

The Unrelated Siblings
Matthew 12:46-50
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The condemnation by Jesus upon the evil generation of Jews of His day is immediately followed in Matthew's Gospel by the commendation by Jesus of those who do the will of His Father in heaven. Jesus considered His followers to be His family.

The evil generation viewed their ancestry to be highly significant. John the Baptist told them in Matthew 3:8-9, *"Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham."* Jesus used the opportunity to teach the crowds about the difference between physical and spiritual family when His mother and brothers sought to speak with Him.

The request to speak to Jesus (12:46-47)

Mark 3:20-21 provides the background for this occasion, *"And He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal. When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, 'He has lost His senses.'"* At this point, His brothers did not believe in Him (John 7:5).

Matthew connects Jesus' family who were seeking to speak to Him with the words that He was saying regarding the coming condemnation of the Jews. Some hypothesize the lack of a reference to Joseph implies he had passed away, but there is no direct evidence of this. The brothers of Jesus were not so concerned with His conflict with the Pharisees as they were about His mental stability. They were standing outside due to the size of the crowd in the house listening to Jesus.

A few of the oldest and best ancient manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel omit verse 47. One of them later was corrected to add this verse. The reason modern translations have chosen to keep verse 47 is because it is attested to by other ancient copies, it is necessary to explain verse 48, and because this variant likely arose from a copyist whose eyes skipped verse 47 due to the similar ending with the prior sentence of verse 46.

The rhetorical statement by Jesus (12:48)

On its face, this appears to be an odd question by Jesus since He would obviously know who His mother and His brothers were. The following two verses make it apparent that Jesus is asking a rhetorical question for the purpose of His point in verse 50.

Matthew later records the names of Jesus' brothers in Matthew 13:55, *"Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?"* James would be identified as the brother of Jesus by Paul in Galatians 1:19 and he played a leading role in the early church (Acts 15). The resurrected Lord appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7) and he is widely considered to be the author of the epistle of James. Jesus' brother Jude is considered to be the author of the book of Jude. Finally, the brothers are considered to be believers with believing wives in 1 Corinthians 9:5.

The normal reference to Jesus' brothers would mean that these were offspring of Joseph and Mary, with Jesus being Mary's oldest child. However, certain religious traditions believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary, although this is not derived from the Scripture. Quite a number of ancient church fathers espoused the view that Mary was forever a virgin. The title "Perpetual Virgin" was first assigned to her at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553.

There are two theories that try to explain how brothers could mean something other than its normal meaning. One, held by the Eastern Orthodox Church, is that these brothers were step-brothers of Jesus, sons of Joseph from a previous marriage. This view however would mean the oldest of these brothers would be the legal heir to the throne of David rather than Jesus.

Another view, held by most Roman Catholics, is that these were cousins of Jesus. This allows Joseph also to be a life-long virgin and views these brothers as the children of "Mary, the mother of James the Less and Joses" (Mark 15:40), who was the wife of Clopas and Mary's sister (John 19:25). This view results in the unlikely case of two sisters with the same name, Mary.

The belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary is one of several tenets of Mariolatry, or the worship of Mary, in the Roman Catholic Church. Yet this view was also held by many of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, and continues to be held by many Lutherans, Anglicans, and some Methodist and Reformed churches. The extra-biblical traditions of the past are often hard to eradicate.

The real siblings of Jesus (12:49-50)

Remarkably, Jesus points to His disciples to refer to them as His mother and His brothers. Clearly, Jesus intends this in a spiritual sense only. This becomes even more clear in Matthew 12:50, *“For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.”* We learn that Jesus had sisters in Matthew 13:56.

This section does not deny the reality of the family. Jesus continued to consider His mother as special to Him and fulfilled His responsibilities to her in His death giving John, the apostle, the care for her (John 19:25-27). Jesus affirmed the concert of family in Matthew 15:4-6, *“For God said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,’ and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother’ And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition”* (cf. Matthew 19:19). Christians have clear responsibilities for their specific family, *“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”* (1 Timothy 5:8).

However, we must not miss the teaching of Jesus that true faith, resulting in doing the will of God, makes us a part of Christ’s spiritual family. We are His mother and brother and sister in this new family, not a specific gender relationship but the whole family, based on the repeated conjunction. This revelation of the spiritual relationship that the disciples have with their Lord has profound implications.

While we have a certain responsibility to our physical family, we have a greater responsibility for our spiritual family. When Jesus called His disciples, they left everything and followed him (cf. Matthew 4:22). We cannot allow our loyalty to our family supersede our commitment to follow Jesus, *“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”* (Matthew 10:37; cf. Matthew 8:22).

Indeed, there will be cases where our family is opposed to our faith in Christ, *“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved”* (Matthew 10:21-22). By choosing to follow Jesus in light of potential rejection from our family, we not only demonstrate our true faith in Christ, but also will be rewarded by our Lord.

Conclusion

Matthew 12:46-50 describes Jesus' spiritual family as those who do the will of God the Father. The importance of this spiritual family can hardly be overstated. The New Testament epistles are filled with references to our spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus explicitly opens the family of God to all mankind with the word "whoever" in verse 50. The Jews had wrongly trusted in the biological ancestry as children of Abraham, but *"it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants"* (Romans 9:8). We are children of God through faith, *"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God"* (John 1:12-13).

The family of God that we belong to in Christ is more important than our physical family. Our spiritual family is forever, our physical family is temporary, for even marriage only lasts for our earthly lifetime (cf. Romans 7:2; Matthew 22:30). Our brothers and sisters in Christ will dwell together with us into eternity.

In the modern, evangelical church, the family has sometimes taken preeminence above the church. While this can be understandable given certain attacks upon the family unit in our society, it can lead people to view church on the basis of how it serves their earthly family. Children and youth ministries can be evaluated based upon how they serve our children rather than how our children can serve others. Those families from the community that a church may be reaching might be considered as a negative influence upon our family. This is hardly reflective of the heart of Christ toward those who are distressed and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd (cf. Matthew 9:36-38).

As churches seek to attract those who come for the sake of their family, they can become less attractive to those without a spouse or children. All who believe in Christ are part of our heavenly family, and as such, they ought to be valued. Christ's family is made up of people in all stages of life, beyond the traditional family unit. While our God-given family is important, and we have certain responsibilities toward our family, it cannot be the center of our spiritual life and ministry.

