

No One Like Jesus: Next Of Kin
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 49:5-6; Ephesians 2:12-20; Matthew 12:46-50

Our final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 12:46-50. May God add His blessing from the reading of His holy Word. “While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to 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.””

We’ve been working our way through the series **Parenthood** over the last few months, which is the story of the Braverman clan -- the parents in their late 60s or early 70s, their four children in their thirties and forties, and their families. All the characters are very unique, but they come together on a regular basis to help each other, listen to one another, give each other advice, and occasionally chew each other out when they wind up hurting the family.

On a recent episode when a fight occurred between two brothers, an old saying was trotted out: “blood is thicker than water.” The Bravermans aren’t religious, but they have an unspoken moral code – you help your family; you care for your family; you pay attention to your family. They mess it up over and over but always circle back to it. They welcome strangers into the fold – like spouses – but woe to you if you mess with a Braverman, right or wrong.

The funny thing is, the world has been organized along those lines from the very beginning, in every culture. Your tribe matters. You take care of your people. Other tribes matter in as much as the blood of your relatives flows through them. Throughout most of history and most of the world today, your religion wasn’t based on what God *you* chose to serve; you inherited the gods of your ancestors. Abraham’s story in the Old Testament is stunning in part because he rejected the gods of his tribal people and followed the one true God into the land of Canaan. Your language, your culture, your god were all determined by your parents. And woe to you if you defy the family.

Western culture over the last hundred years has tried to destroy the concept of the nuclear family and any responsibility beyond ourselves. But we still want to be part of something bigger than ourselves. It’s no accident that in the online gaming world, groups of like-minded gamers play together in groups called tribes and clans. In a world where family doesn’t mean much, finding “your people” becomes incredibly important – whether those people love football or photography or needlework or mystery novels. We want a people to call our own.

In first century Palestine, take that and multiply it by a thousand. Family and tribe was everything. Every Jewish man knew his family’s lineage back to their forefather Abraham. Honoring parents was one of the Ten Commandments. Family came first. So Jesus’ attitude here was shocking to His listeners. Jesus is speaking to the crowd – perhaps in a large home with an outdoor area common to a region with little rain and frigid weather.

His mother and brothers are outside. Why do they want to speak to Him? Good question. Matthew doesn't tell us. Parallel passages in other gospels suggest that they are worried about Him. There's the concern that He might be insane. Remember that as Jesus has been performing miracles, the religious leaders have lied, claiming that He's doing these magnificent healings by the power of the devil. Other religious leaders have mentioned that there is talk of having Jesus killed – and to defy the Pharisees would be crazy. Rumors spread quickly.

I don't doubt that word of this got back to Jesus' family, and they've come to make sure that He's OK. At this point, His brothers don't believe in Him, and after these horrible reports coming from the Pharisees, perhaps even Mary has been rattled. While Matthew doesn't spell it out, they aren't here for a nice cup of tea. They're ready to try and stop His ministry, against the will of God, probably to save face amongst His family.

Jesus doesn't dishonor His family in the slightest by what He says. Instead, He redefines what family is really about. "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Jesus asks. He gestures over at the disciples and says, "It's them! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Doing the will of God by believing the miracles we've seen and following Jesus faithfully is what brings someone into God's family.

Matthew shifts gears from here, so he intends this short passage to sum up much of what we've learned together from his gospel the past few months. This sermon will be shorter than most. (Saying that might wake a couple of you up!) But there are several important bits to pull out of what Jesus says. Some we've explored recently, so we won't spend a lot of time on them. But they are worth mentioning because they are summed up so brilliantly by Jesus in this simple statement.

First is that the good news of Jesus and adoption into the family of God is open to all people. Jesus says "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven" can be His mother and sister and brother. Not Jews, not Pharisees, not priests of the clan of Levi. He doesn't draw the line at the Samaritans, the people who have Jewish blood from the northern tribes of Israel intermingled with pagan. Anybody. Pagan Gentiles. Eunuchs and lepers, cut off from entering the temple gates and worshipping. Women, who were unable to cross into the holier parts of the temple reserved exclusively for men. Foreigners who had to stay in the court of the Gentiles.

The family of God radically changes under Jesus' provision. Jewish descent is not the telltale sign of the God-follower, but instead the heart and mind and attitude. The miracles that Jesus has been doing for the last five chapters of Matthew have been all about bringing people whose diseases, infirmities, and conditions kept them from God – as well as women, Samaritans, and Gentiles who were outside the closest parts of the Jewish covenant. The summary Jesus leaves us with is, "do the will of God, and you are in the family."

In these crazy days of political conventions and social activism and very real threats against our police officers, it's easy to point at this group or that group and say, "*they're* the problem." But the Kingdom of God is aligned on very different lines. It is about bringing people together from radically different places because God has changed our lives.

And that leads to something else we should discuss today: *the church of Christ is our new family*. That doesn't mean we don't love and respect our families by blood. God gave them to us; He put us in them and chose them for us uniquely. One of the ten commandments orders our respect for our mother and father. But we have a new family now, and we should act like it. I'm pleased that many of us at CrossWay have begun to do just that. But it's something we need to model for other Christian brothers and sisters too, because we too easily forget it.

In a culture like Detroit, many people have extended family right here in town. Entire generations of folks, three, four back, even, live within twenty minutes of each other. For many Christians, their family of origin is still their only real family. They haven't thought that they've needed any other. Grandma and Grandpa live down the street to watch the kids for date night; your brother lives a subdivision down to help with redoing the basement. All well and good

But who is the family for those who have no family in the area? For those who do not have those resources? The church is to be our family. And perhaps we need to think of ways we can adapt how we respond as a family to the crises that go on in our family. For example, sometimes, bringing a meal is a perfect help; that's something people have done for centuries. But in an era of \$5 Hot-N-Readys and fast food, maybe a meal isn't the best way to help.

Instead, maybe it's reclaiming the kind of neighborliness that has died out in America. Maybe it's offering to watch the kids of a family who needs a break. Maybe it's inviting someone single out to the movies and coffee. Maybe it's visiting someone who is homebound or taking someone who can't afford it out to lunch. And more than all those things, how about lending spiritual support, offering to do a short Bible study or prayer time together? All are possibilities just depending on the situation.

It goes beyond the doors of CrossWay, too. Our friends and neighbors who are Christians at different churches are a part of the fold as well. A lot of churches in this area are very large, and people don't know one another, let alone feel like family. The average churchgoers at a large church go maybe twice a month. That's not enough time to be family. We have the opportunity to fix that. Invite them to church as God intended it, where we treat one another as family – not just as an ideal, but something we do regularly.

There's still another aspect of this too we need to touch upon – *we still don't get to choose our family*. We don't choose our families of origin, and we don't get to choose our spiritual family either. God brings together people of all sorts of races, colors, nations, and ways of thinking. That means that we are going to have to work together to love people we don't agree with. As long as they fit the bill – “doing the will of the Father in heaven” – they are part of the family. We'll talk about that part in a minute, but let's focus here for now.

There are amazing things about having a spiritual family. We come around each other in difficulties. We care deeply about one another. And this family is eternal. It is a family where everyone will eventually be perfected by God. Even if your family by blood turned out to be pretty terrible, you have the opportunity to be a part of a family that truly cares about you as Christ does. It's the opportunity for some to have the family they never had.

But while we are still on this earth, the church still bears the mark of sin and problems that exist in our everyday families. Families have crazy relatives that everyone wishes they didn't know and silent relatives they can barely get to know. Families have boisterous relatives that can be obnoxious and relatives whose views don't make sense to us. Families have members who believe that the best way to show Jesus' love is through charitable giving and others who would have us show Jesus' love through some form of government system. Families disagree. And sometimes, those disagreements create big rifts. But they are no less families.

The same things are precisely true of the Kingdom of God. God brings together people who have little in common – not language, not culture, not background – and He makes them into His own family. And against all of our conventional wisdom, God does accomplish things through people who work in very different ways and think very differently from one another. We will disagree about methods, and we should not compromise our consciences to do something that we think is unfruitful or unhelpful, let alone immoral. But God gives believers the freedom of conscience. Where His Word is not clear – and it is, on many many things – there is room for genuine disagreement.

But nevertheless, we must still love each other as family. You all have embraced my family, though we're not native Michiganders, and that's an important thing for many people up this way. You've loved us even though sometimes the path that I believe Jesus has shown me is too politically conservative for some and too liberal for others. As your pastor, I attempt to do the same. And I encourage us to open our arms wide to one another more and more so that, in this time of upheaval and drama in our country, we can show the world that love does not require us to walk in lockstep. True love requires only one thing: Jesus. He can and will sort out the differences between us. If we are followers of God's will, we can disagree and still come out united as brothers and sisters.

But that leads into our final thought for today: *the defining characteristic of the spiritual family of Jesus is doing the will of God.* Our culture sentimentally states that everybody who exists is a child of God. That's not what Scripture says. Genesis 1 and Genesis 9 state that God made mankind in His own image and likeness. We have the stamp of God on us because He made us to be like Him. That image has been marred by sin, but it still exists in every person. But being made in the image of God and being a child of God are two separate things.

Jesus sets out no other criteria for being in His family save for doing the will of God. But that means, to be in the family, we must actively participate in following after godliness. As John 1:12 tells us, "Yet to all who received him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Transformation into Kingdom citizens and the brothers and sisters of Christ happens because of God's choosing us and Jesus' work on the cross to save us. But that transformation results in us becoming people who act like our Heavenly Father. We are not saved by our works, but they reflect that we have been born again spiritually with God as our Father. It's the rebirth, being born again, that Jesus taught in John 3:3 is a necessity to enter the Kingdom of God. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian is one, but we can tell a true Christian by their actions.

Do you do the will of God on a regular basis? Knowing the will of God is simple. In the vast, vast majority of situations, His clear will is laid out in Scripture. Believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. Show compassion, kindness, gentleness, mercy, and patience toward others. Rather than demanding your due, make yourself the servant of others. Do not harm others physically through acts like murder and adultery, and don't harm them emotionally, spiritually, or reputationally through gossip, slander, lying, and covetousness. Follow Jesus. What He did and the disciples did, you do.

Friends, this is nothing new to us, but it does bear repeating. Children of God act like their Father. We're learning, like children, so we will make mistakes. Failures do not mean we are not His children. But we can't ever forget that we are called to be salt and light in this world, imagebearers of God in the world. We can stumble and fall and still be children of God as we constantly turn to Him to pick us up. But we must be careful not to fall into this world and think that we can act however we want. The children of God are remade to be like Him. If you don't desire to be like Him, there's something wrong with your adoption papers! Make sure they aren't fraudulent.

God is so good to us. Through Jesus, all of us have the opportunity to become part of the eternal kingdom of heaven. While our spiritual family here on earth isn't perfect, we are given that new support system to help us as we mature in faith, and that family will be ours forever. Let's not stop running the race, but faithfully do the will of God – and we will see the embrace of our Father growing ever nearer day by day.