

“Fathers, Brothers, Mothers, Sisters” (1 Timothy 5:1–2)

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When I say the word “family,” what comes to mind? Do you think of unconditional love and acceptance, people who have your back, peace and harmony, and warm embraces? Or do you have a lot of negative associations? Perhaps when you think about family, you think, “It’s complicated.”

If we’re being honest, a lot of us have mixed feelings about family. I know someone who is away right now with multiple family members and in-laws of various generations, all spending a week in a rental house. He was concerned about getting along with everyone and also having the ability to share his faith with them. And I sort of jokingly asked, “This is supposed to be a vacation, right?” I suppose my idea of vacation is doing something really enjoyable or just relaxing, or perhaps doing a little of both. When I think about spending a week with my extended family, well, the words “enjoyable” and “relaxing” don’t come immediately to mind. But that’s just my experience. Yours may be very different.

My point is that families can be pretty messy things. They are the building blocks of society, the most basic and fundamental unit that God created. Families are places of growth and learning, of protection and safety, of love and forgiveness. And families are often places of conflict, too. And that’s reflected in the Bible.

Most nights, I bring Caleb, our 8-year-old, to bed. We have gone through many different children’s Bibles with him. In the past, these were different story Bibles, which are illustrated kids Bibles that feature the most prominent stories of the Bible. These stories are told briefly; sometimes, they quote the exact biblical text. Most of the time, they’re paraphrases. Well, since he’s 8, and since we’ve been through those story Bibles many times, I decided I would read the Bible—the real Bible—to him. So, I started in Genesis. I’ve read the first 31 chapters to him. I’ve skipped a few small things, but not much. When I read the biblical text to him, I have to stop and tell him the main point kind of quickly. And a lot of times, the main point is that families are divided because of sin. God created the world to be a place of harmony, but when people turned their backs on God, disregarding him and his authority, they turned against each other, too. Adam blames his sin on Eve. Cain kills Abel. Noah’s son, Ham, dishonored his father. Abraham and Lot separated. Abraham had family problems because he had a son with his wife’s servant,

and she and Abraham's wife, not to mention Ishmael and Isaac, had tensions. Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau had conflict, and so did Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah. Last night, we read about how Jacob had conflicts with his father-in-law. I often tell Caleb, "This story also shows that even families fight against each other because of sin."

Again, families are messy things. And the theme of family conflicts continues throughout the Old Testament.

But something changes in the New Testament. The family starts to be redefined. And that begins with Jesus himself. Jesus belonged to a family, though a rather unique one. His mother, Mary, became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit when she was a virgin. Her husband, Joseph, was Jesus' adoptive father, and Jesus had half-brothers and half-sisters (Mark 6:3). But the Gospels show that Jesus creates a new family. Take the Gospel of Mark. Early on, Jesus starts to draw crowds, because they heard he was performing miracles. After Jesus appoints his twelve disciples, this is what we read in Mark 3:20–21:

²⁰ Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."¹

That's nice, isn't it? Crowds are gathering around Jesus to the point where he and his disciples cannot eat. I guess the crowds surrounded their house. Jesus' family somehow hears about all of this, and they come to get him. They want to bring him from Capernaum back to Nazareth. Maybe they thought that Jesus was somehow out of control. What person in their right mind would draw all these stalkers to himself?

A few verses later, in Mark 3:31–35, we read this:

³¹ And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. ³² And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." ³³ And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" ³⁵ For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus' family is still trying to get to him, and someone tells Jesus this. And Jesus asks, more or less, "Who is my family? You are my family! Whoever follows me is part of my family." That greatly minimizes the role of Mary, by the way. In Luke's Gospel, we hear of a

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

woman who says to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” In other words, blessed is Virgin Mary, right? Now, if there were ever a place in the Bible where the special status of Mary would be affirmed, you would think that would be it. But you would be wrong. Jesus responds, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Luke 11:27–28).

So, who are the members of Jesus’ family? The people who are united to him. The people who do the will of God. Jesus once said, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29). The one who trusts Jesus does the will of God. The one who loves God and loves other people, because they trust Jesus, does the will of God. People who are united to Jesus and rescued from condemnation are part of his family.

And those who follow Jesus have a new family. We see this in Matthew 10:34–39:

³⁴ “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come 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 person’s enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Jesus divides natural families and creates a new one. To be a part of Jesus’ family, we must love Jesus even more than we love our own parents and children. That does not mean, as we’ll see, that we don’t love our parents and children. But it means that things have changed for us.

There’s one more passage in the Gospels that shows us that Jesus redefines family. As he is dying on the cross, Jesus looks at “the disciple whom he loved,” John, and his mother, Mary, and says something quite beautiful. This is John 19:26–27:

²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

Jesus made sure his mother was taken care of. At this point, Joseph was more than likely already dead. Jesus’ siblings were in Nazareth, not in Jerusalem. John and Mary were grieving deeply, and Jesus did something wonderful: he gave them each other.

Now, why do I take all this time to give us a little tour of what the Bible says about family? It's important to see this because in today's passage in 1 Timothy, we see that Christians have two families. We have a church family and we have natural families. And we have obligations to both families. We must take care of both families. We must treat people in both families appropriately.

The book of 1 Timothy is a letter written by the apostle Paul to his younger associate, Timothy. Paul left Timothy in the city of Ephesus to make sure that the church there was corrected. Paul had helped start the church, but after he left, some false teachers eventually crept into the church. Timothy's job was to correct them, or perhaps remove them. And Timothy had to make sure that the church ran according to God's plans. In today's passage, Paul tells Timothy how to treat others in the church, and then he shifts to talk about how the church should take care of widows and how Christians should take care of family members.

Today, we're looking at 1 Timothy 5:1–8. Without further ado, let's read the first two verses:

¹ Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, ² older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

In last week's passage, Paul had some personal things to say to Timothy. Here, he tells them one more thing: he tells Timothy to treat older men and women and younger men and women. He tells Timothy to treat them like fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters. This makes sense, because Paul has already told Timothy that the church is "the household of God" (1 Tim. 3:15). Or, the church is the family of God. And there are certain ways that families should behave.

Paul tells Timothy not to rebuke an older man, but to encourage him like a father. The word translated as "rebuke" appears only this one time in the New Testament. It has violent connotations. It can mean "strike at." We might say, "don't lash out at an older man," or "don't rebuke sharply an older man." What Paul does not mean is, "Don't correct an older man." God has ordained that certain people be leaders in the church, and age is not really a qualification. Last week, we saw that Paul told Timothy, "Let no one despise you for your youth" (1 Tim. 4:12). Older people are not necessarily authorities in the church. Pastors, or elders, or overseers are the leaders of the church, and part of their job is correcting. But that correction must be done

like you would correct your father—with respect. I think John Stott, a longtime British pastor and a prolific author, puts it well. He says, “It may be Timothy’s duty to admonish somebody considerably older than himself. Paul seems to assume that it will be. In this case, he must perform his duty, but do it as an exhortation, not as a harsh rebuke.”²

And, really, that’s how Timothy was supposed to treat older women, too. Treat them like mothers, says Paul. Paul knew something of this. At the end of Romans, his most famous letter, he mentions a number of people by name. We don’t know who many of these people are. That is, we don’t have any other details about them other than what we read in the last chapter of Romans. Paul writes, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well” (Rom. 16:13). Mary was like a mother to John; Rufus’s mother was like a mother to Paul; and Timothy was supposed to treat older women like mothers, even as he had to correct them or lead them.

Timothy was supposed to treat younger men like brothers and younger women like sisters. And then Paul adds these words after he tells Timothy to treat younger women like sisters: “in all purity.” Paul was probably warning Timothy against sexual temptations. “Treat younger women like sisters, not like women to seduce.” Church leaders have often abused their authority in different ways, and that is certainly one way they have done so.

So, we see that Timothy had obligations to people in this church to treat them like family. You might think, “Well, that’s just for Timothy,” or, “That’s just for church leaders.” But older men and women, and younger men and women have responsibilities, too. In another one of Paul’s letter, Titus, he says that these people should act in certain ways. Let’s look at Titus 2:2–6:

² Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. ³ Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, ⁴ and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. ⁶ Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled.

Paul told Timothy to treat older men and older women like fathers and mothers, respectively. Here, he tells older men to act like good fathers and older women to act like good

² John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 125.

mothers. Both should serve as examples. The younger women should learn how to be ideal wives (if they're married). The younger men should learn self-control.

If you're a Christian, you're part of the family of God. That means you're expected to act like it. There are certain behaviors that are fitting for God's family. We should treat each other with appropriate respect. We should acknowledge that each of us has a different role to play in God's household, from the pastors or elders to elder statesmen to matriarchs to young men and women and even children. Each one should behave in a suitable way.

Now, let's move on to verses 3–8. What we see here is that though we have a church family, our natural families still matter. In a sense, we have two families, and we have responsibilities to both. Let's read these verses.

³ Honor widows who are truly widows. ⁴ But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. ⁵ She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, ⁶ but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. ⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Paul starts to talk about widows and how they should be cared for. When he says “honor,” he doesn't just mean give them respect. He means take care of them financially. We know this because later in the chapter he'll talk about honoring elders, and there he makes it clear that he's thinking about finances. If there are widows in the church who have no family and are not likely to remarry, the church should take care of them. I'll talk much more about this next week. This week, I want to us to see that first the natural family has a responsibility to take care of these widows. Paul says that if the widow has children or grandchildren, they should take care of her. That's one way of obeying the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:2–3). Paul says that widows should set their hope on God, continuing in prayers “night and day.” But the indulgent widow, the one who doesn't hope in God, is already dead. Spiritually, those who don't set their hope on God are dead as dead can be. We start out life spiritually dead. The only way we can have true life, eternal life, is by turning to Jesus. When we trust in Jesus for our salvation, we have set our hope on God, not on ourselves and not on anything or anyone else.

That's because Jesus is the only one who can heal what is wrong with us. Again, the reason why there are divisions in this world is because of our rebellion against God. We see divisions in our families, in our workplaces, in our neighborhood, in our country, and between countries. We see divisions within ourselves: some of our desires are contrary to some of our other desires. We don't desire consistently. We don't act consistently. And the great division we have is between God and human beings. We don't see God. We don't always feel his presence. We don't think of everything that we see as a gift from the Creator. We're supposed to live our lives so that everything points us to God. Yet we act as if we are the very center of reality.

The only way to be put back together is to turn to God, which means turning to Jesus, his Son. I'll talk more about that in a moment.

Before I do that, I want us to look at verse 8: "if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." I don't think Paul is saying, "If you fail to provide for your relative, you will lose your salvation." I think he means something like this: "Even unbelievers provide for their families. If you fail to provide for people in your family, you are worse than an unbeliever. You have showed your true colors." Jesus once chewed out the religious leaders of his day because instead of honoring their parents by providing for them, they gave that money to the temple, probably to be seen as being generous to God. Jesus said to them, "for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God" (Matt. 15:6). He also called them "hypocrites" (Matt. 15:7).

Paul says that denying one's family is similar to denying the faith. The reason why we might call this a "gospel issue" is because it gets to the heart of the gospel, the good news of Christianity. Jesus came to take care of family.

God sent his Son to reunite people to himself. Jesus does this by living the life we should live, so that his righteousness can be credited to us. He also does this by dying in our place, so that our sins can be punished. God is a perfect judge, and a good judge will make sure that crimes are paid for. In this case, God allows someone else to pay for our crimes. When we turn to Jesus, we're put back together with God. Our inner divisions start to be healed. And, in the church at least, our family divisions should start to heal, too. Christians are supposed to love their family members and provide for them. If you realize how much God your Father has provided for you by sending his Son, your older brother, Jesus, then you should turn around and

provide for others. It's very similar to forgiving others. When we have realized how much God has forgiven us, we should extend forgiveness to others, too.

If you are part of God's family, act like it. You have a natural family, but you also have a church family. That's similar to the way we are citizens of America, but, ultimately, we're citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). Both citizenships come with different responsibilities. So it is with family. We have responsibilities to our natural family, and we also have responsibilities to our church family. Embrace your role in these families. Respect those whom you are called to respect. Obey and submit to those you are called to submit to. Take care of those in need. If you are in need, please let your needs be known. We are able to do something to help you.

If you are not part of God's family because you are not yet a Christian, I urge you to put your hope in God. And that means turning to Jesus and trusting him as your only hope, your only help, your only way to eternal life, your only way to be put back together with God, with the various parts of yourself, with other people, and even with the world. The Bible says that you are not yet alive—not *truly* alive. There's a better life that comes with turning to God. It's not an easy life right now, but it gives you hope and meaning. And it gives you a new family. Your natural family may be wonderful. Or, you may wonder how any family could be so bad. Either way, there's a better family, a truer family that awaits you, and it's the family of God. We may not be perfect, but we have a perfect Father and we're on the way to becoming more like our perfect, older brother, who has given his very life for us.