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What Does Family Mean to you?

God's Word has become so irrelevant to most of western culture that the biblical definitions of "marriage" and "family" have lost their original meaning. No doubt you agree with the Psalmist's description of today's flagrant and unabashed lawlessness: *"The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men"* (Psalms 12:8). And if you reverence our Father with a holy fear, you're probably grieving over the fall of this nation into a morass of spiritual and moral darkness as it brazenly forsakes biblical truth.

We'd like to address in this e-mail a deeper and more personal issue concerning "family." In recent years we've talked with many followers of Jesus who find themselves enduring painful emotional strain whenever they socialize with or are in contact with their unbelieving relatives. This nation has compromised God's Word by ignoring it or watering it down under the deceptive guise of "tolerance." Those who do cling to Lord Jesus and the inviolable, absolute nature of His Word often find themselves insulted, mocked, excluded, and sometimes fired from their jobs. Even among unbelieving relatives, many Jesus followers struggle to lovingly and righteously represent Him. Finding pleasure in what is depraved and unholy stirs even those who are "churched" to avoid you if you're gratefully living in obedient trust in Lord Jesus according to His Word.

While this disregard for God's way isn't new, it's become ever-increasingly the norm. In fact, *you* probably weren't raised by parents:

- *who wholeheartedly followed Jesus,*
- *whose marriage grew to increasingly reflect Him more over time,*
- *who trained you to apply the Bible to your life,*
- *who prayed with you daily in absolute trust and confidence in His faithfulness.*

Perhaps you, like us, became a follower of our Lord Jesus after leaving home. You may have even wholly put your trust in Him after you got married or had a family. If this describes you, we want to offer some insight into how to handle the emotional tension when you spend time with unbelieving relatives.

Sue and I were married 7 years before we followed Jesus as Lord of our lives. I brought into our marriage the Dowgiewicz family demonic strongholds and some hefty unbiblical and toxic issues. Sue brought with her the Goodrich family demonic strongholds, as well as her own unbiblical and toxic issues. We had a lot to overcome! For 24 years of marriage these unChristlike influences were unchallenged and unchanged; however their effect was painful as we continued to hurt one another. As we look back now, we can see that our separate identities as "Mike Dowgiewicz" and "Sue Goodrich" exercised an element of independence that kept us like two railroad tracks — singularly going in the same direction but certainly not reflecting the union of heart and spirit that evidences Christ at work in us as a couple.

Little in the Christian teachings we received focused squarely on the changes we needed to be willing to make in our marriage. Pulpit sermons dealt with marriage as a concept. "How To" books addressed marriage through the filter of *adding more* to the relationship rather than *eliminating* demonic strongholds and toxic motivations inherited from our relatives. The information put a bandage over a festering wound; we can't remember anything that focused on becoming *more like Jesus together* as our goal.

It wasn't until we went to Israel in 1993 that we gained a new understanding of Father's goal for our marriage. It was there that we received the Gospel that the earliest followers of Jesus embraced—a covenant relationship secured by Jesus and entered through love-grounded, obedient trust. Through this totally scriptural Gospel we came to realize that our Father wanted us individually *and* collectively to diligently pursue sanctification—being set apart as holy for His use—into the character of His Son, Jesus. **Our Father's goal is that our marriage covenant reflect in the physical world the eternal Covenant we have with Him in Christ.** This is a twofold process that can only happen when a person or marriage is *willing to be changed*, and is *intentional in removing anything* that hinders them from becoming more like our Lord Jesus.

Perhaps you find that you respond to your relatives as we did before we received the Hebraic foundations from our Father. When we were around unbelieving relatives, we at times regressed back to the old patterns of interaction which were so familiar when we were growing up. (In *your* past, were you the bossy oldest child? The shy and easily persuaded younger one? The wild and rebellious life of the party?) We'd often find when we left these family gatherings that we felt ashamed that we'd given in to those old, unChristlike ways.

Our Father also showed us in Israel a deeper understanding of what "family" meant to Him when we embraced His Covenant as His trusting and beloved son and daughter. The concept and reality of living in "**Covenant union**" in Christ is so full of intimacy and grateful appreciation! That sense of "intimate union" has wonderfully undergirded our relationship with our Lord, with each other in our marriage, and with others of like obedient trust.

Covenant union in Spirit creates a loving determination to rid yourself of all unChristlike motives or actions. You *want* to live a life worthy of Him and please Him in every way (Colossians 1:10-12). By His grace, you purpose wholeheartedly to be the best reflection of Jesus to others you can be. What a whole different *way of life* in Jesus than just knowing *about* Him!

The question Jesus asks in Matthew 12:48 is intended to pierce our presuppositions so we can have HIS perspective: "*Who is My mother, and who are My brothers?*" He then definitively declares who His family is: "*Here are My mother and My brothers. **For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is MY brother and sister and mother***" (Matthew 12:49,50). No one emerges from the womb belonging to the family of Jesus. This new family identity can only begin *after* we're born again. It's then, with the

Spirit of Christ dwelling in us, that our heart's desire is to please our Father: to *do His will* without regard to the cost. Only after you're born from above do you have both the will and the power from God to live in a way that confirms you're His child in the family of Jesus.

In our recent Hebraic Article, ***Mutually Growing Christ-like Relationships***, we note two pre-conditions you need in order to press on with others in learning how to be the family of Jesus together:

- *a wholehearted desire to be transformed into the character of our Lord Jesus.*
- *a humble willingness to receive biblically-based constructive criticism from those who deeply care about you.*

Being the Family of Jesus Or, Identifying With Unbelieving Relatives

The values and goals you aspire to as you seek to become more like Jesus are diametrically opposed to the worldly values and goals your unbelieving relatives strive after. As Paul affirms, the "wisdom of this world" is foolishness from God's perspective; without His Spirit, the worldly *can't* perceive from His vantage point (1 Corinthians 2:14; 3:18-20). Perhaps a relative has scoffed at your relationships in Christ as your "family" by telling you, "Blood is thicker than water." They may be affirming their own priority of loyalty to relatives, but for those in the family of Jesus, **His blood** is what enables us to even be brothers and sisters in Him. Is your heart filled with gratitude to our Lord for His shed blood to pay the price for your sins? That is the cost to Him that made it possible for you to become our Father's child. It's out of deep-rooted love and heartfelt gratefulness that we yearn to become more like Jesus, and to joyfully fulfill His purposes for our lives.

Several differences distinguish your family of biological relatives and your family of brothers and sisters in Christ. Remember, at one time you as well lived with their values and goals! (See Colossians 1:21-23.) This isn't a time for pride or disdain regarding them; rather, it's a point of recognizing how He's changed you.

The Family Of Jesus

1. On behalf of your Father you seek to reconcile people to Him through Jesus. You want everyone to be drawn to Jesus so they might become His own. (2 Corinthians 5:20)
2. In your purpose and desire to become more like Jesus, you don't hide any areas of spiritual darkness. Rather, by His grace and authority you rid yourself of them. (2 Corinthians 10:4)
3. Through applying His Word to your life, you yield to and cooperate with the indwelling

Spirit to live in way that pleases your Father. (Romans 12:1,2)

4. You refuse to live entrapped by fear of what others say or do to you. Out of love for Jesus, you purpose to live righteously with a holy boldness from Him that fears no one but extends His concern for all. (2 Timothy 1:7)

5. You intervene in interpersonal situations as a *peacemaker* rather than a *peacekeeper*, working to bring emotionally painful situations to a peace-filled biblical resolution. (Matthew 5:9; James 3:18)

Your Unbelieving Relatives

1. Unconcerned with their own eternal destiny and that of others, they live for this world's pleasures and for self-fulfillment.

2. They expend great effort to maintain the status quo of superficial pleasantries as they attend family weddings, funerals, picnics, etc., but refuse to get involved in the trials and troubles of each other's lives.

3. In general, they view the Bible as an ancient narrative, filled with nice stories and irrelevant commands that have no application today.

4. Entrapped by fear of what others, especially other relatives, might say, they're hesitant to reveal their inner motives and feelings to one another. Their family structures are controlled by intertwining **Codependent** relationships in which the Dominant individuals among them are unaware of and/or unconcerned about the emotional hurt they cause others. The Codependent members act as *placaters* rather than peacemakers. For the sake of avoiding any rupture of the status quo, they hamstring any attempt to bring lasting peace to emotionally painful situations.

5. The relationships of unbelieving biological relatives are often influenced by demonic strongholds that have become so "familiar" that they refuse to renounce these by the authority of Jesus' Name: "*This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil*" (John 3:19). You most likely were influenced in the past by the same strongholds and/or haven't been healed of the toxic memories.

Keep in mind that these spirits agitate your unbelieving relatives to know what buttons to push in you when you're in contact! Prepare your heart in advance to persevere in love, refusing to retaliate.

Because of the Spirit of Christ in you, you're probably pained by the gossip and slander that mar many gatherings. You also may be tempted to get frustrated by their resistance to any testimony of the freedom only Jesus can give. And perhaps you feel like your hands are tied by their collective "don't rock the family boat" attitude that wards off any attempt to confront personal issues that you know are hurting others.

In Teaching E-mail 29, ***Are Your Friendships Spiritually Authentic?*** we discuss the three types of relationships people have — Positional, Activity-based, and Value-based. The deepest relationship is Value-based, the kind of relationship we in the family of

Jesus are privileged to have with Him and with the rest of our brothers and sisters in His Spirit. You may find it helpful to review this teaching e-mail.

Here's something to keep in mind. As a follower of Jesus, it's not that you're *for* or *against* any of your unbelieving relatives. Rather, as you seek to grow in His likeness, you are establishing your life on Biblical values and goals that conflict with their unbiblical way of life. Out of love for your Lord, your Christ-like values and goals make it difficult for you to esteem theirs and to voice agreement with them. And, without the Holy Spirit in them, they'll NEVER understand where you're coming from. That disparity brings pain to you because you know the One they're missing and the life they could have in His Lordship!

Over the years the Spirit has put us in the position of confronting in love our own unbelieving relatives, including our parents. Sometimes that meant we had to stay away, especially when their activities so violated God's Word that we needed to protect our son from them. Confrontation and absence may seem harsh to you. But our Father knew that our heart's desire was for our aging parents in particular to bow before Jesus as Savior and Lord. Ultimately, by His wonderful grace all four of our parents repented and committed their lives to Christ!

- Sue's mother did so on her death bed!
- Her Dad entrusted himself to Jesus near the end of his life after years of private conversations with Sue about Him and about eternal consequences.
- Mike's father approached him one day and announced, "I want the same Jesus I see in you." Heartfelt, earnest prayer found a new son in the family of Jesus!
- Mike's Mom entrusted her life to Jesus shortly after becoming free of strongholds.

Our experience over the years, especially with our own unbelieving relatives, has shown that the prison they find themselves in has been built because the family structures are primarily controlled by women. Hardly a man among our unbelieving relatives isn't fearful of his own wife! Is this so in your family? But it's not the women who are at fault; rather, the men fail to establish their family on a biblical foundation, instead allowing their wives to bear the burden of responsibility.

A Note of Caution

We hear from many of you who are pained by your involvement with your unbelieving relatives. In order to minimize the emotional tension among you, you need to grow in the character qualities of Jesus, especially in love. His family values and goals need to take precedence in your life out of loving obedience to Him so your relatives can see the difference He makes in a life—yours! Too often Jesus followers compromise their walk so they can appease those who have yet to believe. But when you do that, you're letting their sinful and stronghold-influenced values and goals dictate your understanding of authentic Biblical family. We encourage you to continue to press into the values and goals of the family of Christ!

***Because you belong to the family of Jesus,
be sure you don't place the interests
of unbelieving relatives above your spiritual family.
If you do, you'll suffer a lot of unnecessary heartache!***
(see Romans 12:13, Galatians 6:10, 1 Peter 2:17, 3 John 1:8)

You may find, as we did with our own unbelieving relatives, that the more growth in the character of Jesus was our priority, the less they wanted us around. Invitations to gatherings and events diminished for sure! While we're still very burdened for their salvation and pray consistently and earnestly for them, the fields are ripe for harvest where we're living and through various means of contact throughout the world. The family of Jesus and those who are moving toward trusting Jesus as their Lord is where we're focusing our efforts, even as we make use of every opportunity to testify of Him with whomever He puts in our path.

We hope that if you find yourself facing tension with unbelieving relatives you'll be encouraged by this e-mail. Only as you're being sanctified into Christ's likeness in your ongoing journey in Jesus will you cast down the toxic memories or motives instilled in you by your unbelieving relatives as you grew up. Press on into the transformation with grateful trust and joy. It's worth it!

Mike & Sue