

## Putting The Family In Its Place

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church on the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 7, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Ezekiel 33:1-11; Psalm 94:12-22; Philemon 1-20; *Luke 14:25-33*.

What is a disciple of Jesus Christ? Are you a disciple? In the Gospel according to St Luke, the 14th chapter, and the 26th verse, Jesus says: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate their own father and mother and wife [*and husband*] and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, *cannot be my disciple*."

I have to admit that *these words frightens me*. And if you're honest I'm sure they frighten you. They not only frighten me, *they make me feel a bit rebellious*. I find myself defiantly asking Christ, "What do you mean I must hate my wife and children? That's crazy! That's unnatural! That sounds like something a cult leader would say."

What *does* Christ mean?

*We can be sure that he doesn't mean that we're supposed to hate our families literally*. Sometimes Jesus spoke outrageously in order to get his point across. He's like the farmer who couldn't get his mule to listen so he got his attention by cracking him over the head with a two by four. Sometimes the only way Jesus can get us to listen is to hit us over the head with the two by four of violent language. For example, once he said, "If your right hand offends you, cut it off. If your eye offends you, pluck it out." Some fanatical people have literally done that. They've mutilated their bodies. And some people, when they hear these words of Christ about hating their families, mutilate their families, tear their families apart. They engage in hateful religious arguments and grow to dislike their husband or wife on the pretext of obeying Christ when, in fact, they're using religion to justify their own folly and irresponsibility.

*So let's be clear that nobody can be a disciple of Christ if*

*they hate anybody.* St John wrote, "If anyone says he loves God but doesn't love his brother, that person's a liar". St. Paul instructed husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church. You can't love anyone more than that. The Fifth Commandment requires that we honor our fathers and mothers. Again, St Paul warns heads of families that "if any provide not for his own household, he's denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel." You can't justify your hatred for a family member on the basis of what Jesus says here. We can't literally hate anybody and be a disciple of Christ.

What, then, *did* Jesus mean when he said to hate our families? *Jesus simply meant that he wants to be first place in our hearts.*

The family has gone through some rough times in America in recent years: divorce, infidelity, child abuse, spouse abuse, single parent families, latch-key children and the disappearance of the extended family. As a result there's a rising tide of concern for strong families which I fully support. *But in reaction to the break-down of families some of us go to the opposite extreme of exalting the family and neglecting Christ.* We use our devotion to family to excuse our failure to build Christ's kingdom and fight against principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this world. And I say that as one who tries to guard jealously my time at home with family. I've seen too many families wrecked by ministers and missionaries who've neglected their own wives and children.

*But it's possible for the family to become all important, and the Kingdom of Christ neglected.* At times it amounts to idolatry. We spend money excessively on our families with the result that we become thoroughly materialistic and many towers in the Kingdom of Christ are

left uncompleted. When a child complains about having to go to Church School on Sunday a parent let's them stay home. But when they complain about going to School on Monday morning we tell them they *have* to go. "It's the law. What's going to become of you if you don't go to school." So we teach our children that it's more important to obey the laws of the state and learn their ABC's than to know, love, and obey Christ. Sometimes we encourage our families *above all* to succeed and get ahead in life but fail to encourage them to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, building his Kingdom and fighting the powers of darkness in this world.

If beings from another planet were to come to earth and see how many Christian families live they'd probably conclude that Jesus had said something like, "Seek ye first what you're going to eat and how you're going to dress; which house you're going to buy; which car you're going to drive; which girl you're going to marry; which career to pursue? And then if there's a little time left, and if it isn't too uncomfortable for you, please do something for the kingdom of God." That's the way so many Christian families live.

*But Christ is Lord, not our families.* When we give our families first place in our lives, our families suffer in the long run. When we look to our families to give us the love, security, and status that only God can give we place intolerable pressures on them. I wonder if that's why some marriages break up. We marry someone with impossible expectations. We expect this person to satisfy our deepest wants and needs. We expect a wife or husband to be perfect like God and we're terribly disappointed, after the heat of passion cools, when we discover that prince charming doesn't turn his socks inside out when he takes them off.

*Sometimes our love for our families is really only an*

*extended and selfish love for ourselves.* We look to our children to be what we failed to be and when we do this we place incredible burdens on them. We even look to our children for immortality, hoping to keep alive our memory in their lives. But only Christ can give eternal life. If we look to family for ultimate meaning, purpose and happiness rather than to Christ and his Kingdom we place a terrible burden on their shoulders. It's unfair to them. We ignore the wider world, and we're doomed to disappointment and disillusionment... and most of all we're letting Christ down.

So when Jesus tells us that we can't be his disciple unless we hate our families he means that we must put our family in its proper place. *He* wants to have first place in our lives.

When Jesus said these words he was still very popular. I'm sure these words discouraged and drove away some of the multitudes. They were willing to be hearers, but not doers. But Jesus calls, not for spectators but for recruits, men and women with undivided loyalty and commitment to the building of Christ's kingdom.

*Christ confronts us* all and says, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate their own father and mother and wife [*and husband*] and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." What Jesus wants, in this church today, is faithful, dedicated people *for* more than patronizing crowds.

*So are we disciples?* Will you help build a tower in the Kingdom of Christ here in Oxford? Will you stand up and strike a blow against the forces of darkness in the world? You can applaud Christ without following. You can admire without helping.

Over the Fourth of July weekend hundreds of men and women stood

before a black robe figure and solemnly renounced their allegiance to their homelands and took an oath of allegiance to their new country, the United States. Some left families to come to the States. They don't hate their families but they've had a *greater* longing for the freedom and opportunities of this country. And they'll work and scrimp and save until they're united with their families her someday.

*When we were baptized we entered a new kingdom, the kingdom of Christ.* Like men and women fleeing oppression we stood before a black robed figure, when we were confirmed, and renounced old loyalties and professed our allegiance to Jesus as Lord. That decision to be loyal to Christ might put distance between family members for awhile until the other comes to share that same commitment. That doesn't mean you literally hate them. It means you've found something better for them and yourselves in building and serving in Christ's Kingdom.

In a few moments we'll take the Sacrament. When you take the Sacrament you're renewing that oath of allegiance you took when you were confirmed. Any one who takes that bread and drinks from that cup says to Christ, "I renounce all other lords and kingdoms and I pledge allegiance to you as my lord and king. I thank you for calling me to help build your kingdom and fight against the kingdom of darkness."

God grant that the King, who's present this morning in the Sacrament, may find men and women willing to build and to battle.

Amen.

Now until him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.