

Family Values and the Cost of Discipleship

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, September 10, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus once said, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." I've never seen that text on a Hallmark Mother's Day card. I don't think I ever will. "Whoever does not hate father and mother and wife and children, brothers and sisters cannot be my disciple." *When I discovered*

What could be more important than our families? We love our families. We'd die for our families. We'd even kill for them. Most of us aren't violent by nature. And yet if someone threatens our children, watch out, we're liable to get violent. Years ago I saw a boy beating up one of my sons. I didn't know at the time that my son had been verbally taunting him. The boy knocked down my son, dragged him to his feet and knocked him down again. He did this several times. Before I knew what I was doing I ran out and grabbed the boy - that's a no-no. I physically restrained him. It took a lot of self discipline to keep from hitting him. We often get violent in defense of our families. I imagine most of us would die for our families, maybe even kill for them. Nothing, today, is more important than family.

Politicians... In Coalition... Focus on the family... family values
And the church is one institution which touts family values.

Churches have "family night suppers." Churches boast, "We're a family church." Churches build "Family Life Centers." The motto of our church - "A family of Christians dedicated to proclaiming

the unconditional love and leadership of Jesus Christ to the local and world community." The church touts family values.

~~Politics~~ ~~the Church~~ ~~politics~~
Not only does the church tout family values, secular men and women look to the church for support for their families. A recent study of how the church can reach out to unchurched people indicates that secular people often look to the church to support family. Non-churched people will send their children to churches that demonstrate the good they can do for families. Many secular, unchurched people look to the church to support family values.

But did you know that the early Christian church got the reputation for destroying families? In his book *The First Urban Christians*, Wayne Meeks says that pagan Roman society had no more cherished value than its belief in family values. A major Roman criticism of Christians was that Christians destroyed the family.

The Gospels support that criticism. For example, the Gospels tell us that at the beginning of his ministry Jesus saw James and John, two brothers, in a boat with their father. They were helping their father mend nets. "Follow me!", Jesus said. "Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him." I can just see their father shouting, "Hey, get back here! Where you going? We have nets to mend. Follow Jesus in your spare time. Don't leave me with all this work to do."

Another time the family of Jesus came looking for him. "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you," someone said to Jesus. Jesus responds, "My real family

is not my biological family. My real family are those who do the will of God (Mark 3:31-35)."

Still another time, a young disciple requested permission from Jesus to go bury his father. Jesus answered, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

Again Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace.... I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother... and a man's foes will be those of his own household." Roman persecutors had no problem pointing to many things that Jesus said as evidence that Christianity can destroy families.

Stanley Hauerwas, a professor at Duke University, opens one of his classes by reading a letter from a parent to a government official. The parent complains that his son, who had received the best education, gone to all the right schools, and was headed for a good job as a lawyer, had gotten involved with a weird religious sect. Members of this sect controlled his every move. They told him to sell all he had and give the proceeds to poor people. He did it! They told him who he could date and who he couldn't date. The parent pleads with the government official to do something about this weird religious group.

"Who is this letter describing?" Hauerwas asks. Some think it's describing the Moonies or some other weird sect. No - it's a composite letter drawn from the letters of third-century Roman parents concerning a group called the Christian church. You can see how the early church got in trouble with the Roman government. Jesus and the early Christian church broke the

hearts of many a first-century family. The Christian church has not always been supportive of family values. The church used to get persecuted for destroying families.

The church got persecuted because Jesus claims that the family is important but not absolute. Jesus warns us not to make our families ultimate. Our families are not ultimate. When we make our family ultimate we place a weight of responsibility on them that no family can survive. God never intended the family to be the end all of human existence. God never intended the family to be the ultimate relationship in our lives, the most important relationship in our lives.

Man's chief end is not to glorify the family. Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Follow Jesus and you take on a responsibility that very well may create conflict in your family. You want to follow Christ and worship with God's people. Your spouse wants dinner at noon. You want to tithe your income. Your spouse begrudges any contributions of money or time to the work of Christ through the church. We follow Christ and we take on responsibilities that supersede all other responsibilities.

In James Michener's, *Hawaii*, one of the newly married missionaries on his way to Hawaii with his bride prays, "Lord, sometimes I wonder if I love my wife too much. Sometimes I fear that I might love her even more than I love you." When I read that I thought "How strange". How could anyone pit love for a spouse against love for God. And yet how many of us have done

something we know to be against God's will - we sin because we want to please family? We don't want to rock the boat.

Following Christ can bring stress to our families. Jim Taylor and his wife, Barbara, recommitted their life to Christ when they were in college and became very active in a Christian campus organization. They felt God was calling them to use more and more of their time and talents in a lay ministry program of their church. They sacrificed financial security to serve Christ as laypeople in the church. A close relative severely reprimanded me for encouraging them. "Can't you do something to talk sense to Jim. He's ruining his life. He needs to spend more time building up his clients." The Taylors were willing to pay the cost of following Christ.

Joining the church - being baptized - is an outward, visible expression of our desire to follow Jesus Christ - to build a kingdom - to battle sin and evil. Don't join the church - don't stay in the church for the few, paltry social privileges it provides - privileges like baptism, funerals, weddings. Count the cost of discipleship! Too many people join the church without counting the cost. Too many people say they want to follow Christ - they start out to follow - but they don't follow through. They begin to build a wall but can't finish. They go forth to battle with evil in the world and sin in themselves - but they end up defeated and Jesus says it happens sometimes because we put family before Christ and his Kingdom.

Christ calls us to follow him. He calls each one of us to follow him. He calls you teenagers. He calls single people. He

calls divorced people. He calls husbands and wives. He calls entire families. "Follow me" he says. But Jesus is very frank with would be followers. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Amen.

Let us pray: Eternal God, our creator, you set us to live in families. We commend to your care all the homes where your people live. Keep them, se pray, free from bitterness, from the thirst for personal victory, and fpride in self. Fill them with faith, virtue, knoweldge, moderation, patience, and godliness. Knit together in enduring affection those who have become one in marriage. Let children and parents have respect for one another; and light the fire of kindness among us all, that we may show affection for each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.