

# Family

Intro and turn to Mark 3.

Last week, we kicked off the first week of our Vision Series. Big thanks to our announcement guy, Kent. Basically, we're taking a few weeks to break down the DNA and core of who we strive to be as a church. And he talked about what it means for us to be Jesus-Centered. And if you've paid any attention at all, you may have guessed that today we're talking about what it means to be *family*. And a lot of it boils down to how we approach relationships with other followers of Jesus.

If you've been around here for a little bit, you've probably noticed that we view relationships with others a little differently than the world at large. And to be honest, some people like it and some people don't—but most everyone picks up on the fact that it's a little different. And so if you've been coming recently and noticed, but haven't been able to put your finger on what it is exactly, this should help explain a lot of it. So what I want to do today is pray, then jump in and look at what the Scriptures have to say.

Mark 3:

[31] *Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him.* [32] *A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."* [33] *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.* [34] *Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here [referring to his followers, here] are my mother and my brothers! [35] Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

So what Jesus is talking about and pushing for in this passage is for followers of Jesus to relate to one another like a *biological family* would. That's the metaphor he uses. That his followers—or, in his language, “those who do the will of God”—are like his *family members*. And let me just say, I get that, to some, that idea can sound a little weird or cultish. I acknowledge that “family” language has been hijacked and misused in some really unhealthy ways. And so let me just say that if this was *just our* preferred language at City Church, we probably would've bailed on it a long time ago. But the thing is, it's not just our language. It is the predominant metaphor throughout the bible to talk about our relationship with each other. This idea doesn't stop with the teachings of Jesus in the book of Mark—the same metaphor can be found all over the New Testament. More authors pick up this language Jesus uses and *run with it*. So much so in fact, that **the most common word used in the entire New Testament to describe followers of Jesus is the Greek term *adelphoi*—or “brothers and sisters.”** It's used 342 times in

the New Testament. It beats out every other term used to describe Christ followers by a *long shot*. So apparently, **when we talk about what it means to belong to Jesus, one of the primary things that means is belonging to the *family* of God.**

And the metaphor extends further. Throughout the New Testament, the bible describes what happens to people when they become followers of Jesus as *adoption*. It's all over the place, but here's a few quick examples:

**Ephesians 1:4-5:** *"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will"*

**Galatians 4:4-5:** *"But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship."*

**Romans 8:14-15:** *"For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."*

There is no situation where a child becomes a son or a daughter, and doesn't also become siblings with the *other kids* in the family. That's how adoption works. It's a package deal. And our relationship with God operates the same way. When Jesus went to the cross and died for us and rose from the grave, we received the opportunity to become *children* of God. He redeemed us. He purchased us out of our sin and made us his sons and daughters *together*. No take backs. We're family now.

Which brings us to something vital to talk about. I mentioned a second ago that the idea of "family" can stir all sorts of thoughts and emotions. But the bible is *not* advocating for the Church to operate like a modern American family, no matter how great yours might be. I could probably come up with a few reasons for that, but it's mostly because it didn't even almost exist a couple thousand years ago. What Jesus is actually saying is that his followers should operate more like an ancient Mediterranean family. And if you aren't familiar with ancient mediterranean family structure, it's radically different to how a lot of Americans operate today. Two *very* different ways of thinking about family. In order to understand and apply the bible, we can't just assume that we know what they're referring to. We have to use context and historical background to make sure we understand what they're saying on their terms.

One of the most significant differences is that ancient Mediterranean culture was what sociologists call a “strong group society.” Or sometimes called *communal* or *collectivist* society. The idea was when an ancient Mediterranean person thought about themselves, they thought of themselves as primarily being part of a larger group. To help put it more into perspective, here’s how biblical scholar Bruce Malina describes a strong group society:

*In a strong group society, the person perceives himself or herself to be a member of a group, and responsible to the group for his or her actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. [...] The individual person is embedded in the group, and is free to do what he or she feels is right and necessary, only if in accord with group norms and only if the action is in the group's best interest. The group has the priority over the individual member.*

Now, like I said just a minute ago, this is very different to how a lot of us living in modern America think about ourselves and the groups we belong to. Some of us may even feel like that just sounds *wrong*. And that’s in large part because we are not culturally part of a strong group society. We are what is considered an *individualist* or *weak group* society. We see ourselves *primarily* as *individuals*, and only *secondarily* or *occasionally* as being a part of a group. In our culture, even the *most communal* of American families probably wouldn’t function like that quote we just read.

Thinking about this idea, you may be wondering what societies function this way. What cultures are strong group societies? And honestly, the answer is pretty much most of them throughout history. With the exception being modern Western countries. A lot of cultures today still operate this way, at least at their core. For example, we could look at Japanese culture. In Japanese, the word for “person” and “people,” singular and plural, is the same word. You can’t separate them without context. More literally, I’ve heard it actually translated as “in between others.” Even at the core of the language, Japanese culture says that to be *human* is to exist *between* and *among* other people. Or maybe you’ve heard the common Spanish phrase, “mi casa es... [what?] su casa.” My house is your house. Here in America, we have the saying, “my house is my *castle*.” My house is where I go to get away from everyone else. Mi casa is most certainly *not* su casa. That’s a bit of a different mindset.

And chances are, since we tend to not think like a strong group society, to a lot of us this mentality may sound pretty odd, if not a little oppressive. Some of us may feel like it sounds suffocating or as if it would stifle our individual freedom and autonomy. And some of that isn’t completely untrue, but it’s also worth noting that individualist thinking has some pretty significant downsides. For example, do you think, *possibly*, that our issues

as a society with loneliness might have something to do with individualist thinking? Modern Western cultures seem to struggle with loneliness and isolation more than any other cultures do. A few years ago, the British government appointed a “loneliness minister” to help address some of the problems that have arisen from such an epidemic. We’ve talked about this on Sundays before, but the US National Institutes of Health has linked loneliness and isolation to widespread health effects including “high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, a weakened immune system, depression, cognitive decline, Alzheimer’s disease, and even death.” Now, loneliness is a complex issue. So, many things can contribute to it. But **I don’t think it’s any coincidence that the most individualist societies to have ever existed also tend to report the highest rates of loneliness.** That’s one major drawback to this way of thinking.

I think another significant effect of thinking this way is its contribution to anxiety. Some of the biggest decisions humans make in life are things like what to do for a career or work, where to live in the country or the world, who we’re going to spend our lives with, what large purchases we’re going to make like houses or cars, and the list goes on. In a lot of strong group societies, these are decisions that are made *together* with family, if those decisions aren’t made on your *behalf* by others. And by contrast, in America a lot of those decisions are made in total isolation. *Maybe* we’ll reach out to a parent or confidante or someone specific, but ultimately we feel the full weight of those decisions on our own shoulders. That, for a lot of people, can generate some anxiety. Now again, with anxiety as well, there are a *lot* of contributing factors. I’m not saying that this is the *only reason* people are anxious. But when some of the most individualistic cultures in the world are also some of the most *anxious*, I’d be willing to bet there’s at least a connection. **So while we may prefer individualist thinking, it’s not like it’s a perfect system.**

But my main goal today is not to give arguments for or against how I think American society should function. I am not hosting a debate on strong group vs. weak group thinking. I am simply pointing out that **when Jesus and the New Testament authors talk about church being a family, they are referring to a *strong group* family. They are saying that we should have the level of commitment and care and priority towards our *church* family that an ancient Mediterranean had towards their *biological* family.** That is what Jesus had in his mind’s eye when he said that stuff in Mark 3 about how “those who do the will of God” are his family. And that feels a little uncomfy to some of us. And in case you think it *doesn’t* sound like an uncomfortable idea, I’m going to demonstrate how uncomfortable it is by reading the same quote we read earlier about strong group thinking, but replace the word “group” with “church.” Here we go, discomfort pedal to the metal:

*In a strong [church], the person perceives himself or herself to be a member of a [church], and responsible to the [church] for his or her actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. [...] The individual person is embedded in the [church], and is free to do what he or she feels is right and necessary, only if in accord with [church] norms and only if the action is in the [church's] best interest. The [church] has the priority over the individual member.*

Oh man. Right off the bat, let me say this: if that makes you uncomfortable, you are not alone. In some aspect or another, I think all of us can think of a way we really don't like that idea. Personally I think it would be easier some days if the bible said something like, "to be a Christian you need to make a private decision, and as far as relationships with other Christians, try to be nice and hang out with people who are pretty similar to you, but only when you feel like it." But **to follow Jesus, we have to wrestle with what the Scriptures actually say, and not what we wish they said.** And I think a lot of the discomfort some of us feel is because we've seen plenty of examples of communities being built around something other than Jesus. We've seen it built on selfish preferences or large power differentials, and it quickly becomes unhealthy and dangerous. But the goal is to see a community built on Scripture and truth and the identity of Jesus.

So what we see in Scripture is followers of Jesus being called to treat one another like a strong group ancient Mediterranean family would. When Jesus calls the church to function like a family, he's not just saying we maybe should care about one another a little more than we currently do. He's saying that we should radically re-orient our lives to be about the good of those around us in God's family.

All that being said, to some of you, that may just be a deal-breaker. To you, that seems too weird and invasive and uncomfortable, and you'd just rather not. And that's fine—your issues are not with me, they're with the Scriptures. But for those of you that are ready to be done with hyper-individualism and the loneliness and isolation and anxiety it can cause, for those of you who are ready to live into the fullness of life that Jesus came to offer us, we are invited to participate in this together. And when this actually happens, it is *incredibly* beautiful.

But the reality we have to acknowledge is that this is not always easy. And I want to spend the rest of our time today talking through a couple things I think are absolutely fundamental for this to exist here. Not an exhaustive list of ways this could play out in your life. Not a detailed recipe for success. Some things that, without them, we will not be able to be this kind of family. First, we need to have...

## A Commitment to Being Together

It may feel overly obvious, but none of this is remotely possible if we are not committed to actually *be* together. On a regular basis. We talk about this all the time, but dead horses aren't going to beat themselves. We get this idea from all over the New Testament, but I want to just highlight a couple to show it's not just my opinion. Hebrews 10:24-25 says:

*"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

The author is saying you have to *be* together to encourage one another. To "spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Now look at Acts chapter 2 where the author is describing how the early church operates. Acts 2:44-47:

*"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day [how many days? Every day] they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*

On average, how often do you think people in the early church went without eating in their homes? I'd wager not all that often if they could help it. The early Church was together *all the time*. Now, I'm not going to stand up here and *require* that all of us see all of us every day. I realize that would be nigh impossible, and there are some cultural reasons that that was *more* possible back then than it is now.

But I *do* feel comfortable saying that, at a bare minimum, if we can't make it a *priority* to be here on Sundays, and be at LifeGroup more often than not, it's going to be pretty much impossible for us to be the type of community we see in the Scriptures. If our approach to those things is "you know what, I'll be there as long as there's not something else happening that sounds better." That's not going to work. If our mindset is "yeah, I'll be there as long as I'm in the mood to be there," that won't work. If our mindset is "yeah, I'll be there as long as it hasn't been a stressful or tiring week so far." I don't know about you guys, but I can probably count on one hand the number of weeks in the past 10 years I've had that haven't felt stressful or tiring in some way. **Just last week our house we sold flooded a few days before closing and we had to get that sorted out on top of everything else that comes with buying and selling a house.** If I only went to LifeGroup

when my week wasn't stressful, I would be at LifeGroup like once a year, *maybe*. For us to be the family God has called us to be, we are going to have to *commit* to being together regularly.

And it's really important to point out that the purpose is not just for the sake of being in proximity to others, which brings us to our second point that...

## It Needs to be Intentional

Being together is vital, but it's because of what being together can *lead* to. This isn't an exact mathematical equation, but it's about as reliable as any I've come across: relational intimacy in a relationship is almost always proportional to the level of intentionality in a relationship. If you want relational *intimacy out* of a relationship, you have to put *intentionality into* that relationship. It's easy to see this within a marriage example: if you got married, and you said to your spouse, "hey, I'd really love to do this whole marriage thing with you, but I'd also like to keep my options open in case someone better comes along. So let's have, like, a 'for now' kind of marriage. And I'll probably be checking other people out pretty consistently." What do you think would happen to the level of *intimacy* in your marriage as a result of that mindset? Not great things, right? Or maybe you've had someone in your life you are trying to build a friendship with and every time you try to do something or hang out, you never know if they're actually going to show up until they walk through the door. And if they do show up, they're constantly on their phone waiting for the next best invite. How deep does that relationship get? That's a kiddie pool friendship. And that's because **the level of intimacy of a relationship is directly proportional to the level of intentionality in a relationship.**

So when it comes to community, if you want to maintain a very loose level of intentionality to other followers of Jesus, you can totally do that, but I just want you to know, that is going to negatively impact the *meaningfulness* of those relationships. **You can't treat people in your life as if they're trivial or expendable, and also expect to experience meaningful friendship with them.** It just won't work. **This is something I personally have consistently struggled with throughout my life.** There have been plenty of times I've let my pride and insecurity work together to sabotage friendships. I really want deep, meaningful relationships, and I have this mindset that if other people wanted that, they would relentlessly pursue me. But I don't even consider that *I* should be intentionally pursuing people too. I think they should pursue me, and when those relationships inevitably don't grow deeper because of *my* lack of intentionality, I just assume no one actually wants to have meaningful relationships with me.

One last note on this then we'll move on: intentionality, more often than not, can be measured in time. We've heard there's *quality* time and *quantity* time. But what often doesn't get said is that quality time happens *inside* of quantity time. **If you want to develop meaningful friendships with others, you're going to have to put in some intentional time with them to get the relationship to that point.** You're going to have to be *around* them on a regular basis. You're going to have to take an *active* interest in their life. You're going to have to follow up when they share something going on in their life. You're going to have to check in and see how they're doing, what they're struggling with, what's happening in their life that you can *celebrate* with them. That takes sacrifice and intentionality. And when we do take the time to be *with* them and invested in their life, those family relationships start to happen. But we have to remember, these relationships can happen naturally, but they don't happen automatically.

Now at this point, you might be asking the simple question, "why?" Why should I prioritize other people like that? Why should I actively seek out these kinds of relationships? "That sounds pretty difficult and draining." And you're not wrong. But it is *beautiful* to see when it happens and life-changing to experience. **We recently had a City Church member retreat we call Family Vacation and we had time for people to sit together and share stories of ways they've seen Jesus work through our community and there was scarcely a dry eye in the room.** People were sharing story after story of the joy and love they've experienced in one way or another. We had people share about the depth of loneliness they've experienced in their life. The isolation and struggles that come with it. And they shared how they've encountered a community that welcomed them in and pursued them and showed them love and intentionality they've never experienced before. We had single people share stories of being invited to live with other families with no strings attached. Just an invitation to be a part of their life and rhythms. People truly becoming a part of holiday traditions and celebrations. People shared stories of how they were welcomed so warmly, it feels like they've always been here. People who have experienced hurt and been outsiders become a part of a *family*. A place they know they can welcome others just as freely. We had people talk about how they feel so much relief and peace knowing their children are being loved on and cared for by the people around them. We even had people sharing stories about how they've seen their *kids* start doing the same thing too. Actively going out of their way when they see another kid having a hard time or not feeling included and extending the same love and hospitality to them. I just heard a story from one of our LifeGroups after the recent racially motivated shootings where the LifeGroup got together and raised money for a self-care day for the black men and women in their group. They said, "hey, we love you, we see you, we hurt with you, and we want to treat you to a day to rest and relax in the midst of the pain you may be feeling." They said every single person in their group

contributed to help make it happen. And it's because they were operating as a family. How awesome is all that?

And what I want to do to wrap things up is end with a few practical questions for us to think on this week if you'd consider yourself a follower of Jesus. Feel free to write these down to think through later, or if you want, just sit and consider them as I list them out, whatever is most helpful:

1. **Do you have community?** Or is the default rhythm of your life isolation? And just to be abundantly clear: by that, I don't mean "do you know some other Christians?" I mean "is your life regularly overlapping with theirs?" Do they know you and know your journey as a follower of Jesus? If not, we mention every week that we'd love to connect you to a group filled with other followers of Jesus who can learn to be that with you and for you. **Are you committed to being together?**
2. **Are you intentional in your community?** For those of you who do have community, who are in a LifeGroup, are you actually *intentional with* some of those people? Are there times where you love them and serve them, and are there for them, even when it'd be easier not to? Are there times when you show up, even when you don't want to? If someone just casually combed through your schedule on the average week, would they conclude that time with other followers of Jesus is a priority for you, or not? **Are you intentional with your community?**
3. **Are you willing to be committed to and intentional with people who differ from you?** Do the ideas of commitment and intentionality sound doable only if the other person is just like you? Or if you just easily click with them? Or if you have all the same interests and preferences? Do you have a person or group of people that pop into your head and you think, "I can do all this *unless* it's with *them*"? I want everyone to take a second and just think about how little Jesus, God in the flesh, has in common with broken sinners. In his perfection, we couldn't be more different from him, yet he still chose to be more committed and more intentional with us than we could ever be. **He was willing to give everything to be in relationship with us. And that's the posture we should be looking to as an example.**

Jesus committed time, he committed intentionality. He ultimately loved *his* enemies by coming for us. He showed us that whatever needed to be done to bridge the gap and connect with us was worth it. And he invites us to do the same. To extend the same love and intentionality because it is absolutely worth it.

Let's pray.