

Relationships: Church and me
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(READ Matt. 12:46-50)

The cord of family has always run thick. Passing on an inheritance, sticking up for a weak cousin, and nepotism in the workplace are all examples of how we have almost this innate bond to family. So, Jesus words in Matthew 12 are quite revolutionary; they almost come off disrespectful. It's not just that his family shows up and wants to spend some time with him. I mean, who could blame a guy for making his brothers wait an extra 15 to 30 minutes. But his mother shows up, too. If anybody demands respect and a hearing, it's mom.

What Jesus says and does is very important for us as we think about our relationship with God's people. Jesus looks at his disciples, he looks at those who have been learning from him, who have made sacrifices for the sake of his work and the Kingdom of God and says, "Here are my mothers and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus is helping us re-define life and relationships within his kingdom. And what he is showing us now is that when we are called into the life of God by his gracious invitation through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit we become a part of a new family. This is why when you read through your NT you keep seeing church members, fellow followers of Jesus, referred to as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Part of what sounds disrespectful in Jesus' statement is that it seems he is picking his spiritual family over his biological or immediate family. And for some of us, no person or group is more important than our immediate family. If you remember a couple of Sundays ago when we talked about our family we learned that God says we have an enduring responsibility to our family members. In fact, this responsibility to our families is so significant Paul said that if you deny, ignore, or close your heart to your family you are worse than an unbeliever. So, don't think that Jesus is somehow advocating that we become disinterested or unloving to our immediate family; that's not what he saying.

But what Jesus is teaching here is profound and we all need to spend some time reflecting on his teaching (especially those of us have a strong "family first" mentality). Because Jesus' words are a challenge to our familial priorities and commitments. I do think that Jesus is teaching that there is a bond that we have with our fellow followers of Jesus that goes even deeper than the bond we share with our immediate families. That what unites people who have been made new by Jesus Christ is stronger than any earthly bond. For some of us, that's hard to imagine; we are so close to our immediate families. We do everything together. We celebrate together; we support one another; we care for one another (and we should.)

I bet a number of you have experienced what I'm talking about; a deep spiritual bond with your church family that you don't have with your immediate family. You are the first (maybe still the only) in your family that has come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. You have come to see that your brokenness, your rebellion is your biggest problem in life. And you've also come to see that the death and resurrection of Jesus is more beautiful than a 1000 sunsets over the Pacific Ocean. But your family does not share your vision. They cannot because they have not been born again. So you hope and pray for your family. But you have also come discover that what you truly need (encouragement in Christ, the wisdom of God, nourishment for your soul) your family cannot provide for you because they do not share your faith in Christ. They provide many other things and praise God for that. But you find the encouragement in Christ, the wisdom of God, the nourishment for your soul from another family, the family of God. Your brothers and sisters in your church home. And you have come to discover that you have a home with them that you never thought you'd find. They care for you as if you were family; and you care for them in the same way. But God is telling you something this morning; it's not *as if* they were your family; they *are* your family -- your family in Christ. And what binds you together with your brothers and sisters in Christ is stronger than blood, stronger than the legal paperwork of adoption, stronger than DNA; what binds you together is supernatural (and isn't it a blessing when our immediate family is also our spiritual family in Christ... and I know that's true for many of you and that's something to praise God for).

It's important that we start here when we talk about our relationship with our church. I'm going to spend a good deal of time this morning getting practical; talking with you about what you should actually do on a daily, weekly, and yearly basis. But you have to start here; you have to start with what is true. You have to think the right way and believe the right thing or you'll never get to proper action and behavior in your relationship with your church family. Because here's the deal when we're talking about this kind of relationship: it requires everything and will give you everything.

That's how I want to transition and like I did with family, I want to give you a guiding word that should inform your relationships with your brothers and sisters in Christ. And that word is *blessing*. I think the scriptures tell us that we should be a *blessing* and receive the *blessing* in relationship to our brothers and sisters in Christ. I get that idea primarily from the *one another* passages in the NT. What do I mean by *one another* passages?

59 times in the NT we are commanded to do something with or for one another within the body of Christ. 59 times. One of the things that implies is that the church of Jesus Christ is the collection of individuals that make up our local assembly. *You are the church*, FBC. This building is not the church; the pastors or leaders of FBC are not the church. All of us, together, are the church and we are to live our lives in relationships of blessing with one another.

Let me give you an example of these one another passages. Of these 59 one another passages, there are a few themes that emerge; or maybe it could be said that there are some one another commands that are repeated rather regularly because they are so important.

Here's the most frequent one another command: *love one another*. It's stated in a variety of ways; here's an example.

- Love one another ~ 1 John 3:11
- Keep loving one another earnestly ~ 1 Peter 4:8
- May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another ~ 1 Thess. 3:12

Another command you see repeated is this: *encourage one another*. Again, here's an example of that.

- Encourage one another ~ Heb. 10:25
- Encourage one another and build one another up ~ 1 Thess. 5:11
- Exhort one another daily ~ Heb. 3:13 (exhort means to encourage with truth).

Along with these repeated one another commands are a number of them that you hear one time or so like...

- Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another ~ James 5:16
- Bear with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving one another ~ Col. 3:13
- Bear one another's burdens ~ Gal. 6:2

I have compiled a list of all 59 of these one another commands; you can find a copy of them at the Welcome Center or online. Take a look at all of them and get familiar with the myriad of ways God expects us to be a blessing to one another.

I want to suggest to you two prerequisites, if you will, to practice and experience the blessing of your church family. Let me call it *community 101* and *community 201*. Community 101 I would call *integration*. To truly be blessed and be a blessing to your church family you need to be integrated. What I mean by that is you need to be connected and involved with others in your local church.

Let me tell you a quick story: Ben and Kari just moved into town. So much of their life is new. They've recently graduated from college, started new jobs, and got married. And they want to make sure faith is an important part of their new life together. It takes some courage, but they decide to start attending the local church near them. At first, it seems it's exactly what they're looking for. The people are friendly, the music is encouraging, and the preaching connects to their daily lives. It's working; they're growing! During the services or in the bulletin they learn about other opportunities at church like Bible studies or seminars, but they are a little shy so they don't take advantage of those opportunities. They also hear about the chance to serve, but never respond. Everybody is still friendly, but nobody really reaches out personally to help Ben and Kari feel at home. They meet new people, but they don't make any new friends. And over time, church doesn't seem to be helping them like it did at first. It's not like the church is different; it's just not feeling so helpful. In time, Ben and Kari stop coming. And sadly, not many notice.

This is not an uncommon scenario. Statistically speaking, the failure to connect and become integrated into the life of a church is a top reason people stop attending. I don't want that for you. Part of the blessing we are searching for comes to us through one another. So

when we miss that, when we never get it, it's not surprising that we'd stop. You won't experience the blessings of...

- Serving one another in love (Gal. 5)
- Welcoming one another the way Christ has welcomed you (Romans 15)
- Building one another up (1 Thess. 5)

How do you experience those blessings if you're not connected, involved... integrated within the life of the family? You really can't.

So, this begs two responses. The first response is from us as an entire church. It's so important that we make sure we are opening up our lives, our spaces, our ministries to help people become integrated. It's hard being new, isn't it? If you are new to FBC, I'm so thankful you tapped into the courage of the Lord and overcame the anxiety and fear that comes with trying a new church. FBC, we need to make every effort to keep extending the warmth and welcome of Christ to help everyone become integrated. Imagine how you could be God's appointed person to help another feel the welcome of Christ.

But the second response is for those of you who are newer. Some more courage is still necessary. You took an important first step (I'm so glad you did); but there are still a few more to go. Take that courageous step to come to a Bible study, to participate in the Sunday school hour. If you've been around awhile and you hear about opportunities to serve, consider saying yes to those. There's something special about serving with others that links us together in more significant ways. When I watch the many of you serving in Awana, I can see how your work and time spent together helps you experience the integration I'm talking about. Don't wait in a corner wondering, "When will others come and invite me." I am inviting you now, but that does mean there are a few more steps you will need to take.

Community 201 is a step beyond intergregation. In Paul Tripp's book, *Broken-Down House*, he encourages a kind of community he calls *intentionally intrusive*. Let me read for you what he means by that (READ pg. 160).

Here's what I believe to be true: Unless I specifically give permission to a brother to lovingly, kindly encourage me in my relationship with Christ, he's most likely going to stay out of that area of my life. He's most likely going to mind his p's and q's, mind his own business, and not provide me with the kind of encouragement I really need. Our spiritual life, our character, is a pretty intimate part of who we are. That means we're pretty picky who we let in and we recognize others are really picky, too. And that's good. We should be picky about that. Friends, as Tripp implied, you ought not open the vulnerable parts of who you are to many people. There is a right kind of guarding we do of ourselves. Yet, if we are guarded with everyone then we will never be truly known; nor will we find the necessary help in our journey.

So, can I ask you to do one of two things so you can be blessed and be a blessing to others in your church family? For some of you, you need to take a step towards integration. You're here; I love that. But you need more; you're kind of hanging out on the sidelines, you

have a habit of saying, “not today” and “not for me” when you hear about opportunities. You won’t experience the blessings of the one another without being more connected. If that’s you, go ahead and tell us that. If we know, we might be able to help point you in the right direction. When you hear about opportunities, ask God for the courage to take the step you need to take. And I’ll do my best to keep providing you with the opportunities you need.

Some of you are integrated, but taking the next step of inviting people more deeply into your life will get you closer to the true blessings of the one another passages. It’s not that you’re not experiencing the blessings, but you could be even more.

Let me challenge you: if you’re hiding, come out. Trust that God has more for you from his people. Like I mentioned earlier: it will be a sacrifice, but your reward and return will be worth it.

Questions for the week

- Is it hard to view your fellow church members as “family”? If so, how come?
- What does Jesus’ teaching from Matthew 12 imply about the importance and centrality of his way for those who follow Jesus?
- Review the 59 one another passages; in which ways would you like others to be a blessing to you and how could you envision being a blessing to others?