



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Changing Shape of Family
(*Marriage*, pp. 62-65)

Suggested Article:

📖 I Know Who She Is
(*Marriage*, pp. 68-72)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Changing Shape of Family

Sometimes families are hurtful, dysfunctional, unhealthy systems. But “family” does not have to be an outdated or negative word. While many of us struggle with our families of origin, inclusion into the family of God brings freedom, healing, and redemption.

Prayer

God of covenant, God of unfailing love, enable us to trust others and make us trustworthy. Empower us to create families that model your love in this world. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 12:46-50

Reflection

When Jesus surveyed the many disciples seated around him and declared, “Here are my mother and my brothers!” it was not a dig at Mary and his brothers who were waiting outside. He was affirming his close relationship with his followers (Matthew 12:49; Mark 3:34; Luke 8:21). The good news is that when we do God’s will today, we too are members of the family of Jesus.

“Jesus models for us what it means to ‘do the will of the Father’” in human relationships, Bo Prosser writes. And in the Sermon on the Mount “Jesus tells how to be family”:

- ▶ *Smile at unfair demands.* Going far beyond the law’s limit on retaliation (taking “an eye for an eye,” as in Leviticus 24:19-20), Jesus tells us to “turn the other cheek,” “give our cloak also,” and “go the extra mile” (Matthew 5:38-42). When “we are hurt by unkind comments, insults, and emotional jabs...Jesus tells us that ‘doing the will of the Father’ means to relate redemptively to persons who make unfair demands on us,” notes Prosser. Sometimes, not insisting on what we are owed “allows us to be family with one another.”
- ▶ *Spend time together.* Jesus does not dismiss prayer and fasting and almsgiving, but he does tell us how to perform these tasks humbly and sincerely (Matthew 6:1-18). “Families must find time to share ministry and to worship together,” suggests Prosser. “In previous days we were given the myth of ‘quality’ time: just spend five minutes a day with each family member. This allowed us to rationalize our time spent away from family. The call to be family is the call to be intentional about sharing the love of Jesus with one another and the world.”
- ▶ *Serve one another in God’s love.* In case we missed Jesus’ first point about nonretaliation, in the next verse he extends the love commandment (Leviticus 19:18) to include everyone: “Love [even] your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45a). “God’s love does not discriminate; neither should our own! We are called to be gracious to those who are not in our group, to those whom we do not know very well and may not like very well. Jesus has always been in the business of tearing down walls not building them,” writes Prosser. “What a difference we could make in the world if we did the will of the Father, if we were family!”



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- ▶ *Seek perfection.* “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). “God knows that we will never attain perfection,” Prosser admits, “but we are still to desire it. Too many of us are driven by wanting more stuff! Too many of us are driven by hoping that our next acquisition will be the one to fulfill us. Jesus calls us to be perfect, completed – to be completed in God’s love, not our love of stuff.”

Ginny Bridges Ireland echoes the last point in “I Know Who She Is” when she describes a loving marriage as “knowing and being known by God and reflected in knowing and being known by one another.” Marriage comes undone, she says, when like Adam and Eve we seek “a kind of knowledge and control wrapped in self-interest,” where “we crave a world created in our own images for our purposes.... We assume something better must exist just beyond our grasp in the next juicy apple.” Though no marriage is perfect, Ireland reminds us that we were created to enjoy a knowing intimacy, “graced with love and acceptance, that encourages the other person toward wholeness.”

Study Questions

1. How do family members put unfair demands on one another? Why are we more unfair in our expectations of spouses and other family members than of strangers?
2. What pressures and demands prevent families from spending time together today?
3. Bo Prosser suggests that in our culture families seek their fulfillment in stuff, not in love. Do you agree?
4. From Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Prosser draws four instructions for how to be family: “Smile at unfair demands,” “Spend time together,” “Serve one another in God’s love,” and “Seek perfection.” How does each instruction help us to be family to one another? Would it be spiritually dangerous to follow one of these instructions without the others?
5. “Intimate marital knowledge sometimes backfires.... Betrayal, hurt, and manipulation for selfish ends can displace love’s comforting trust,” Ginny Bridges Ireland writes. Then “the power of intimate knowledge combined with strength and equality can be misused and abused.” Discuss her view.
6. How has your congregation become “family” to members who are separated from their parents, siblings, spouses, or children – by betrayal and distrust, physical distance, or illness and death?

Departing Hymn: “My Light and My Salvation” (verses 3 and 2)

Hear now my voice and answer; be merciful I pray.
Your face, Lord, I seek daily; do not turn me away.
For you have been my helper; do not reject me, God.
Though family may forsake me, I know that you will not.
One thing I ask and seek, Lord: to dwell with you always,
to gaze upon your beauty and seek you all my days.
For in the day of trouble, you’ll hide me, keep me safe.
My head will be exalted; I’ll sing and shout your praise.

Susan H. Peterson (2000)

Tune: AURELIA

The Changing Shape of Family

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret how Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, tells us how to be family.
2. To discuss how a congregation can be family to members who are alienated by distrust, separated by distance, or separated by death from parents, siblings, spouses, or children.
3. To consider how intimate knowledge can be misused in a marriage.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Marriage (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “My Light and My Salvation” locate the familiar tune AURELIA in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“I have always felt like I had family,” Bo Prosser writes. “When my dad divorced my mother, I felt that he also divorced me. He wanted out of our family. When our broken family was trying to make sense of it all, several key families from my home church adopted me. They let me be a part of their families. They loved me unconditionally, fed me unselfishly, and tolerated me lovingly. How thankful I am for Bill and Ruby and Bundy and Anna, for Marion and Linda and their girls! These folks modeled family in the most healthy, intimate, and spiritual ways! They modeled what it meant to do the will of the Father, what it meant to be in the family of Jesus” (*Marriage*, p. 63).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 12:46-50 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In reality, our marriages and families “are not all they are cracked up to be.” They are pulled apart by our personal sin (e.g., our betrayal, distrust, and abuse of intimacy), by powerful forces in society (e.g., increasing career demands, desire to support the disparate interests and activities of family members, and relocation away from family members for specialized education or service), and by experiences of the debilitating sickness, aging, and death of loved ones. Increasingly, “we need the intimacy of God’s family as we journey,” Bo Prosser writes. Jesus’ promise that we are part of his family as we respond to the will of God can be realized in a very practical way when congregations answer the call to be the family of God.

In the suggested article, “I Know Who She Is,” Ginny Bridges Ireland explores how we sinfully misuse the intimate knowledge within marriage. “We crave a world created in our own image for our purposes,” she writes, “we shun God’s design for wholeness for us, which is found in the simplicity of knowing and being known by God and reflected in knowing and being known by one another.”

Study Questions

1. Do members agree that Jesus' teachings about responding to unfair demands apply to family relationships? Though some may suffer physical blows from family members, Prosser admits, more often we endure "unkind comments, insults, and emotional jabs." We may face unreasonable expectations to perform well—children to do unduly well in school, spouses to satisfy exaggerated sexual desires, wage earners to provide resources for family members' consumerist whims, or everyone to pick up and move just for one member's benefit.
Perhaps we are more unfair in our expectations of spouses and family members because we know them so well and trust them. Sometimes we take family members for granted and neglect to see how our exaggerated expectations are harming them. Or we may intentionally abuse our intimate knowledge of family members when we manipulate their emotions, make unworthy demands on their love, and count unfairly on their forgiveness.
2. Encourage members to consider pressures related to career and work, personal interests and hobbies, school activities and sports. How have television, the Internet, and 'virtual' relationships influenced their family time? How do the size of their city and the location of their home in relation to school, workplaces, shopping areas, and the church affect their family time? Don't forget the church. Do congregational responsibilities and ministry opportunities draw family members together or keep them apart?
3. Consider, on the one hand, how family members make money. Do their commitments at work or for education draw them together or increase their separation? Then examine how they spend money and leisure time. Are shopping activities, major purchases, vacations, and sporting events bringing them together or increasing their separation?
4. Each instruction points us toward loving and selfless behavior. The first urges us to seek redemptive reconciliation with family members who harm us; the second and third put the family's focus on ministry to others; and the fourth re-centers the family on loving relationships rather than possessions. Each instruction helps us to interpret the others. For instance, by itself the instruction to "seek perfection" might suggest the focus should be on one's virtue, but the other instructions correct this reading. Or "smile at unfair demands" might trend toward a docility that accepts abuse from others and allows hatred of the abusers, except that the other instructions call all members to loving relationships before God.
5. Encourage members to discuss why we are more able, and in some cases more likely, to manipulate and hurt a friend, or spouse, or child than a stranger. When a person reveals to us what he or she loves deeply, how he or she perceives the world, and how he or she thinks, the person has entrusted to us intimate knowledge that gives us great power. If we betray that trust, we can easily manipulate the person. Why would we do this? Of course, we might have selfish motives—by manipulating the person we have something to gain for ourselves. Sometimes we manipulate a friend or spouse or child for his or her own good, or for a greater cause that we honor. Some people do this in the name of the Gospel. Is this ever permissible, or is it always a betrayal of trust and a violation of the other person?
6. Does your congregation have programs or support groups that support members who have suffered betrayal by family members, must endure separation by physical distance, or are dealing with family members' illness or death? Consider ways in which members may minister to one another in less formal ways—through sharing meals on a regular basis, through visits and conversations, or other shared activities. How do members share their needs for family with one another? How does worship provide opportunity for members to learn about and express concern for one another's needs?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.