

The First Family

Psalm 103, 1 Thessalonians 2:8–12

When Christ came to earth, he did not come as the abominable snowman, he didn't come as a space alien, he didn't come as an android; rather, he came as a baby in a manger. He came as a human person. He entered into this world as a member of a human family. When the shepherds arrived at Bethlehem they found “Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.” That is a description of an intact human family—father, mother and offspring. The eternal Son of God was raised by loving, committed parents. He knew a mother's nurture and a father's protection. He ate home-cooked meals. He had a mother to kiss him if he fell and skinned his knee. He had a father who could teach him life lessons. He experienced life with uncles and aunts and cousins. He went to the synagogue and worshiped at the temple in Jerusalem. He attended circumcisions and bar-mitzvahs, weddings and funerals. He was “the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” He knew what life was like in a fallen world. Yet he experienced firsthand the truth that “God sets the solitary in families” and “maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children.”¹

In the Bible the church is called a family. In Ephesians Paul writes, “You are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the *household of God*. . . . For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole *family* in heaven and earth is named.”² The Westminster Confession helpfully explains that the church is “the house and *family* of God.” The church is not only a worshiping community, not only the body of Christ, it is also a spiritual family. The bonds and ties that we share with other Christians are not those of blood and marriage but of faith. Christians are united by our common confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. We do not share common human parents but a common Savior. If you and I belong to Christ—if we confess him as Lord, if we are his worshipers—then the Bible teaches that we are members of one another, we are God's fellow-servants, we are one in covenant, we are *family*—a spiritual family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of our Christian brothers and sisters live in other countries. Some speak other languages. We are separated geographically and politically. We are members of different local churches, yet we share a common salvation. We are family.

The dictionary defines *family* as *the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children*. In Bible times the family would have also included servants. It was often multigenerational as well. The apostle Peter's

¹ Ps. 68:6, 113:9

² Eph. 2:19, 3:15

mother-in-law lived with his family.³ Under Mosaic law the eldest son would receive a double portion of the inheritance and would have primary responsibility for taking care of his parents in their old age. Children growing up in ancient Palestine would be watched often not only by their parents but also by one or more grandparents.

In our text this morning we learn four things about God's family: namely, that it is (1) founded on love, (2) devoted to truth, (3) growing in goodness, and (4) bound for heaven. These are joyous truths that each of us can experience firsthand. Let's consider them. First, God's family is

1. Founded on love

Paul writes: "So, *affectionately longing for you*, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because *you had become dear to us*." Notice the words "affectionately longing for you" and "you had become dear to us." Paul loved those he won to Christ as his sons and daughters in the faith. They had become dear to him. He lifted them up in prayer, even after he had been called away from their community and was laboring in another place. His letters reveal that even when he was focused on preaching the gospel and making disciples in other cities, he prayed for the Thessalonians by name. This was not strictly a business arrangement—it was much more than that. Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians that he *affectionately longed* for them. In the business world, sometimes an employee will take a job with another company, or a business will relocate. Sometimes former colleagues will keep in touch with one another for one reason or another—perhaps to share an attractive job opening or provide a letter of reference—but in the church of Jesus Christ our ties run much deeper. If a minister or member transfers to another church, our prayers and well-wishes go with them.

Paul held the members of the church in Thessalonica deep within his heart. He affectionately longed for them. These saints had become dear to him. He regarded them as his spiritual sons and daughters. But Paul was no indulgent, permissive parent. He loved his spiritual sons and daughters too much to hold back from speaking the truth to them. He told them the truth, even when it hurt. Notice his plain-speaking in other of his epistles: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth." "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel." "You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" "How is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?" "I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ."⁴

³ Matt. 8:14, Mark 1:30, Luke 4:38

⁴ Gal. 3:1, 1:6, 5:7, 4:9; 2 Cor. 11:3

In his second letter to the Thessalonian church Paul will say, “We hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.” Paul would speak hard words if they were needed. He would say what needed to be said, knowing that what Christians need most of all is to hear the truth and to adjust their lives in accordance with it. Paul expressed his deep love for his spiritual sons and daughters not by *avoiding* the truth but by *speaking* the truth in love.

Sometimes, as parents, it is necessary to tell our children the hard truth: “I love you, dear son, but if you don’t shape up and change your ways, you’re going to mess up your life.” “You are a precious daughter, and I love you very much, but you are self-centered and disrespectful. Your heart is not in the right place.”

God’s family is founded on love. We see this most clearly in the New Testament, but there are glimmers of it in the Old as well. We hear the words this morning “As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” God is a spiritual Father to those who fear him, that is, to those who look to him in faith. In the Old Testament as well as the New, the love that believers have for one another is a reflection of the love that the Father has for us. We loved because we are loved!

When children are raised in a loving family, they are better able to love when they become adults. They are able to love other people. They are able to love God as our loving heavenly Father. When children are raised without a faithful father, it is more difficult for them to relate to others. It is frightening that intact families are becoming more the exception than the rule. According to the Census Bureau there are now almost 11 million one-parent families with a child under the age of 18. Eighty percent of one-parent families are headed by a mother. Among certain populations up to 70% of families have no father in the home. These statistics are alarming. What our country needs is a renewal of the two-parent family. And for this to happen, there must be a renewal of the church.

God’s family is *founded on love*. Second, God’s family is

2. Devoted to truth

Paul writes, “we preached to you the gospel of God . . . we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you.” As we’ve seen previously, Paul had basically one message—Christ. Wherever he went, whatever topic he was addressing, he preached Christ. He testified, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”⁵

⁵ Rom. 1:16

The word for *gospel* in the New Testament is εὐαγγέλιον, literally *beautiful announcement*. The gospel is the “beautiful announcement” that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”⁶ This is what lost sinners most need to hear. Though we all fell in Adam’s first sin, God undertook to send his Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, to take upon himself our human nature and go to the cross to die for our sins. “Christ died for our sins, according to the Scripture.”⁷ He “suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). Without Christ we are all guilty before God and must suffer the fate of eternal death, excluded from the life of God forever and ever. But when, born again by the Spirit, we look to Christ in true faith, we are saved eternally. The message of the Bible is that *Christ saves sinners*. We cannot save ourselves, for we are spiritually dead without Christ. Moreover, the Bible does not teach that Christ Jesus came into the world *to enable sinners to save themselves* with Christ’s help. It says, simply and clearly, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” This is the gospel—the good news, the beautiful announcement. This is the truth of Scripture.

God’s family is devoted to truth. Man does not make his own truth. Rather, truth is fixed, it is established by God. Wherever Paul went, he spoke the truth. Paul established the church in Thessalonica so that it could be a living monument to the truth. As he would write later, the church is “the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the *truth*” (1 Tim. 3:15). This is the truth which Paul spoke continually as he did the spadework of establishing the church in Thessalonica. He did this in various ways, according to what each situation required; he testified: “we *exhorted*, and *comforted*, and *charged* every one of you” (v. 11).

God’s family is devoted to truth. The devil’s family is based upon lies, whether the lies of a false religion or the lie that man’s life consists only in the abundance of his possessions and the attainment of personal happiness, something like “man’s chief end is to please himself.” But if a family culture is based upon a lie, it will eventually perish. “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.”⁸ Families too!

Is your family devoted to truth or based upon lies? The answer to that question will determine your eternal destiny.

Third, God’s family is

3. Growing in goodness

Paul testifies “how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you.” Paul and his missionary team *lived* the faith. They were devout—they

⁶ 1 Tim. 1:15

⁷ 1 Cor. 15:3

⁸ Ps. 9:7

trusted in God. They treated people justly, according to the character of God, revealed in his law. They at all times wanted to behave themselves blamelessly in the sight of God. Paul and his companions *lived* the faith before those that they were evangelizing. But this high standard of behavior is clearly not intended for ministers and missionaries only; it is the standard for *all* Christians. The apostle's desire for the Thessalonians and for all of us is "that you would walk worthy of God" (v. 12). God's family is to be growing in goodness. God himself is good, and his people, renewed according to his image, are likewise to be good—to live "devoutly," "justly" and "blamelessly" before a watching world.

Have you ever noticed that the world loves to publish stories of scandalous behavior involving professing Christians? When a well-known preacher or evangelist embezzles money from a church or nonprofit, or commits adultery or abuses underage children, the story is repeated far and wide. Many people draw the conclusion that Christianity is all a sham, devoid of truth. The reputation of Christ suffers—as though he, the one about whom the Father testified: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am *well pleased*—personally committed the sin. And since the reputation of God the Father is intimately bound up with that of the Son, the reputation of the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—suffers damage. This is why it is so important for you and me to live *devoutly, justly and blamelessly* before our family, friends and neighbors: so that the reputation of God is enhanced, so that our perfect Savior is glorified. God's family is growing in *goodness*—that is, is being sanctified, growing in the faith, growing in Christian character. That is God's will for every Christian.

Fourth, God's family is

4. Bound for heaven

Notice the last phrase of our text: "God who calls you into His own kingdom and *glory*." The Greek is plural: the God who calls you—all of you. Paul is writing to the church at Thessalonica, but the words he uses refer to every faithful church and Christian the world over. What a sublime truth! We who belong to Christ, who have been redeemed by his grace, have a new destiny and a new destination: heaven! As Paul wrote concerning himself: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven."⁹ There, "he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter." Paul would testify, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him."¹⁰ The primary focus of heaven is not the mansions God has prepared, or the streets of gold; rather, it is the presence of Christ, the Lamb who was slain. In heaven one day the whole spiritual family that bears the name of Christ will finally be together, worshiping Christ with one heart

⁹ 2 Cor. 12:2

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 2:9

and voice—sin only a distant memory. The saints will sit down with Christ at the marriage supper of the Lamb and enjoy eternal fellowship—union and communion—with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The saints will enjoy eternal rest as we gather to engage in the activity that we were created for and meant for: to sing the praises of the Lamb that was slain, to rejoice in his goodness and holy character, and to worship with the heavenly choir. At that final day the family of God will be complete. There will be no one missing. Hypocrites will be excluded, as will the enemies of Christ. There will be eternal rejoicing.

God made man to be a social creature. Living in families brings order to society. Every person has a place. Every person has a specific role to play.

The church is likened to a family. It is the family of God. God is a father figure. He is the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is a faithful Father—one who pities his children.

The church into which God calls his elect is a spiritual family. As Scripture testifies, there are fathers in the faith; there are young men; there are children¹¹—individual saints at various stages of spiritual development, each having various gifts, strengths and weaknesses, each member of the family needing the others. In a family, every member is important. In an emergency the family wants to get everyone out—even the weakest one. Even the weakest member of the family is important. In a fire, the head of the family will rush back into the house to get even the weakest, most vulnerable, most dependent member out. When God gives a newborn baby to a Christian family, even if that baby is born with birth defects, that baby is important to the family. It is a member of the family. There is a sense of belonging.

In a family, the various members have various duties to one another. The father's duty is to provide for his family; it is also his duty to provide spiritual leadership to the family. The mother's duty is to serve and be a helper to her husband, and a nurturer to family members. The children's duty is to learn from their parents, to obey them in the Lord, and to grow and develop toward maturity. When a child becomes an adult, he takes on adult responsibilities. The church is composed of individual families—families who come together to worship God and propagate the faith. The elders are to be spiritual fathers. The saints are to be spiritual sons and daughters.

Every member of the church can relate to the idea of a family. Some of us were raised in intact families. Others were raised in broken or dysfunctional families. We had natural fathers who were either good fathers or bad fathers, but God is the perfect Father. He is wholly faithful. He does not shirk his responsibilities. He does not live for self at the expense of his family. The idea of individuals pursuing their

¹¹ 1 John 2:12–14

own happiness and success at the expense of others is called selfishness. A family does not consider any of its members to be dispensable. Every member is important. Whether you are a communicant member or a noncommunicant member, a regular attender or a visitor, you are important. The church does not exclude anyone who has a sincere interest in Christ, who has a desire to become his disciple, who wants to know the Word.

The church sings, “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above. Before our Father’s throne we pour our ardent prayers; our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares. When we are called to part, it gives us inward pain; but we shall still be joined in heart and hope to meet again.”¹²

God’s family is founded on love, devoted to truth, growing in goodness, bound for heaven. It is a place of safety and belonging. There is no better family! Amen.

¹² <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/blest-be-the-tie-that-binds/> accessed 12-23-23