

# The Family of Jesus (Matt. 12:46–50)

By Jacob D. Gerber

As Matthew brings chapter 12 to a close, he turns in a surprising direction. Most of this chapter has been taken up with Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees; here, however, Jesus suddenly asserts that serving his heavenly Father is more important than responding to the demands of his earthly family. Since the next chapter begins a new section where Jesus teaches through parables about the kingdom of God, it is clear that Matthew intends for this chapter to provide resolution and clarity to the entirety of Matthew 12. Why, then, does Matthew give us these words of Jesus here? As we will see, Jesus teaches us here to *seek first the family of God*.

## The Earthly Family (Matt. 12:46–48)

Matthew tells us that there is an immediate connection in time between Jesus' previous words about the return of the unclean spirit and this subsequent interaction: "While he was still speaking to the people..." (v. 46a).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is somewhat difficult to see the thematic connection with what has preceded. Or, in other words, why does Matthew close off this extraordinary section of Jesus' escalating conflict with the Pharisees and the scribes, punctuated by demon exorcisms and the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, with a scene in which Jesus interacts with his family? We will return to this question after working through what Jesus says here.

At this time, we read, "behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him" (v. 46b). Matthew does not give us any details about the specific intentions and purposes of Jesus' family. Some, however, look to the parallel passage in Mark 3:31, and suggest that the actions of Jesus' family may be explained by what is written a few verses earlier in the chapter: "And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind'" (Mark 3:21).<sup>2</sup> This translation from the ESV, however, may mislead us from identifying the actual people who thought Jesus was out of his mind, since the word here is not "family" but literally "those with/ beside him" (οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ; *hoi par' autou*). So, the KJV translates this phrase as "friends," while the NASB uses "His own people." Either way, it is not clear that Mark 3:21 refers to Jesus' family as background for their actions in Mark 3:31.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "The genitive absolute, 'he still speaking to the multitudes,' makes it certain that Matthew gives us the true connection of events. The strange nature of the incident is marked by the interjection." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 501.)

<sup>2</sup> e.g., Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 502.

<sup>3</sup> "If so, it is also possible that disturbing remarks about Jesus—for example, that his opponents regarded him as being demon-possessed and that even his friends thought that he was out of his mind—induced them, out of natural affection to try to remove him from the public eye and to provide for him a haven of rest and

Based on Jesus' later reaction, however, it does seem that Jesus' family wanted to draw him away from his public ministry, for which there could be a number of explanations. Calvin, for example, suggests that the reason for their actions "must have been either that they were anxious about him, or that they were desirous of instruction; for it is not without some good reason that they endeavor to approach him, and it is not probable that those who accompanied the holy mother were unbelievers."<sup>4</sup> Jesus is not willing to let his family on earth draw him away from doing the will of his Father in heaven.

Although it is not a central point in this passage, we should note here the presence of Jesus' mother and "brothers." This is a problematic passage for the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity. Some have attempted to explain away the significance of this text and others that speak of Jesus' siblings; however, D. A. Carson's response to those attempts is worth quoting at length:

To support the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity, a notion foreign to the NT and to the earliest church fathers, Roman Catholic scholars have suggested that "brothers" refers either to Joseph's sons by an earlier marriage or to sons of Mary's sister, who had the same name....Certainly "brothers" can have a wider meaning than male relatives (Ac 22:1); yet is is very doubtful whether such a meaning is valid here, for it raises insuperable problems. For instance, if "brothers" refers to Joseph's sons by an earlier marriage, not Jesus but Joseph's firstborn would have been legal heir to David's throne. The second theory—that "brothers" refers to sons of a sister of Mary also named "Mary"—faces the unlikelihood of two sisters having the same name. All things considered, the attempts to extend the meaning of "brothers" in this pericope...are nothing less than far-fetched exegesis in support of a dogma that originated much later than the NT.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, this text would lose some of its force if Jesus were speaking of more distant relatives. In that culture, one's obligations to immediate family were sacrosanct, so that Jesus is faced with a dilemma: whose will should he follow?

So, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (v. 48). Again, in the context of the culture, this was an astonishing question. Whereas our culture increasingly rejects any overarching significance for the biological family, in Jesus' day the biological family was everything. Jesus is not so much questioning the value of the family as he is asserting the comparative superior value of the spiritual family. John Calvin writes, "To sum up the whole, this passage, first, teaches us to behold Christ with the eyes of faith; and, secondly, it informs us, that every one who is regenerated by the Spirit, and gives himself up entirely to God for true justification, is thus admitted

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refreshment. Even if this guess as to their motive should be correct, it does not warrant anyone to say, as some commentators do, that Mary and her other children shared the view of the 'friends,' and were actually of the opinion that the one dear to them was becoming mentally unbalanced." (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 541.)

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:90.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, "Matthew," 345.

to the closest union with Christ, and becomes one with him.”<sup>6</sup> This still retains some intuitive force within our culture today; however, it would have been scandalous in Jesus’ day.

## The Heavenly Family (Matt. 12:49–50)

After raising the question of who his family is, Jesus answers it: “And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (vv. 49–50). Primarily, Jesus is demonstrating here that the bonds of the spiritual family are more significant than the bonds of the biological family. Those who follow him as his disciples gain the first fruits of his time, energy, and efforts.

Additionally, Lenski here helps us to answer the question we raised earlier about the thematic connection within the chapter that has preceded this: “This probably is the reason that Matthew ends this section on the clash with the Pharisees by adding the incident in which Jesus calls his disciples his brothers, sisters, and mother. However hopeless this generation as such may be, some are won for Christ even among such people.”<sup>7</sup> In a chapter filled with outright spiritual warfare, Jesus acknowledges that some do follow him. Furthermore, he is assigning a value to their following him that extends beyond even the bonds of his biological family. Although the scribes, Pharisees, and even Beelzebul himself will oppose the work of Jesus, our Lord will continue gathering his eternal, adoptive “forever family.” Then, in the coming chapter (Matt. 13), Jesus will begin to use a number of parables to distinguish between different kinds of responses to the kingdom.

What, then, does it mean to do “the will of my Father in heaven” as Jesus says in v. 50? We should remember that Jesus used this same expression back in Matthew 7:21:<sup>8</sup> “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” There, as here, Jesus is not saying that we are saved by earning something from God by our merit and works. Rather, as Morris writes, “Jesus is not opting for salvation by works, but pointing to the importance of conforming to God’s way and not imposing one’s own pattern on heavenly things. It is relationship to the heavenly Father that constitutes membership in the family.”<sup>9</sup> This relationship, as the entire Scriptures teach, comes by faith in Jesus Christ.

## Discussion Questions

1. What kind of connection between this passage and the previous passage about unclean spirits does Matthew indicate by the transition in v. 46a? If the connection is temporal (i.e., based on time), what is the thematic connection between the two passages? Furthermore, why does Matthew see fit to close the entirety of chapter 12 (which has been taken up with Jesus’ conflict with the religious leaders) with this passage?

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<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:90–91.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 501.

<sup>8</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 497–98.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 332.

2. Why do you think Jesus' family might have sought to draw him aside to speak to him (v. 46)? What would the culture of that day have expected Jesus to do in response to the request of his family? What would our own culture expect Jesus to do in this situation? What is good and bad about the culture of Jesus' day in regard to the family? What is good and bad about our own culture in regard to the family?

3. What does Jesus say about his earthly family? What does Jesus say about his heavenly family? Why does Jesus identify his disciples as his "mother and...brothers" (v. 49)? What does Jesus mean when he says that "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (v. 50)? How, then, is Jesus' heavenly family constituted? Are you a member of Jesus' heavenly family? What does that mean to you?

4. What are the pursuits that might tempt us to ignore Jesus' heavenly call today? What factors have reduced our culture's regard for the family? What does God want from the family? How did your family growing up live up to that standard? How does your current family live up to that standard? In our culture, how might Jesus' challenge here lead us back to a higher compassion for our own families?