

Who Is Your Family?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a five-part series

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Matthew 12:46–50 (NIV)

⁴⁶ While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”

⁴⁸ He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Luke 2:41–52 (NIV)

⁴¹ Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover.

⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom.

⁴³ After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

⁴⁹ “**Why were you searching for me?**” he asked. “**Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?**” ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁵¹ Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Ephesians 2:17–22 (NIV)

¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹ **Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household,** ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Galatians 3:23–29 (NRSV)

²³ Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ **for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.** ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ **There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.** ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Family? Jesus invites us all to join his,

Let’s face it. Jesus said some really hard and challenging things. They leave us with a choice. Do we just let his words go in one ear and out the other? Or do we strive to hear Jesus well and let his words push us ever more firmly toward God’s path?

Certainly, Jesus’ teachings about family and loyalty are some of the toughest. So, let’s try to hear him well.

Jesus and his mom

On a day like many others, Jesus is busy teaching when he is told that his mother and his brothers are waiting outside for him. Jesus seizes the moment and makes the seemingly scandalous pronouncement that his mother and his brothers are those who do God's will, not the flesh-and-blood standing outside. It's as if he says that blood may be thicker than water, but obedience is thicker than blood. Stop and think about how that must have sounded to Mary. Though she surely understood Jesus' unique vocation, it still must have hurt. How could it not?

Contrary to what it may seem, in this moment, Jesus is not tossing out one of the Ten Commandments. After all, he came to fulfill the Law, not abolish it. Rather, he is teaching everyone that their new family in him shares a kinship deeper and stronger than any kinship based upon blood relationships. All believers are brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, a family created by the Holy Spirit that is eternal and unbreakable.

It isn't that Jesus is forcing his mother or us to make a choice between God and family, but he is cautioning us about the choice we must make if it arises. In his commentary on Matthew, Eugene Boring writes: "Matthew's point is that those who have accepted Jesus' message, and thereby have been called to place the kingdom of God above even family loyalties . . . have found a new family in the community of disciples. [By stretching his hand out to the gathered disciples] Jesus signals his compassionate and direct response to those in need, his mighty act of deliverance to disciples in distress."¹

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ we are taken into a new family. It doesn't replace the family into which we were born, but it does transcend that family. We not only gain countless new brothers and sisters, but also gain Jesus as our brother (Matthew 12:50.) Take that in for a moment. God our Father and God our brother. The apostle Paul had much to say about our adoption into Jesus' family, as we'll see a few paragraphs below

You might take a few minutes the next time you are at church to look at each person as you would family. The body of Christ is neither a club nor an organization though it might take on the trappings of either. We are a family – brothers and sisters with one Father.

Jesus, young and free (of mom!)

If we make our way further in Jesus' life, we find ourselves in the midst of the single story we have from Jesus' youth. This incident certainly wouldn't have been any easier on Mary than the later one!

In the first few centuries after Jesus' resurrection, many stories and legends circulated about him. In these fanciful stories, the youthful Jesus amazes his friends, helps his parents, punishes his neighbors, and even turns a wooden toy into a living bird!² But the New Testament Gospels avoid all that. As noted in the accompanying text box, the Gospel writers tell us almost nothing about the young Jesus. Only Luke gives us anything and his story is remarkable for its lack of miracles, angels, or other special revelations. Indeed, the circumstances and his parents' reactions seem quite ordinary.

At that time, it was customary for Jewish men to go to Jerusalem at least three times a year for religious festivals. Entire families would accompany the men at least once a year for the Festival of Passover in the spring. In today's passage from Luke's gospel,

¹From Boring's commentary in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 298.

²There are many purported "gospels" about Jesus. We have portions of nearly 20 and know of about another dozen. But most of them were written in the 3rd century or later. A few were written in the late 2nd century. None were written in the first century. Such writings are often called something like the "Lost Books of the Bible." Hogwash. They weren't lost, just never accepted by the Christian community and were then set aside. Only the four New Testament gospels were written in the first century and have always been embraced by the Christian communities.

Joseph, Mary, and their children are part of a large group of Galileans making their way to Jerusalem. The journey might have taken them ten days or more. After the festival was over, everyone headed back north to Galilee. You can picture a large group making their way up the dusty road, with packs of children and teenagers doing their own thing while the adults tend to the work of the journey. It is certainly no surprise that Mary and Joseph expected Jesus to be running around with cousins and friends. But, actually, Jesus took it upon himself to stay behind in Jerusalem!

Having raised several sons myself, I'd bet Mary and Joseph headed back to Jerusalem both anxious and angry. Sure enough, when they find Jesus, who is only twelve, at the temple, Mary angrily asks Jesus how it is that he could treat his parents in such a manner. I'm sure she didn't know whether to be angry with him or to hug him . . . probably both. After all, it had been several days. Whether you've had a teenager or simply been one, most of us can identify with the parents in this story. But with whom does Jesus identify?

During the days away from his parents, Jesus amazed all the adults (Pharisees, scribes, and priests) in the temple with his understanding and his answers to their questions. But Jesus' responses to his mother's questions are the center of this story. Jesus wonders how she couldn't know that it was "necessary" for him to be in "in my Father's house" (v. 49). *Necessary*. What an interesting choice of words. Not "ought to be" or "want to be" . . . but "necessary." Even at this young age, Jesus knew that his life would be driven by the divine imperative. He would do what he did because that would be the vocation laid out for him by God. His life would not be controlled by fate. He was not working toward some impersonal destiny. No one would coerce him into anything. He would simply *do* as he must, regardless of the consequences. God was revealing the boy's vocation to him and Jesus would be 100% faithful to that vocation, even if it took him to death on a cross.

But what must this young boy, soon to be man, do? Jesus is actually very ambiguous about this. The NRSV translates Luke's Greek, "I must be in my Father's house." However, "house" is not in the Greek; in fact, there is no word there at all! Hence, the KJV translates the phrase, "I must be about my Father's business." In the NRSV footnote, there is yet another rendering, "I must be about my Father's interests." Regardless of exactly what Jesus meant, in these few words he claims for himself a special relationship with God. God would shape his life.

What Happened to Jesus' Childhood and Youth?

One question often asked in my classes is "Why don't the Gospel writers tell us more about Jesus' childhood and youth?" This is an understandable question. Luke and Matthew tell us about Jesus' birth and the immediate aftermath. Luke gives us one story about Jesus when he was twelve (today's passage.) But that is it. The next time we meet Jesus in the Gospels, he is at least thirty!

Though modern biographies usually spend considerable time on the upbringing and development of their subject, ancient "biographies" did not. In the ancient world, the closest things to modern biographies were writings they called "lives," such as those written by Plutarch and Suetonius. The purpose of these writings was to present an unveiling of the subject's public life and show why their character should be emulated. The ancient writers couldn't make things up, but they could move events around and even embellish them in order to make their point. Sometimes these "biographies" were structured chronologically, but some were also structured around themes in the subject's life. Childhood experiences mattered little, as did anything that happened prior to the subject's maturity and entry onto the public stage. The ancients had no illusions about understanding psychological motivations. Even physical appearances didn't matter to them; thus, we have little idea what Jesus looked like. We should not approach the Gospels as we would a biography from our day.

Many of us spend decades trying to find our identity, to come to know who we are and to find purpose in our life. Surely, in this story, Luke wants us to understand that by the age of twelve Jesus had found his identity, affirming it in his unique relationship with YHWH, the God of Israel. While still a boy, Jesus understood that he was called to obedience. He will *do* as he *must*. Jesus had grown up fast. The boy Jesus understood that “*there are some things we do just because of who we are*: ‘It is necessary that I be in my Father’s house.’”³ . . . and often in the presence of his mother!

On to our own adoption into the family of Jesus

So how is it that we are part of God’s family? What does that really mean? The apostle Paul develops the metaphor of adoption and inheritance to describe our becoming God’s children.

In chapter 3 of his letter to the Galatians, Paul depicts the Old Testament Law as a custodian, who took care of God’s children. The Law showed them how to live, and disciplined them.

Paul then mixes two metaphors. Paul begins with the image of an heir. Then, as now, fathers would set up estates for their children and appoint guardians or trustees who would control the estate until the children had come of age. Unlike today, under Roman law, children with a guardian had the legal status of a slave. In Paul’s metaphor, it is God the Father who has set up the estate. The law is the guardian. It is all humanity who have lived as minors, as slaves even, under the guardianship of the law¹, bound to the “elemental spirits of the earth” (v. 3).

But . . . in an act of cosmic significance, God has intervened . . . the time has been fulfilled -- the minors have become of age. The slaves have been freed!

How could this be? Paul explains to the Galatians that God has sent his own son -- quite human (born of a woman) and quite Jewish (born under the law) – who has “redeemed¹” humanity, so that everyone might be adopted as God’s children. Here, Paul introduces his second metaphor, that of adoption. This becomes a little clearer when we remember that Paul is writing to Christians who had not been Jewish; the adoption language would have been especially meaningful for them – as it is for us. Jewish-Christians would have seen themselves as having received their inheritance by birth. Paul makes clear that Gentile-Christians could claim adoption into God’s family . . . a slave to a child (adopted or otherwise) to an heir! Whether born a son or adopted as a son, Paul sees no distinction before God. By sending his Son to free us from our prison, God has brought both Jew and Gentile into his newly-created family.

This “legal” adoption is not the end of Paul’s story. God sent his Holy Spirit to us as the sign and pledge of our adoption into God’s family. As Cousar writes, “Just as an orphan taken into the home of foster parents may initially mistrust or at least wonder about the reception given by the new parents and may require some gesture to get over the feelings of being an outsider, so God’s adopted children move about in fear until the Spirit operates at a deep level ‘in our hearts’ to corroborate not once by repeatedly the reality of the Father’s love.” It is striking that Paul uses the Aramaic word, “Abba,” and striking that the early church preserved the original Aramaic as the writings of the New Testament were preserved and passed on. Clearly, we are to understand and find great joy in the intimate relationship we enjoy with God. God’s Spirit helps us to overcome the timidity of newly adopted children and enables us to pray to God in this most intimate way.

The Holy Spirit helps us to experience the joy of being heirs to God’s kingdom, of being in an intimate and very personal relationship with the creator of all that is. If we will keep our eyes on God and cultivate our relationship through prayer, study, and action then we will find the joy that God desires for us all.

³from Alan Culpepper’s commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon, 1995.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *We are beginning the book of Esther this week;*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *2 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This Sunday: *World Religions in Seven Sentences – Buddhism and Taoism*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.