

**Loving the Church**  
***“Everybody needs a family. . .”***  
Matthew 12, 1 Timothy 3

My family lived in Newport, Tennessee from the time I was three until I was nine. We had a laundry room in the basement. Mom, of course, did all the laundry. Before she threw our clothes in the washer, she had to empty all the pockets. And so there were little piles of toys and papers and rubber bands on the shelf in the laundry room. One day I happened to be in the laundry room and saw a dollar bill lying there. Without thinking, I picked up that dollar bill and put it into my pocket. The next day, we were scheduled to take a trip to Gatlinburg; we liked watching the taffy-pulling machines, going to the wax museum, etc. But before we left, my mother announced that somebody had taken a dollar bill from the laundry room and that we weren't going to Gatlinburg until it was returned.

I can almost feel the panic that overtook me at that moment. I took that dollar bill back down to the laundry room, pretended to find it behind a box of detergent, and went back up stairs to explain my discovery. I'm pretty sure my mom knew that I'd taken the money, but she never accused me. I think she knew I'd learned my lesson. That day, I learned that in our family you don't take things that don't belong to you. I'm sure I'd been told a dozen times before, but that was the day I learned that lesson. Honestly, I don't think I've ever stolen anything since that day (I've got a problem keeping most of the other Ten Commandments, but not that one).

You can probably think of similar things that you learned by living in your family of origin. Typically people will say, “I learned the value of hard work. . . education. . . doing your best. . . not complaining. . .” Or maybe you can think of deficiencies – things you wish you'd learned in your family of origin. For better or worse, we learn how to live in our family of origin. Even though every family has deficiencies, I can't imagine growing up without a family.

And I can't imagine growing up in Christ without a spiritual family. In a spiritual family we re-learn how to think and speak and act. I believe that people who aren't living in a local church have a glass-ceiling on their growth. It's not that such people can't walk with God, but certain things can only be learned in the ongoing/permanent relationships in a local church. Without the commitment and continuity, people move through their lives without ever dealing with deeper issues.

Today I want us to think about how Jesus and Paul thought about the local church as a family – and as the ideal context for spiritual growth. This is a core reason why we should love the local church (and why planting churches is so vital): Because *everybody needs a spiritual family*.

In Matthew 12 we have an account that introduces the idea of Jesus' disciples being His "family." Jesus teaches that:

***Jesus and Spiritual Family. (Matthew 12:46-50)***

46 While He was still speaking to the crowds, behold, His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him. 47 Someone said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You." 48 But Jesus

answered the one who was telling Him and said, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?"

I think we have to assume here that Jesus wasn't trying to be mean to His mother and brothers. He wasn't looking for an occasion to offend his brothers (and sisters) or to "dishonor" His mother. Rather, Jesus – as always – responded to the opportunity to communicate a perspective to His disciples that was critical for them to understand. With His biological family standing outside waiting to talk with Him, Jesus asks the question, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" In other words, "Where am I really 'at home'?" "Among what group of people do I really 'belong'?"

49 And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! 50 "For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother."

Jesus – whose entire life was devoted to "the will of His Father" – is really at home among those who also do the will of His Father. This reality is obvious when we stop to think about it: ***if you and I have the same Father, we're family***. Whether we realize it or not, whether we want it or not, we're family. Jesus is the "Elder Brother" among the children of God. In a local church, the thing that binds us together as a family is our common commitment to doing the will of God. Unless people in a church are broadly seeking to do the will of God, any talk of living together as a family is just a cliché. Unless we are relating to God as a heavenly Father, seeking to do what He wants, we'll never experience our identity as the family of God.

Other New Testament writers (such as Peter, James, John, and Paul) pick up this concept in their writings and flesh out what it means to live together as the family of God. They will stress that we are supposed to think about the church as a family and treat each other as members of the same family. The implication is that we're supposed to belong to one another and be committed to one another as a family.

Sometimes people who've grown up in and around the church take all of this for granted. Sometimes those who experience it for the first time see more clearly the value of the church as a family. In India we met a woman named Christina (not her original name) and her husband Chandra. Tina was from a farming village in northern India; her family rented some land and grew tomatoes. They would all wake up early and work; by 10:00 in the morning, they would break from their work and take naps. Tina never liked to nap, so she would turn on the radio. She never liked the Christian stations (she thought the preachers were boring), but one day she heard some women speaking very emotionally about how Jesus had changed their lives. Eventually through listening to this radio program, Tina trusted in Jesus as her God and Savior.

The preacher on the radio said that if you were a believer that you needed to go to church. Someone in her village told her that there was a church 60 kilometers away (37 miles!). Tina walked 60 km to church. . . regularly. That church became her spiritual family. She valued the life and nourishment of her spiritual family to walk that far. At first her family objected to her involvement with the church, but eventually they saw the fruit of her life and became okay with it. It was a joy to meet Tina and Chandra and several others from their church. It was obvious

that they thought about the church in the terms Jesus described. Their common commitment to God and His will made them brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let's build on our understanding by turning to Paul's first letter to Timothy. There Paul explicitly develops the idea of the local church as a "family of God."

***Paul and Spiritual Family. (1 Timothy 3:14-15)*** Let's read these verses and then we'll pick up the context.

14 I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; 15 but in case I am delayed, *I write* so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

Paul was currently in prison (probably in Rome) when he wrote this letter, but his hope was to be able to visit Timothy in Ephesus before too long. Timothy was serving as a teacher and shepherd within the church in Ephesus. But in case Paul was delayed for any length of time, he wrote his letter to Timothy so that Timothy and the church at Ephesus would understand "how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God."

In calling the local church the "household of God" Paul was emphasizing how those in the local church live together in God's family. As in every family, there are certain standards of conduct, both individually and relationally. Paul wrote what he did because he thought it important that Timothy and the Ephesian church know the type of conduct that is appropriate within ***God's*** household.

Paul underscores how critical it is to be a healthy, mature expression of God's family by going on to say that we are "the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." This means that the stakes couldn't be higher. ***First***, we belong to the one, true living God; if we fail to represent Him well, the world draws the wrong conclusions about Him. ***Second***, as the pillar and support of the truth, if we fall, the truth comes tumbling down with us. There is a sense in which the truth will always remain the truth. But in this world, the truth is mediated through the church. If we don't hold up the truth through our belief system and our behavior and through our relationships with one another, we've failed in our mission as a church. ***The advancement of God's reputation and God's truth depend upon how we conduct ourselves in His family.***

Let's look briefly at some of Paul's instruction about living as the family of God.

**A family needs leadership. (1 Timothy 3:1-13)** The immediate thing that Paul has been writing about in relation to "conducting oneself in the household of God" is the selection of elders and deacons. Elders are those who shepherd the church, giving oversight in matters of doctrine, discipline, and direction. Deacons are those who "serve" in various other capacities. The qualities of elders and deacons which Paul lists are especially appropriate for those who give leadership within the household of God. Without these qualities among the leadership, the local church won't be a healthy family.

For example, elders are supposed to be hospitable (welcoming). . . able to teach (communicate the faith so that others learn). . . etc. Elders aren't explicitly called parents, but there are some similarities. Elders are supposed to set the spiritual (and even emotional) tone in the church. The training ground for being an elder is typically his family. Those who shepherd their own families might also shepherd the flock of God well. Elders who love the church shepherd the flock of God well.

**A family deals with conflict, sin, and disagreements. (1 Timothy 5:1-2)** Chapter 5 provides a priceless example of how our identity as "the household of God" affects the way we "conduct ourselves." Just like in our individual families, in the church there will be conflicts that need to be resolved, sins that need to be confronted, and misunderstandings that need to be figured and straightened out. Individual families deal with conflict in ways that may or may not be healthy. Some families yell and scream at each other; some families withdraw and go silent for days at a time; other families have one person who always wins every argument (whether s/he is right or not). Paul tells Timothy that in the "household of God" THIS is how we deal with conflict, sin, and disagreements:

5:1 Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but *rather* appeal to *him* as a father, *to* the younger men as brothers, 2 the older women as mothers, *and* the younger women as sisters, in all purity.

Instead of being harsh with each other, we appeal to each other as family members. Depending on the age and gender, we appeal to each other as a father, mother, brother, or sister (in all purity). Paul is advocating that they treat each other with the type of respect that characterizes a healthy family.

This is something we continue to learn here at Faith. But we're more and more committed to living out biblical principles of dealing with conflict (and speech in general). If you have a conflict with someone (which you will eventually), you shouldn't go talk about that person; you go talk to that person. You clothe yourself with humility – wanting their best and looking out for their interests and not merely your own – and you have an honest conversation about things.

We need to help each other with this way of dealing with conflict. If you're talking with someone who is "going off" about somebody else, stop them mid-sentence and ask, "Have you talked with him/her about this issue?" If they have, there may be a good reason for you to listen to the complaint. But if they haven't, you tell them that that needs to happen first. If they're unable (for whatever reason) to go to the other person, you offer to go with them. As a spiritual family, we have a common commitment to deal humbly with conflict and to speak the truth in love. If we love the church, we'll deal with conflict this way.

**Members of a family take care of one other. (5:3-16)** Implicit in many of the instructions given throughout 1 Timothy is the idea that members of a local church should care for each other as family. Just as we care for members of our own families, we should care for members of our spiritual family. In chapter 5, for example, Paul has an extended discussion about how the church should care for widows who meet certain qualifications. They did what

was necessary to help widows "make it" financially and materially. That's the mindset of a family: you do whatever is necessary to take care of those less capable of meeting their own needs.

Read the rest of 1 Timothy when you have the chance. It gives a vision for the local church as the household of God. What becomes clear is that a good, healthy local church is the very best context for seeing people grow up in Christ. Everybody needs a spiritual family.

By way of response, I'd like you to ask yourself two questions. The first question might be difficult to face, but I think it's important: ***Has anything dulled my affection for the church as my spiritual family?*** Ask yourself whether there are reasons why you don't really love the church the way you should.

The question is important because there are many things that can dull our affection for the church and therefore make us love the church less than we should. You may have come here today thinking, "I want to go to the church building for an hour or so, sing some songs, hear a message, and then leave. I'm not coming to be part of a family." Maybe you feel this way because you've been burned by a church; or maybe you already have a good family and don't feel the need for another one; or maybe you've never considered the value of a spiritual family.

If you identify reasons why your affection for the church has been dulled, I'd encourage you to pray about the possibility of addressing it. Perhaps there's an unresolved conflict, and you realize that life is too short and that there's too much at stake to ignore it any longer. Perhaps you conclude that you simply need to let go of an offense – simply move on in faith and in joy. Perhaps you've had a consumer mentality. Instead of loving the church like you love your own family, you've viewed the church as an entity that delivers a product. That will ***always*** lead to disappointment. These are simply ideas. If God shows you anything that has dulled your affection for the church, please seek Him about it; ask for help if you need it.

Second, ask yourself ***How can I better live as a brother or sister in this family of God?*** This question challenges us to look forward and consider ways that we can better live out our calling as the household of God. Just like you might ask, "What could I do to be a better husband/wife or parent/child or brother/sister?" ask, "How can I be a better brother or sister in the family of God?" I'd encourage you to ask this question honestly and trust God to lead you. He might bring someone else to mind that you might befriend or encourage. He might impress on you how you might serve your spiritual family more effectively. Perhaps you might be a better brother or sister by praying for someone specifically or by praying for your church family in general. You might look back over the sermon notes and see what God impresses on you.

**Additional Note: Dealing with rejection from one's biological family.** God's desire and design is that our biological and spiritual families intersect and overlap. The best possible scenario is when a person's biological family is part of the larger spiritual family and follows Jesus and "does the will of His Father" together. Even so, Jesus made clear that that would not always be the case. Jesus said shocking things like this (Matthew 10):

34 "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 "For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; 36 and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD. 37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

Even though we grieve that it's true, sometimes the gospel will cause division among members of a person's family. In such cases it is all the more important that the spiritual family step up and become everything that Jesus and Paul envisioned.