

**What is Jesus' Definition of "Family?"**    **Tim Carson**  
**Luke 8:19-21; 18:15-17**                      **May 13, 2018**

When we say "family" what do we mean?

Is this the family of our origins, mothers, fathers, siblings? Or is it extended family, the whole tribe? Does it have a good feeling or one that leaves you feeling uneasy? Do you look forward to family times or dread them? What is family for you?

We talk about families a lot. We talk about forging strong ones. We make family friendly events. Churches build family life centers.

And what does a family look like to you? Is it two parents? Two parents, mother and father? Or the same gender? Is your family smaller than it used to be because some went away: one of the parents, some of the kids moved out? Are you empty nesters? Are you the only one in your family now? Do you have a blended family made up of step-everybody? Does your family have biological parents or children or adopted parents or children or both?

Does your family come in many colors? And what are the kinds of family have we left out, the unconventional but equally important kinds?

I started asking the same questions of Jesus. What was his notion of "family?" What I found was rather surprising.

Jesus doesn't talk about family, not like we do. In the Gospels we hear mention of Jesus' own family, but by someone else (Mk 3:2). Jesus tells parables that include families as characters, but he doesn't tell stories about his own family. Really, as far as family goes, there's hardly anything he says directly.

Later in Paul's letters and other New Testament epistles there is conversation about families. But not from Jesus himself.

Most shockingly we find some anti-family sayings. Jesus said that true disciples should be willing to leave their families for him and for the sake of the kingdom (Mk 10:29-31).

Yesterday I participated in a session in which we heard what makes for strong and resilient families. All the research on that identifies crucial elements you might imagine: being open, affection, mutual support, lots of humor and shared routines and rituals. Strong resilient families have a sense of who they are and want to be.

As I listened to those apparent truths I thought about Jesus and his message in the Gospels. We don't find any of what I have just described, certainly not in that way. We find his insistence that love drive all our relationships and meaning of life itself. We discover his affection for children, the outcasts and the broken-hearted. But we have nothing like a blueprint for family life.

So if Jesus isn't talking about families like we do, what do we find? There are clues along the way.

One clue is when Jesus refers to children he treats all children as though they were his own children. In a communal culture all the children are raised by everyone.

You have to become like a child, he said, to see the reign of God. The youngest shall be your leaders in the spiritual life. They haven't yet become jaded yet, driven by their own egos.

Another clue is that he refers to all who live in the Spirit as his family. He talks about a new kind of family, the one that wraps around God, an all-encompassing community not built on natural ties but on spiritual ones. This is a transcending and crossing of old boundaries of blood where people only love their own tribe. Jesus says that salvation is not based on bloodlines but rather on the power of God. He defines family along entirely different lines.

What we have in Jesus is what I call the *transcendent referent*; he defines all relationships in their much deeper and larger God context, and that includes family. Whatever you are or hope to be, you belong to God first. And that kind of knowledge leads to a larger perspective on family. Or put differently, it leads to families that are much more expansive.

For people and families who embrace that larger God reality people who are wrapped around God become your spiritual family, and by extension all people become your universal family. That is exactly what irked people about Jesus the most; he broke through tribalism by insisting that everyone was part of the tribe. He ate with all manner of socially accepted people and not. He moved outside of convention.

As I thought of how that translates for us in our time, regardless of the contours of our families, I thought of at least three things:

*If we assume the transcendent perspective of Jesus our families will become more expansive.* Have you ever known those families who always seem to have one more seat at the table? Have you known those homes where those outside the family end up feeling at home? These are families with semi-permeable boundaries – like a pop-up camper they allow for expansion and invite people into their space with an open hospitality.

*If we assume the transcendent perspective of Jesus our families will become more defined by love than by blood.* Many of you know from hard experience that blood ties do not automatically insure anything. In fact, blood without love can create the opposite of family. If love becomes the criteria by which families are formed we will find lots of circles of love that become our families. Human beings search for places to belong. And the best tribes of belonging are driven by love.

*If we assume the transcendent perspective of Jesus our families will become oriented to God's presence in the world.* This is what happens with families whose values turn them outside of the family as a way to define who they are as family. They are aware that God cares for the whole world and so they do to. You know those families who for example decide that for Christmas they are going to join together and contribute to some important cause? They know that the highest meaning of love is to share it, and not just with those in your tribe.

I think of those three characteristics as driving Jesus' connection with those around him and the unique way he defined family:

- It was an expansive perspective that broadened the circle of who was included.
- It was defined by love and faith more than blood lines or tribe.
- It was an outward view focused on what God was doing in the world.

And of course as we consider church family we have to apply the same criteria. How does Broadway measure up when it comes to Jesus' transcendent view of family? Do we embody that expansive circle defined by faith and love more than blood with an outward view toward the world God loves?

I pray so. Because Christ has made us His family!