

What Family Meant to Jesus¹

Good to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, turn with me to Mark 3. We are entering into a new teaching series this morning called *Church is a Family*. Which I know maybe sounds the slightest bit cultish to you if you're new, so we'll get to how it's not really and why we use that language in a bit. But first, I wanted to just share a little bit about *why* we're doing this series. The ideas we'll cover in this series are about as core to who we are as a church as something can be.

Most people that come around our church, or at least those who *stick around* our church for very long, start to pick up on the fact that we approach relationships a little differently. And to be honest, some people like it and some people don't—but most everyone picks up on the fact that it's a little different. And so if you've been around and noticed that, but haven't been able to put your finger on what it is exactly, this series should help make sense of a lot of it. If you have been a part of our church for a *long* time, a lot of these ideas will be familiar to you. But at the same time, we're going to get to go more into detail on some concepts in this series than we ever have before in this setting. So I think it'll be helpful and informative for both groups of people in the room.

But the big idea that we'll spend the next seven weeks unpacking is that church, at its core, is designed to function like a family. Now, that's a relatively simple sounding concept, but we need to do some work this morning to discover what it truly means. Because it may not be exactly what it sounds like on the surface. But let's just start with where we get this idea from in the Scriptures. Take a look with me at Mark 3, starting in v. 31:

*[31] And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. [32] And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." [33] And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" [34] And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "**Here** [referring to those sitting around him who are followers of Jesus, **here**] **are my mother and my brothers!** [35] **For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.**"*

¹ I owe a large portion of the emphasis and logic in this entire teaching to the first chapter of Joseph Hellerman's book, *When the Church Was a Family*. That book is [available here](#).

So obviously, what Jesus is pushing for in this passage is for followers of Jesus to relate to one another like a *biological family* would. That's the metaphor he uses. That his followers—or, in his language, “those who do the will of God”—are like his *family members*. And this idea doesn't stop with *Jesus*—the same metaphor can be found all over the bible. The other New Testament authors pick up where Jesus leaves off and *run with* this language. Such that **the most common word used in the entire New Testament to describe followers of Jesus is the Greek term *adelphoi*—which translated into English would be “brothers and sisters.”** That word is used 342 times in the New Testament—it beats out every other term used to describe Christians by a *long shot*. So apparently, **when we talk about what it means to belong to Jesus, one of the primary things that means is belonging to the *family* of God.**

This family idea is also built in to one of the primary metaphors in the bible for what happens when we *become* followers of Jesus: the metaphor of *adoption*. Take a look at just a few samples of this from the bible:

- **Ephesians 1:4-5:** *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for **adoption to sonship** through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—*
- **Galatians 4:4-5:** *But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, **that we might receive adoption to sonship.***
- **Romans 8:14-15:** *For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the **children of God**. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your **adoption to sonship**. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”*

When the New Testament authors want us help us understand what it means to *become* a Christian, they employ this word picture of *adoption*. Now think about adoption for just a second with me: adoption is by its very *nature relational*, is it not? Relational in terms of *parent to child*, but also in terms of the adopted child to the *other siblings* in the family. I can think of no situation where a child becomes a son or a daughter, and doesn't also become siblings with the *other kids* in the family. Because that is how a family works. If my son Whit came up to me one day and said “you know dad, as my sister Norah gets older, I'm not really a fan, to be honest. So what I'd like to do is still be *your son*, but not be *her brother*.” That would not work. Because it's a package deal.

And it's the same way with our relationship with God. When Jesus went to the cross and died for us, and then rose again from the grave, what happened is that you and I became God the Father's *kids*. We just heard it just a second ago in Galatians: he *redeemed* us. Meaning he purchased us out of our sin, he paid *for* our sin on our behalf, and he made us his son or his daughter. That's final. For good. No take backs. But *with* that, we were *also* adopted into a *family*. A family made up *other* people who *also* were purchased out of their sin into God's family, and who we are now to live alongside of, and in relationship with. That *also* is final, for good, and no take backs. **When God becomes our Father, we also gain a whole lot of new brothers and sisters.** No way around it. The church becomes our *family*. And that's precisely what Jesus means in Mark 3.

Now, here's the really important part to realize, and unfortunately it's also the part that is so easy for us to miss: when Jesus says we should function like a family, he *doesn't* mean a *modern American* family. I know that because when Jesus said this, *modern American* families didn't exist, and I'm really good at context clues like that. Nothing gets by me. What Jesus actually *means* is that we should relate to each other like an *ancient Mediterranean* family did. Because that's the type of people Jesus is speaking to in this passage. And any of you who have studied much anthropology will know that those are actually two radically different ideas. Those are two very *different* ways of thinking about family.

Perhaps the most *significant* difference between the two is that ancient Mediterranean culture was what is often called a *strong group* society. Sometimes these are also called *communal* societies or *collectivist* societies. The gist of it is that **when an ancient Mediterranean person thought about themselves, they thought of themselves primarily as being a part of a larger group.** Here's how biblical scholar Bruce Malina describes a *strong group* society, just to help you get a grasp on what it meant exactly. He says this:

*In a strong group society, the person perceives himself or herself to be a member of a group, and **responsible to the group** for his or her actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. [...] **The individual person is embedded in the group, and is free to do what he or she feels is right and necessary, only if in accord with group norms and only if the action is in the group's best interest.** The group has the **priority** over the individual member.*

Now, like I already mentioned, this is *very* different from how most of us here today tend to think of ourselves and the groups we belong to. That might even sound a little bit *wrong* to us. And that's because *we* today are *not* a *strong group* society. We are what is considered a *weak* group society, or an *individualist* society. We see ourselves *primarily* as *individuals*, and only *secondarily* or *occasionally* as being a part of a group. In our culture, even the *healthiest* of American families probably wouldn't function like that quote we just read.

So, you might wonder, what societies are *examples* of *strong group* societies? Well, almost every single society down throughout history has been, with the exception of late modern Western society. And a lot of cultures today *still* operate this way. For example, Japanese culture. The Japanese word for "person," translates roughly to "in between *others*." So even down to how they use *language*, the Japanese believe that to be a human being is to exist *between* and *among* other human beings. In Spanish, there is a saying: "mi casa es...*su* casa." Meaning, "my home is your home." In America, our saying is, "a man's home is his *castle*." My home is where I go to *get away* from you. Mi casa is most certainly not *su* casa. That's a very different mindset, right? We just think about things differently.

And chances are, because we don't think like a strong group society, to a lot of us this "*strong group*" mentality not only sounds *undesirable*—it might even sound a little *oppressive*. It feels to us like it would be *suffocating*, like it would stifle our individual freedom and autonomy. And those are certainly downsides of strong group thinking, to be sure.

But it's probably worth noting while we're on the subject that *individualist* thinking has its *own* downsides. For instance, do you think our issues with *loneliness* in our society might have something to do with our *individualist* thinking? Modern Western society seems to struggle more with loneliness than any other culture that we know of. British Prime Minister Theresa May made headlines in January of last year for appointing a "loneliness minister" to her cabinet. That's a real thing—you can Google it: Brits were experiencing such widespread loneliness that they created a new position in their *government* to help alleviate the problem.² It's a problem here in the states too: if you were around for our Psalms series this past February, you remember that a former Surgeon General of the U.S. was quoted as saying that the most widespread pathology he saw wasn't heart disease or diabetes, but rather *loneliness*.³ Now, loneliness is a

² Details [here](#).

³ This is a quote from former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. Read more on it [here](#).

complex issue—there are all sorts of things that contribute to it—but **I don't think it's any coincidence that the most *individualist* societies to have ever existed also tend to report the highest rates of loneliness.** That's one drawback of viewing ourselves in this way.

I think another effect of our individualist take on life can be *anxiety*. Some of the biggest decisions that we make as human beings—like what we're going to do for a living, who we're going to spend our lives with, and where we're going to live—in *other cultures*, those have often been decisions that you made *together, in conjunction with your family*. Your family would help you decide those things, if not occasionally decide those things *for* you. By contrast, in our society, those are now decisions that most Americans make in near total *isolation*. *Maybe* they seek out the *advice* of a parent or a trusted confidante, but the *weight* of those decisions rests entirely on their own shoulders. That, for a lot of people, can generate some anxiety. Now again, with anxiety as well, there are a *lot* of contributing factors. I'm not saying at all that this is the *only reason* people are anxious. But when some of the most individualistic cultures in the world are also some of the most *anxious*, I'd be willing to bet there's at least a connection. // **So while we may prefer individualist thinking, it's not like it's a perfect system.**

But *whatever* you happen to think about any of that, it's kind of beside the point. Because I'm not trying to argue that *America* should try to *become* a strong group society. I'm not trying to make the point that *strong* group thinking is any better than *weak* group thinking. I'm simply showing you that **when Jesus and the New Testament authors talk about church being a family, they are referring to a *strong group* family. They are saying that we should have the level of commitment and care and priority towards our *church* family that an ancient Mediterranean had towards their *biological* family.**

And *that's* where it starts to get a little bit uncomfortable for us. To demonstrate just *how* uncomfortable, I'm just going to read that Bruce Malina quote we read earlier *again*, but this time I am just going to sub out the word "group" for "church." And I want you to pay very careful attention to how terribly *uncomfortable* we all get. This'll be fun. You ready? You don't look ready. Here we go:

In a strong [church], the person perceives himself or herself to be a member of a [church], and responsible to the [church] for his or her actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. [...] The individual person is embedded in the [church], and is free to do what he or she feels is right and necessary, only if in

accord with [church] norms and only if the action is in the [church's] best interest. The [church] has the priority over the individual member.

Some of you at this point are like, “wait—is this a *cult*? My mom told me not to attend churches because I might accidentally attend a cult, and here I am. I should’ve listened to her.” So just up front, 1) this is *not* a cult, and 2) if *you* are made uncomfortable by this idea, know that you’re not alone. This idea makes *me* uncomfortable too. There are plenty of days where I would much prefer that the bible just said “to be a Christian is to make a private decision about Jesus in your heart, and as far as your relationship with other people, just try to be nice to them when you can.” To be honest, that would be so much *easier* than what the Scriptures call us to. But **to follow Jesus, we have to wrestle with what the Scriptures actually say, and not what we wish they said.**

And here’s the important difference between the “family” language of Jesus, and a cult: it’s about *him*, not about any of *us*. In other words, **it’s not a way of orienting anybody around me or Jeff or Marcus or City Church the organization. It is about all of us, myself included, orienting ourselves around Jesus and his kingdom, which also includes his family.** A cult would mean that this is all *my* idea. It’s not my idea—it’s *Jesus’* idea. All I’ve done so far today is simply set Jesus’ words in their correct historical context so you can grasp what he intended to say. Do you see that? So there’s no Kool-Aid here for you to drink, there’s no blood covenant for you to participate in—all we’re doing is unpacking what the bible means.

Specifically, that **followers of Jesus are called to treat one another like a strong group, ancient Mediterranean family would. That when Jesus calls the church to function like family, he’s not just saying we might should care about one another a little more than we currently do. He’s saying that we should radically re-orient our lives to be about the good of those around us in God’s family.** To Jesus, *that* is how we should relate to each other.

Now I realize, to some of you, that may be a deal-breaker. To you, that seems weird and invasive and uncomfortable, and you’d just rather not. And that’s fine—your issues are not with me, they’re with the Scriptures. But for those of you that are ready to be done with the loneliness and isolation and anxiety of hyper-individualism, for those of you who are ready to live into the fullness of life that Jesus came to offer us, we’re going to talk in this series about what that might look like *practically* speaking. That’s what we’ll discuss the next six weeks. But for today, I just want to give you three foundational building

blocks to *start* with. There are at least three things that *must* be present if we are going to get *anywhere* being the type of family that God designed us to be. First...

A Commitment to Being Together

If any of the stuff we talk about in this series is going to have *space* to actually happen, we are going to need a commitment to being around each other on a regular basis. Scripturally, one place I get this from is Hebrews 10, where it says this:

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **not giving up meeting together**, as some are in the habit of doing, **but encouraging one another**—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

There is simply no way around it: we have to put a priority on being together on a regular basis, if we are going to foster the type of relationship that the Scriptures call us to. Now, just in case you think that passage just means “attend church services regularly,” consider also passages like *this* one in found in Acts 2:44-47:

*All the believers **were together** and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. **Every day they continued to meet together** in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and **ate together** with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Do you see how much “togetherness” is in that passage? They *ate together* in their homes, they *were together* and had everything in common—it even says that “*every day* they met together in the temple courts.” *Every day*. The early Church was together *all the time*. Now, I’m not gonna sit here and require that all of us see all of us every day—I realize that would be near impossible, and there are some cultural reasons that that was *more* possible back then than that it is now.

But here’s what I *will* say: at a bare minimum, if we can’t make it a *priority* of ours to be here on Sundays, and be at LifeGroup more often than not, it’s going to be pretty impossible for us to be a part of the type of community we see in the Scriptures. If our approach to those things is “yeah, I’ll be there as long as there’s not something else happening I’d rather do,” that’s not going to work. If our mindset is “yeah, I’ll be there as long as I’m in the mood to be there,” that won’t work. If our mindset is “yeah, I’ll be there

as long as it hasn't been a stressful week so far—I don't know about you guys, but I've got two kids and both me and my wife have jobs. If I only went to LifeGroup when my week wasn't stressful, I would be at LifeGroup like once a year, *maybe*. For us to be the family God has called us to be, we are going to have to *commit* to being together regularly.

But it's not just to check off a box (“great, I did the *community* thing this week”). It's because of what being together *leads to*. Think about it this way: **relational *intimacy* in a relationship is almost always proportional to the level of *commitment* in a relationship.** If you want relational *intimacy* out of a relationship, you have to put *commitment* in to that relationship. It's really easy to see this within a *marriage*: if you got married, and you said to your spouse, “hey, I'd really love to do this whole marriage thing with you, but I'd also like to keep my options open in case someone better comes along. So let's have like a ‘for now’ kind of marriage.” What do you think would happen to the level of *intimacy* in your marriage as a result of that mindset? Not great things, right? And that's because **the level of *intimacy* of a relationship is directly proportional to the level of *commitment* in a relationship.**

So when it comes to community, if you want to maintain a very loose level of commitment to other followers of Jesus, you can totally do that—but I just want you to know, that is going to negatively impact the *meaningfulness* of those relationships. **You can't treat people in your life as if they're expendable, and then expect to experience meaningful friendship with them—it just won't work.**

And last thing on this: **commitment, more often than not, is measured in *time*.** You and I have been told that there is *quality* time and *quantity* time, right? But here's the thing that doesn't get said: ***quality* time happens *inside of* *quantity* time.** You know how I know that? If you say to someone you care about, “okay, I have fifteen minutes between these two meetings...let's get fifteen minutes of quality eye contact and meaningful conversation in. Annnnnnd go!” That's most often not going to work. Because *quality* time happens inside of *quantity* time. **If you want to develop meaningful friendships with others, you're going to have to put in some *time* with them to get the relationship *to that point*.** You're going to you have to be *around* them on a regular basis. And what you'll find is **when you do spend *quantity* time with people, *quality* time starts to happen fairly naturally.** So if we're going to become this type of family, there's going to have to be a regular commitment to being together, spending *time* with each other. Second, we're going to need...

Healthy Expectations

If we are going to continue becoming the type of family God has called us to be in the Scriptures, we are going to need to have healthy *expectations* of our community. And sometimes that's tough. Because **most of us have a tendency to idealize human relationships**. Once again, one of the easiest ways to see this when it comes to our perspective on *romantic* relationships. A lot of people tend to think that finding the perfect person to marry will meet all of our relational needs and will make us permanently happy as a result. And then, for those of us who *get* married, we find out fairly quickly, "oh wait—that's not exactly what this is." Marriage is great in a lot of ways, but it's not *that*." And so when those expectations aren't met, we either become disillusioned, or bitter, or *we end up crushing our spouse* under the weight of our expectations. Because nobody can live up to those ideals perfectly.

Now, you may never have thought about it this way, but **we often have a similar tendency when it comes to our community**—when it comes to relationships with other followers of Jesus. We want to connect with others effortlessly, we want them to push us and challenge us but not push us *too hard* or challenge us *too much*. We want them to reach out to us at just the right times and in just the right ways, and not lay any expectations on us in return. If we're honest, we want them to meet all of our spiritual and relational needs, whatever those may be. And if we're not careful, we can begin to crush our *community* with *those expectations* too. A guy you might've heard of named Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way in his excellent book *Life Together*:

*Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a **hindrance** to genuine community and **must be banished** if genuine community is to survive. **He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter**, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.*

That quote gets me every time. Because *I do* that. I think most of us do. We want our Christian community to be this perfect thing that meets all of our needs and all of our expectations. And often, when they *aren't* that, if we're not careful, we grow bitter and frustrated towards them as a result. And what Bonhoeffer is saying is that if you want the community around you to *thrive*, you have to get just as good at loving the community *itself*, as you are at loving the *ideal* of community you have in your head.

In other words, we need *healthy expectations* of our community. The people in your community are sinful & flawed people (just like you), who desperately need the grace & forgiveness of Jesus (just like you), and will probably do an imperfect job at loving you (just like you do an imperfect job of loving *them*). So if you go into a community expecting them to do perfectly what no one has ever been able to do perfectly, that's not gonna much of anywhere. Instead, we should go into a community expecting them to be imperfect people who are learning and growing just like we are. So we need healthy expectations when it comes to our community. Finally...

The Posture of Jesus

Lastly and by far the most importantly, if we are going to become the type of community God intended, we need to take the posture of Jesus. This is actually what's behind both of the other ones. In Philippians 2, the apostle Paul is giving the church in Philippi some practical instructions on how to live together as a church family. And in part of that, he says this—this passage tends to be a favorite of ours around City Church:

*In your **relationships with one another**, have the **same mindset as Christ Jesus**: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*

If we are going to function like a family, this right here is where it has to start. It has to start with each one of us having the “same mindset” as Jesus—the *posture* of Christ himself. The posture that doesn't put our own preferences and schedules and moods and convenience ahead of *community*, but rather puts the needs of our community ahead of *ourselves*. The type of posture that doesn't come into a community demanding and insisting that other people live up to our ideal of community, but instead loving and caring for the community we've been given. Walking into a community thinking “how do I serve the people here?” Walking into LifeGroup each night asking “what can I *offer* the people here? How can I encourage them? How can I point them to the good news of Jesus?” *That's* the posture that will build up a community into what it's designed to be. Because it's the posture that Jesus himself took.

So Paul says that we *get* that posture by looking to Jesus himself. Jesus, who because he *was God*, had *every right* to make demands. To call the shots. To insist that

everybody organize themselves around his ideal. But in many ways, he didn't do that. Instead, he *emptied* himself, and entered into the brokenness of our world as a servant. He came "not to be served, but to serve." He came not asking the question "what can I get?" but rather "what can I give?" And that posture would take him all the way to the cross, where he would offer up his very life as a sacrifice for others—for you and for me. Jesus' posture was that of a *servant*, all the way to the end. It was him *emptying* himself for the others around him. And maybe just need to be reminded of that reality today. And that through *trusting* in Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit in us, that's the posture that you and I can take too. We too can learn to ask "what can I give?" instead of "what can I receive?" We too can *empty* ourselves for the good of others, rather than demanding that other people empty themselves for us.

And I can guarantee you, that if we have a church full of people taking *that posture*, we *will* become the type of community that all of us need, that the city of Knoxville needs, and that God designed us to be. That will happen. But it all starts with each one of us taking the posture of Jesus.

So I'd love to just wrap things up with three practical questions for us to think on this week, if you'd consider yourself a follower of Jesus. Feel free to write these down to think through later, or if you want, just sit and consider them as I list them out, whatever is most helpful:

- 1. Do you *have* community?** Is the default rhythm of your life isolation? And just to be abundantly clear: by that, I don't mean "do you know some other Christians?" I mean "is your life regularly overlapping with theirs?" Do they know you and know your journey as a follower of Jesus? If not, we mention every week that we'd love to connect you to a group filled with other followers of Jesus who can learn to be that with you and for you. *Do you have community?*
- 2. Are you *committed* to your community?** For those of you who *do* have community, who *are* in a LifeGroup, are you actually *committed* to some of those people? Are there times where you love them and serve them, and are there for them, even when it'd be easier not to? Are there times when you show up, even when you don't want to? If someone just casually combed through your schedule on the average week, would they conclude that time with other followers of Jesus is a priority for you, or not? *Are you committed to your community?*
- 3. Are you *idealizing* community?** Are there any ways that you have put undue pressure on your community to be something for you that they can never perfectly be? Have you put any expectations on them that you haven't lived up to yourself?

Are there any ways that you have grown bitter or frustrated or resentful towards your community for not living up to your ideal picture of it? And if so—what needs to be done to acknowledge that, apologize for it, and chart a better way forward? *Are you idealizing community?*

I'd love for us to just consider those three questions today and in our LifeGroups this week. Let's pray together.