

## Jesus' new family

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In Luke 8:19-21, we are told of a scene in which Mary and her other sons have become disturbed by the things Jesus is teaching and so they come to see him. Jesus' response is shocking in a society that was built on family solidarity and loyalty (In fact, in the Jewish society, honoring family was part of honoring God. Their entire culture was built around honoring family. A son would usually work with and live with, or near his parents, until they died. The family was the source of your occupation, your security, your comfort, and your identity.) Jesus does not rush out to show respect, as would have been expected. He says that his "mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." Was this a one-time social gaff on Jesus' part or was this an intentional aspect of Jesus' teaching? An examination of Jesus' teaching throughout the gospels shows us that Jesus deliberately and systematically redefined the concept of family for those who would follow him.

There are numerous examples in the gospels where Jesus implies that, for those who would follow him, a redefinition of family was necessary. No longer would his followers seek and find their identity and comfort from the things of the world, including their biological families. No, they would define their family as those who would follow Jesus' teachings, in other words, those who would be his disciples. In Luke 8 (and Mark 3:31-35) Jesus said that his family was defined by those who do the will of God. We see Jesus teaching the same sentiments in a scene recorded in Luke 11:27-28. A woman shouts out a standard Jewish greeting to bless his mother. Rather than simply graciously accepting the intended blessing, Jesus uses it as another opportunity to teach that those who "hear the word of God and obey it" are the ones that will be blessed. Obedience to God, in Jesus' mind, is what constitutes God's family, not human birth.

Jesus continued this call for his followers to redefine their concept of family in Luke 9:57-60 as he tells a young man to leave the duties of burying his father to someone else. This challenging statement would only make sense if Jesus was completely redefining the concept of family for those who would follow him. Jesus is not banning his disciples from burying their relatives, but is, in the context of his immediate mission to Jerusalem, telling this man that if he wanted to follow him, he needed to prioritize the needs of the Kingdom of God over those of his normal familial obligations.

Jesus' call for redefined family is seen further in Luke 14:25-27 when Jesus tells those that would follow him that they must "hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life." Without meeting this standard, says Jesus, no one can be his disciple. This teaching from Jesus is puzzling until we understand that 'hate' (*miseo* in Greek) was a common Hebrew figure of speech for 'reject' (particularly when it came to matters of inheritance; For Example: Malachi 1:2-5 where Esau and Jacob are mentioned as representatives of the people who would be accepted or rejected as the people of God). Jesus was telling his would-be followers that they must be willing to redefine what would be the source of their identity, comfort, and security. It would no longer be their biological family, or anything else in their lives. It would be in the new family that Jesus was forming around himself.

Jesus wanted his followers to know that to truly live the life of a disciple, it would be necessary to redefine their family (this does not mean that they would not care for or love their biological families but was a matter of identity and priority). In Mark 10:28-30, Jesus tells his disciples, who have given up everything for him, that they will receive, in return, families and homes a hundred times over, both in the present age and the age to come. Was this an early form of prosperity gospel? Was Jesus telling his followers that after an initial period of giving things up for him, they would then get rich? No, he was redefining family once again. When his followers mentally (and often physically) left their families as their source of identity and means of honoring God, they would receive a new family that would be a hundred times (metaphorically speaking) larger than their biological families.

Jesus sent another clear signal of this on the day of his death when he asked John to consider Mary as his mother and care for her. Mary had other sons that could have done this, but Jesus wanted to send a clear message to his followers that the Kingdom of God involved new boundaries and new definitions of what it meant to be in God's family. This act would continue, throughout Mary's life, to send a strong message to Christians, as early church tradition tells us that Mary did go with John, and eventually died in Ephesus many years later.

Finally, we should consider whether or not the early church actually followed Jesus' teachings on this. We know from Acts 2:42-47, that the first Christians certainly began to act like a family. An often-missed detail from the first Jewish Christians, though, is that as part of their early practice they sold off land (Acts 4:34, 5:1). It would have been quite disturbing for traditional Jews to see an entire group like the followers of Christ selling off their lands. This would have been deeply concerning to Jews who saw their land as an inheritance from God (Psalm 135:12). Why would the early church have been so eager to sell their land? Certainly they wanted to be able to care for one another and give to those in need, but there is more to it than that. The land was a sign of their family inheritance and their status as the people of God. Selling that land was a strong statement to the rest of the Jewish world that they had rejected that standard of being God's family and His people, and would, instead, embrace the new family of believers that Jesus created around himself.

We should never forget that we are also disciples of Jesus, but we live in a much different culture than did the very first Christians. We need to take the principle of Jesus' teaching and not just limit it to the specific cultural expression. For first-century Jews, one of the main competitors for their time, loyalty, commitment, and identity was the obligation that they felt to their families. For some of us, we might struggle with similar issues when it comes to our families. For many of us, however, it is not family but things like friends, jobs, status, relationships, etc., that compete with Jesus for our full devotion and source of identity and security. These are the areas in our lives that must be thoroughly examined to see if they measure up to the standard of Jesus' teachings.

We are still left, though, with the question of our biological families, and what should be their roles in the life of the believer that has accepted Jesus' teaching of the redefined family. In the first century, becoming a Christian often meant that you would be cut off from your biological family. As they entered into Christ and became a part of His family, people were disowned and disinherited by their biological families, and so they turned to their new family of brothers and sisters in Christ for spiritual, but also physical support. This is usually not the case for the twenty-first century Christian.

Christians should focus on the family — the question is which family. It is true that the family that consists of our brothers and sisters in Christ should be held more dearly than our biological families, but that does not diminish the importance of the biological family. Baptism inducts us into a new family (1 Corinthians 12:12) that overrides the ties of blood, but it does not erase our ties or responsibility to our birth families.

We are not to love the members of our biological families any less. But, how is that possible, you might ask? Consider newlyweds. When I was married, for instance, the role of my biological family changed in my life. I did not discount them, dishonor them, or love them any less, but the priority in my life became my wife. Although the mode of my love for my biological family had to change, it did not in any way diminish or alter the content of my love for them. My priorities now centered on my wife, but it was still my duty and call from God to honor my parents. In Exodus 20:12, God commands His people to honor their families. That command is never rescinded at adulthood or marriage. I surely left my parents, as the Bible describes (Genesis 2:24), but that did not in any way release me from my commitment to honor them.

In addition to that, the Bible has many commands and examples of taking care of those outside of our families (Deuteronomy 10:17-19; Leviticus 19:33-34; James 1:27). Surely this call to take care of aliens and strangers would not surpass the care and honor that should be shown to our own biological families. It is up to each Christian to carefully consider the new role that our biological families should continue to play in our lives. A thorough analysis of that is outside of the scope of this article, but is certainly a worthy path for someone to explore in the future.

In conclusion, let us remember that to truly hear Jesus' words in our own time and culture, we must first hear them in his. Once we understand what he was saying to his original audience, we might begin to take the next step, which is to discover how his words translate to 21<sup>st</sup> century disciples. If Jesus were speaking to us directly today, he would surely speak the message that when we become disciples we need to redefine who our family is. Yet, he would, I believe, expand that message to the areas of our culture that demand our loyalties, prick our sense of obligation, and appeal to our concept of identity. The test for each one of

us is to thoroughly examine our lives and see if we have allowed Jesus to challenge us as much as his teachings challenged the very hearts of the Jews of his day.