

## *The Family of Christ*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on July 14, 2019.

*While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:46–50).*

The family is not a man-made, socially-engineered, pragmatic construct of human evolution. Rather, it is a creation blessing of God for the fellowship, enjoyment, and procreation of His image bearers. The world may seek to re-define it and destroy it, but it is as God designed it. We read in the first chapter of the Bible: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion [over creation]’” (Gen. 1:27-28). One man and one woman in marriage and their children. Marriage and the family are God’s work and His blessing to us.

Furthermore, God has chosen historically to work covenantally through the family. The first word of hope after the Fall of mankind is given in the early gospel prophecy of the woman’s offspring who would bruise the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15). God established His covenant with Noah saving him, his wife, and his sons and their wives and thus perpetuating mankind. God established His covenant with Abraham, a covenant in which all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his offspring. Even the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, circumcision, was restricted to family members only. In the kingdom of Israel, God established a covenant with King David promising that his son would reign upon the throne forever, revealing not only a temporal but an eternal blessing upon his lineage.

The first book of the New Testament begins with a family tree: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). In keeping with the family lineage established by God, in the New Covenant it is revealed that Abraham’s promised heirs are constituted as Israel by faith in Christ. Yet, rather than the elimination of the family we find a reinforcement of it. Just as Abraham’s biological children were set apart by their father’s faith, receiving the Old Covenant sign and seal of circumcision, we are taught in the New Testament that a child of a Christian parent is “made holy” (1 Cor. 7:14), or set apart. In the early church we learn that children of Christian parents received the New Covenant sign and seal of baptism.

The Apostle Paul provides specific counsel to the family, and his admonitions are not metaphorical teaching but pragmatic instruction for the family: Quoting the fifth commandment, Paul writes, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.’ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:1-4). In the economy of God’s creation, the family is an integral and multi-dimensional aspect of human life, an aspect to cherish in love and honor.

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Therefore, if this is the case, then why does Jesus leave his family standing outside the crowd? Why does He contrast His flesh-and-blood family with His recently acquired disciples? Why does He refer to His disciples as His family? Why does Jesus further define His family as those who do His Father's will?

### **Family of Christ**

Who is the family of Christ? The historical accounts of the four gospels reveal various facts about Jesus' family. We have two genealogies, the name of His mother and adopted father, his half-siblings, and even his aunt, uncle, and cousin. We also know that Jesus took care of His mother up to the day of His death and then delegated her care to the Apostle John (John 19:26-27). But, in our passage today we see that there is a distinction between family in the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom.

Jesus is not breaking the fifth commandment, rather he is using the opportunity to distinguish between the eternal significance of the heavenly kingdom and the temporal nature of the earthly. As Jesus explained to the Saducees, "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30). Jesus' point is an eternal one, and so it is with the family of Christ.

I am reminded of a church visit that I went on with my dad when I was a boy. The children of a family began attending the local church where dad pastored, but the parents never came to church. So, dad, with me in tow, went to visit the parents. I remember the father of the children came outside to talk with us but his wife did not. Dad shared the gospel with the man and invited him and his wife to come to church. I will never forget the man's response. He explained that his wife had been raised strict Church of Christ and wanted nothing to do with the church or Jesus, and then he said, "If my wife is going to hell, I guess I will go with her." I was shocked by his response and terrified that he might burn in hell for eternity.

The reverse of this is the shock that Jesus' family, disciples, and the crowd felt when Jesus looked around and said, "Here are my mother and brothers!" Isn't blood thicker than water? Several years after that man said that he was willing to go to hell with his unbelieving wife, she left him for another man. I am told that sometime after that he came to faith in Christ and began attending the very church he had avoided. Perhaps it was then that he found that the family of Christ transcends husband and wife, father and mother, and sister and brother. In the kingdom of heaven baptismal water is thicker than blood, because the family of Christ is a family of faith.

### **Family of Faith**

Why did Jesus' family want to speak with Him? Perhaps a better question is why were they not seated among His disciples? Perhaps the answer to both questions is that His family thought He had gone crazy (Mark 3:21). Prior to His resurrection, even Jesus' brothers didn't believe in Him as the Christ (John 7:5). Therefore, with His question, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" and with His statement, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" Jesus reveals that His true family is one of faith in Him.

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The Apostle Paul (Rom. 8:29) and the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 2:11) emphasize the connection between our redemption and Jesus Christ as our brother. Consider that we have been redeemed not as creatures of creation but as sons and daughters of God. We have been redeemed by the second Person of the Godhead, Jesus, the Christ, who is by God's grace our Lord and Savior. But He is also the brother of all who are born again, born not of flesh but of water and the Spirit (John 3:4-6). We have been adopted into the family of God and may now pray not to an unknown God but to our heavenly Father. We may pray in and through the name of Christ who has redeemed us as our brother into His family, a family of faith.

So essential is the trait of faith in the family of Christ, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:34-39). These are harsh words to anyone who loves family more than Christ, but they are family—constituting to all who are in the family of Christ by faith.

Of course, an earthly family can also be a family of faith. This is the consistent and ordinary pattern within Scripture, and we should not be surprised to see multiple generations of believers serving Christ. And, we should not be surprised to see how the Lord's work in one person's life has a redemptive ripple effect to the family, such as the jailer and his family (Acts 16:30-34). However, in the mysterious providence of God there may be cases where the family members that you love do not share your faith in Christ. In the most intimate of family relationships, marriage, Paul describes a believer married to an unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:10-16) and the difficulties of being unequally yoked. This is difficult to understand and even more difficult to live with but not surprising given the devotion Jesus demands.

As painful as a faithless family may be, Christ has united a family of faith, His Church, as manifested in local churches like us, as brothers and sisters in Christ, a family of faith. As sinners saved by God's grace, we are far from perfect, often revealing our ugly sin nature in sinful strife, but we are not family based on our perfection but Christ's. We also enjoy the presence of Christ's Spirit within us individually and collectively, and it is as Christ's church that we are a family of faithfulness.

### **Family of Faithfulness**

In defining His true and spiritual family, Jesus reveals that it is not blood or even proximity that makes up the family of Christ but faithfulness: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Of course, in the strictest sense no one but Christ does the will of our heavenly Father all the time. In fact, the only consistency we can point to is our failure.

Yet it is here that we hear the beautiful gospel truth that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). He who always did His Father's will to

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perfection took upon Himself our sin and gave us His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:17). By God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone, we come into the family of Christ not because we did the will of our Father but because Christ did it for us. We are a family of grace.

As recipients of God's grace in Christ, we love and seek to do our heavenly Father's will. You could say that doing the will of our Father is a family trait, a trait that we share by faith. The Apostle Peter writes to the Church: "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:14-16). As a shared family trait, we come to realize that the Christian life is not a lonely path to walk in holy isolation but is a family affair. You and I need spiritual fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers of faithfulness.

I heard a pastor recently argue that he identifies himself by his homosexual desire. He went on to say that because the church has not accepted his desires-driven identity, he is desperately lonely and has no one to receive his ashes when he dies. If his testimony is true, it is not only a sad distortion of redeemed sexuality and identity in Christ, it's an insult to his church family. I thought to myself as I heard this confused minister: Not only are you confused about what defines Christian identity, you've missed the essential characteristics of the Church as the family of Christ. (When I die, I'm planning on you, my brothers and sisters, burying me as my beloved family in Christ Jesus our Lord!)

Faithfully living for Christ is what we do (together) as the family of Christ. The writer of Hebrews encourages us, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb. 10:24-25). Being a family of faithfulness involves *you* to stir up your brother and sister to love and also good works.

To do this, you have to get involved: join the church, find ways to serve, spend time together, don't miss Sunday worship. Why? Because we're family. Get to know your church family so well that you learn specific ways to encourage one another. Why? Because we need one another. You possibly came to church today with hurts and needs, and so did your brothers and sisters. Let us look to Christ our brother to faithfully serve one another as family.

I know it requires effort, and you could get your feelings hurt. But in the providence of God, He has called you here with Christ-exalting intent. So, "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord" (Rom. 12:10-11).