

The Gospel of Marriage and Family

[What if Jesus' Little Brother clip]

What do you think? Do you think Jesus' family had problems? Actually, we know it did. Michael Jr. isn't far off. The passage we read today from Matthew 12 tells Jesus' family isn't sitting there at his feet, they're on the outside, looking in. They seem to be making some kind of claim to own him. Jesus himself, takes a shot at his family. "I'll tell you who my real family is—anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven."

And this isn't the only account of Jesus' problems with his family. John 7 says his brothers didn't believe in him—which you can understand. Would you believe if your brother claimed to be the savior of the world? That's family.

Family plays a critical role in our lives. A good family gives us a great head-start in life, a dysfunctional one gives us emotional and financial hurdles to overcome.

Christians put a huge emphasize on family. In fact, the focus on family values is the reason Christians are so maligned in our culture today. We preach that keeping families together is the best way for a person, neighborhood to thrive. But many people say this view is out of line with the times because "it's 2019" and focusing on family values is cruel to those who have different kinds of families. Despite the critique, the fact is that it's still true. The best way for a society to flourish is to promote healthy families.

But is it possible to take it too far? This is the question I want to explore today. We are in the middle of the series called Where is the Good News? And in it, we're looking at some of our cultural gospels—or what our society tells us is the good news. We've looked at the Gospel of Science and Technology, the Prosperity Gospel, the Gospel According to Hugh Hefner, and today, we're talking about the Gospel of Marriage and Family.

Now, notice that all the cultural gospels we've explored are good things—Science and Tech, Prosperity, Sex—all of them can be good, but they can also become gospels that compete with Jesus when we believe that they will solve all our problems and satisfy our deepest longings. Tim Keller says that an idol is “any good thing that we make an ultimate thing.” And I believe this happens even with something as great as family.

There are many today—not just Christians—who put their faith in the Gospel of Marriage and Family. This gospel says that family should be our number one priority and should be protected at all costs. It says if you don't get married you won't be complete. This gospel causes parents to run themselves ragged to make sure their kids get everything they want and participate in everything activity. This gospel convinces us that if our kids don't turn out the way we planned, we're failures and God is disappointed in us. This is not a uniquely Christian thing, but it is prominent in churches today.

In some churches this idea is so prominent, I suspect it protecting family values would be more important than making disciples. But is this what we *should* be about? And if we are, is there a danger in this?

To answer the question today, I want to talk a walk through what Scripture says about family. So, let's start right at the beginning in Genesis where we see the first family. I'm not talking about the Trumps, I'm talking about Adam and Eve. In Genesis, we learn the first thing about family. *God created the family to promote human flourishing.* Now, the basic unit of society is not the individual, it's the family. But notice that God didn't create the family for its own sake.

Gen 1:26-27, "²⁶**Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."** ²⁷**So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."**

Now, the picture we get here, in poetic form, is that God made creation and ordered it the way he wanted. Then he created humans as caretakers to bring about the flourishing of creation. That's a big part of what it means to be made in the image of God. So that's fine, but it's not just individuals, it's a family thing because at the end of verse 27, he adds this qualifier, "male and female he created them."

So, here we have the foundation of family—male and female. Then God gives them a task, "²⁸**God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over**

every living creature that moves on the ground.” So, it starts with male and female and two commands—1) fill the earth; and 2) subdue it.

Now, of course, filling the earth means, “go make babies.” In other words, God tells them to populate the earth because it’s a big place and we’re going to need more than just two people to take care of it. As they *fill* the earth, their purpose is to *subdue* it. That doesn’t mean *exploit* it. To subdue it means to “order it to bring about flourishing.” This includes humans, but it’s not limited to humans. So, notice that *families don’t exist just for themselves. Families have a greater purpose.* That’s first...

Second is that *instead of flourishing, family is often the carrier of generational sin and dysfunction.* After creation, the Bible doesn’t paint an flattering picture of family. The first brother, Cain kills his brother, Abel. And things only get worse from there. So, God decides to start over, he reaffirms the covenant to be fruitful and multiply with Noah and his family. Then the ultra-righteous Noah gets off the ark, gets drunk and some weird seemingly sexual thing happens with his sons and when Noah wakes up, he curses them.

Then we have the story of Abraham, who God forms a covenant with and says, “*I’m going to give you a huge family that will carry my blessing to the world.*” (Again notice his family had a purpose). After that Abraham goes to Egypt and is afraid of the Egyptians because he knows they’ll want his hot wife Sarah, so he tells them she’s his sister to save his butt. After his clan leaves Egypt, a fight breaks out between his people and his nephew Lot’s people and they go their separate ways.

Then God makes a covenant with Abram and tells him he will be a great nation, but he and his wife, Sarah can't have kids. Over time, they get tired of waiting for God, so Sarah gets a girlfriend for Abraham and he has a baby with Hagar and names him Ishmael. Then Sarah gets mad at Hagar and sends both Hagar and Ishmael far away.

They wait for decades and finally, in their 90's, Isaac is born. Isaac grows up and has a family, but his family is messed up, too. He has twin sons Jacob and Esau. Esau was born first, but he was short-sighted and naïve. His younger brother, Jacob was a hustler who swindled Esau out of the family blessing with the help of his mom who loved Jacob more.

When Esau comes to his senses, he wants to kill Jacob, who flees to his uncle, Laban. While he's there, Jacob falls in love with Laban's younger daughter Rachel and works for seven years to marry her. But when the wedding day comes, Laban dressed up his older daughter, who's not such a looker and gives her to Jacob instead. He works for another seven years and finally gets to marry Rachel—who becomes his favorite. Well, Leah sees this and the two them get into a baby-making contest and just like Sarah and Abraham, both of them at one point, gave Jacob servants to makes babies with.

Jacob ends up with twelve sons, but Joseph is his favorite and he gives him a sweet favorite son coat—it was a technicolor dream coat—so the other brothers get jealous and want to kill him, but instead of killing him, they just sell him into slavery and tell their dad he was killed by a wild animal. And you thought your family was messed up!

Here's the point. *Families are very effective at passing down traits from generation to generation.* But we don't need Scripture to tell us that, we know it. Of course, it's true *biologically*. Here's a picture of me [Kory pic] I asked my dad to send me a selfie and find a picture of his dad—my grandpa. He said, "This doesn't sound good." I said, "It depends on how you feel about your face!" Anyway, here he is! [dad pic] and here's *his* dad [grandpa pic]. Maybe you see some similarities there. Here's my son Duncan [Duncan pic]

This is true for facial features, but all kinds of other things. Your medical history is really important because things like heart disease, cancers, mental illness—all of these are at least somewhat hereditary. But also family patterns like alcoholism, divorce, child abuse and poverty. But it's not just bad things. If your parents have been married 50 or 60 years, there's a much better chance you will, too. If your family faithfully followed Jesus and was generous and gracious and forgiving, it's more likely you will be, too.

Chances are, you are like your parents and you'll become more like them as you get older. Like this [like your dad clip] If you're a parent, you give your kids the lens through which will view life. If you're angry and unforgiving, your kids will absorb that. If you're kind and caring, your kids will see that. If you value money above all else, they'll pick up that value. If your relationship with God isn't that important to you or if you act one way in public, but another way at home, they see that. I know that's a lot of pressure, but that's the way it is. The reason family is so critical is because it's the greatest determining factor in our lives for success or failure, sin or righteousness.

Third, family can be the source of great joy and support or pain and struggle. Some of the best memories and greatest joys I have in life come from my family. I love to see my kids grow up and to see what they've become and I'm excited to see what they'll be in the future. I'm so proud of them and the choices they make. We're at the point where they're moving out of the house and starting lives of their own and that's cool.

But sometimes I miss the days when our kids were younger. We had some great times and made some great memories of things like taking my truck to Dairy Queen on a summer night and sitting the back while ice cream dripped all over. There's a love that happens in a family that's hard to reproduce anywhere else.

But one thing we probably don't talk about enough in churches is the fact that for some people, family just doesn't happen like that. When you talk about family with them, it doesn't bring joy and nostalgia, but pain, regret and hurt.

For instance, we always want to be sensitive on Mother's Day because while for some, Mother's Day is a reminder of the joy of children, for others it's a painful reminder that even though they desperately want to have children, for some reason, they're not able to. Some because they're not married and maybe have given up on the idea, for others they are married and have tried and tried, but they can't—and it's devastating.

And we see stories in Scripture of how painful this can be for couples—from Abraham and Sarah to Jacob and Rachel to Elkanah and Hannah. The book of 1 Samuel tells the story of Hannah, who year after year, would watch as other women had children

while she did not. It says she went to pray at the Temple “*in deep anguish, crying bitterly as she prayed to the Lord.*” (1 Sam 1:10-11) If you’ve struggled with it or if you’re close to someone who has or does you know this is not an exaggerated picture. It’s agonizing.

In the church’s efforts to promote family and the flourishing of society, we have to be sensitive to people for whom family is not a source of joy, but a source of pain—couples struggling with infertility; people who, when you talk about God as father, it doesn’t bring up a good image, people who have been in abusive relationships or lost a spouse or child prematurely. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t strive for and uphold God’s ideal, but we have to be sensitive to the fact many people don’t experience God’s ideal.

That brings us to our fourth point—*your family can serve the Kingdom or can be an excuse for not getting involved.* Our New Testament passage today was from Matthew, chapter 12. Jesus was speaking to a crowd and his family was asking to speak to him. From the context of the passage, the point seems to be that they were interrupting him in the middle of his teaching, assuming that whatever they had to say to him should take precedent over what he was doing simply because they were family. And when we read this passage, our natural instinct is to think that Jesus was pretty rude to his family.

Now, if you subscribe to the Gospel of Marriage and Family, this will be a big surprise. But it shouldn’t be. Jesus is very consistent. For instance, in the book of Mark, Jesus calls people to be his disciples, one of them says, “**I will follow you, Lord; but first**

let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Jesus replies, “**No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God.” (Mark 9:61-62)**

In Luke 14, Jesus tells the parable of the banquet where people are invited to this great banquet. They all initially say, “Yeah, we’d like to come,” but when the time came and the servant went out to get them, they started to make excuses. Jesus says one of them makes the excuse, “I just got married so I can’t come.”

Now, the interpretation of the parable is that the great banquet represents the Kingdom of God and everyone is invited to participate. But people make excuses for why they can’t. And clearly for Jesus, family can be one reason people don’t fully participate in the Kingdom of God. But people don’t realize they’re doing it.

That’s why he explains later in the chapter, “**If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.”** Now, of course, Jesus isn’t saying we should literally hate our families, but he’s saying that our loyalty to our family should pale in comparison to our love for him and dedication to his Kingdom. And yet, we often put so much emphasis on family that Christians think nothing of elevating family over God.

Think about these examples. When I was a youth pastor, I would see families disappear from church for long periods because they had a child involved in sports that took them away every weekend. There are some families who never reach out to unmarried people after church or for Thanksgiving or Christmas because they say

“holidays are for family.” There are some who won’t get involved in a ministry or take someone into their home because it might change their family dynamics.

I read a piece by one young mom who was convicted when she was driving with two kids in the car and saw an elderly lady limping along with two big grocery bags. She writes this, *“Since we were going pretty slow, I had a good 30 seconds to make a decision. She clearly needed a ride. Buuut I had my 3-year-old and 1-year-old in the car with me. What if she’s dangerous? What if that’s not really milk in her bag but a bomb? What if she’s pretending to walk with a limp but she’s actually a 25-year-old man in disguise? I have kids in the car. My kids’ safety always comes first.*

I passed her. I passed an 80-year-old woman with a limp carrying two bags of groceries. Because of my kids.” Like I said, she immediately felt convicted about it, so she turned around, went back and picked up the woman. And this was her conclusion, *“That was the first time I realized what my [idol] is: I loved my kids more than I loved Jesus, more than I loved bringing his Kingdom down to this earth.”*

Now, I don’t say this to make you feel guilty because I’ve done it and I’m sure you have, too. But I say it to help you think Biblically about your family. Your family should not be a hinderance to your ministry, but you should bring your family into your ministry. It’s not just that the church serves your family, but that your family serves the church and Kingdom of God. I wonder how many, when you heard about Together for Good, you

thought, “That sounds like a good ministry. But I don’t think we could do it because of our kids.” When we decided to be foster parents, that was something we had to consider.

But when you serve, your kids learn to serve. When you give and you invite your kids into that, your kids learn to give. When you invite someone who would otherwise spend a holiday alone over to your house for Christmas, you show them that family doesn’t limit you from serving, but that’s the strength of a family. If you’re a parent, you’re in charge of what the family does. So, what do the decisions you make say about what you value?

And finally, the Bible shows us that *the most important family is the family of God.* Isn’t that exactly what Jesus is saying in Matthew 12? *Who are my brothers and sisters? It’s those who do the will of God.* Throughout the New Testament, the church is called the family of God. People refer to each other as “brother” and “sister.” Why is that? Follow me here...we said that from the beginning, God created the family as the basic source of human flourishing. Some families do this well, but many families are either messed up and usually, even families that are reasonably intact don’t have this vision in mind. In other words, biological families are not the hope of the world.

But the Christian Gospel says that Jesus is the hope of the world. Through his life, death and resurrection, we are forgiven for our sins and have the hope of eternal life. But what we often gloss over about the Gospel is that Jesus didn’t just die so that individuals can go to heaven eventually. He came to create a new family.

John 1:12-13 says, “**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.**” The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 1:5, “**God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.**” (NLT)

So, that means three things. First, that in Jesus Christ we have eternal life if we have faith in him. Second, it means that even if you have no other family around, you have a family in the church. Your salvation is more than just an individual thing, it’s a family thing. And third, this means that Christians need to expand our definition of family.

Something I saw this week that could have turned into a huge political dumpster fire happened when a pro-choice woman, responding to some of the abortion bills in a number of stats, tweeted out this; “*Dear pro-life friends: what have you *personally* done to support lower income single mothers? I'll wait:*” The response was beautiful!

I have no idea who this gal is, but she received over 13,000 responses. Here are a few of them.

“My mom started a pregnancy center and I did volunteer work there from the age of 0-18 (when I left for college). When I was 2, my parents took in a pregnant HS student. Paid all her medical bills. She still comes to visit us and reminds me that I inspired her to not abort.”

“I have taken in a single mother and her two children when her power was cut off in winter. When her car was taken we gave her ours. I’ve given to charity off and on for years. Donated clothing and school supplies to underprivileged kids.”

“Donated a well-working car to a pregnancy support center, which was given to a single mom who chose life.”

“I had a single mother friend who I took into my home, we helped get her daughter into a decent school, introduced her into a caring, Christian community, then all of us helped her establish a home, furnish it, stock the kitchen, and find dignified work.”

“Adopted 1 and took in 3 foster [kids] who are now staying permanently. In addition to my 6 natural children.”

“Yeah, we are foster parents, and adopted our youngest, to add to the three we already had.” Now, of course, there were some uncalled-for snarky comments, but the vast majority of responses were just like this. And the gal who made the original message was gracious in her reply and said it’s so good to see all these responses. Thank you for what you do. I just wish the government did more!

But do you see what happened there? These are people who view their family not fragile things they need to protect, but as a potential source of flourishing. That’s what church as family means. Yes, of course biological families are critical. But the church family can do so much more. There is no reason anyone who is a part of this church

should feel alone. We should never use our biological family as an excuse not to sacrificially serve.

On the back of your bulletin are some questions for further reflection.