

God's Family Dynamics

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 September 2020

Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] Okay, so we're going to go back to this passage today for a little while and try and apply it for ourselves and in our own lives, remembering what has already been said from this chapter.

Because I think certainly lockdown has made us think a little bit about what church is, hasn't it? I mean, we maybe were, when a bit of a rut, taking things for granted, we were maybe just coming along and church was church on a Sunday morning and we got on with our life with the rest of the week.

And I think we all know that church is never just about Sunday morning, and it certainly shouldn't be just about Sunday morning. However precious that has been to us, and maybe in this case absence, I hope, certainly has made our heart grow fonder for both each other and for communion together and for worship together, it's hugely important.

But maybe it has made us think a little bit about what actually church is, because we all have preconceptions, everyone, and there are people that will be watching will have preconceptions. Some of us really value what we see church to be. Some love it, some are cynical about church, for some it's important, for some it's really unimportant. And so there's a difference in our thinking, and there's a difference generally, and maybe sometimes we go up and down in the different value we have of church and the community of the gospel.

[1 : 27] So what I think about what Jesus is doing, and what the Holy Spirit through Matthew is doing right through the book of Matthew, is he's helping us to recalibrate our thinking in line with God's, not just Matthew, all the gospels and all the Bible is really there to recalibrate our thinking towards God's mind and God's heart.

And that's what we do as Christians, we're looking to be transformed, to be the people, the individuals, the unique individuals that He wants us to be in line with His character and in line with how He wants us to live.

And particularly in Matthew's gospel, we find that God is laying foundations through Christ's teaching, and you know Matthew, we've seen before it's split into sections, there's teaching sections and then there's parables and there's also His miracles and His ministry that way.

But through His teaching and through His life, His life and death, His ministry, the kingdom of God is being explained, it's being, He's laying foundations for what it looks like.

So much He says the kingdom of God is like, the kingdom of God is, the kingdom of God is. Now that's just another word actually for the church. Maybe we think a kingdom of God, we think of something a bit maybe vague and worldwide, you know, the universal kingdom of God, but we can distill it because it's the same principles that apply to the local church.

[2 : 56] The local church is the kingdom of God in microcosm. It's a small version of the kingdom of God. And it's, He wants us to live in community as the kingdom people in the local church just as much as in a kind of general sense that is the case.

And you could break that down further. You could break down that further into big church, little church like we do with the pastoral groups, the city groups. You could break it down even further into families.

And of course, therefore, into individuals, the kingdom of God is within us. And we are to live out the life that Christ wants us in His power.

So in this chapter particularly, I've entitled it God's Family Dynamics. And we use that phrase quite a lot, don't we? What's the kind of family dynamics you have or you've grown up with?

And it's maybe quite a good phrase to think about. You know, in other words, what should the church be like as it reflects the heart of God? What should this community of believers be like?

[4 : 01] What should you be like as an individual Christian that reflects the heart of God? How should you live in the church? How should you live with other Christians that reflects your understanding of grace, of what God has done for you?

Because when we understand what God has done for us, it transforms how we treat other people. And Jesus is putting flesh on it here. It's very practical.

He's not airy-fairy. He's being practical for us. How are you and I to think about one another? Are brothers and sisters in Christ as Christians, how to live together in the light of who we are before God?

Okay, that's what we're going to look at. There's two things we're going to look at from this chapter. And the first is that we belong to God as Christians.

And the second thing is that we belong to each other. Very simple, nothing new. But we're going to go through what Jesus says here. We belong to the Father, okay?

[4 : 59] As you as a Christian who has given your life to Jesus Christ, you belong to God the Father. You're part of His family. You've been adopted into the spiritual family of God. And He talks in this little, in this passage about His little ones.

John looked at that last week where children are used to picture the kind of attitude we should have in humility as believers.

And in verse 1, which we didn't read today, we read last week, it all stems from the disciples asking, who's the greatest? Who's the biggest? Who's the most important Christian in the kingdom of God? And Jesus then takes a little child and says, you've got to be like little children. He speaks about humility and as Mary and William were saying that, that willingness to learn and grow in God's family.

And Jesus turns greatness on its head. Nobody takes children and makes them the great most important people in the universe. The family of God, in other words, consists of people with a childlike attitude, not big shots.

[6 : 02] That's really what He's saying. He goes on to explain what He says in verse 4, for whoever humbles himself like a little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

So He's speaking about a humble attitude, humility. And willing to have a childlike attitude towards our living God and willing to be led and grow and learn from Him and trust in Him is a huge challenge to our ego.

It's always a huge challenge to our ego to act like with a childlike trust before the living God. But we are His little ones. That's a good thing to remember as Christians, whoever we are, we are His little ones.

We belong to the Father. And we see here that I think we have from Him, He's appointed angelic support for us as His children.

In verse 18 there's that great verse that He tells us... Is it verse 18? I've lost it again.

[7 : 10] Someone tell me what verse it is about the angels. Why have I lost that? Is there somewhere...

I've lost it. It's verse 11, sorry. I'm losing a paragraph here. Yeah, verse 11. I see to you that you do not despise these little ones, for I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

Now this is a really difficult verse. I don't pretend to have all the answers to it. I don't know the exact meaning of it in reality. So much isn't revealed about the work and the life of angels in the universe. But clearly what God is saying is that there's an unseen world of angelic worship and service. And however it unfolds, we as God's children are central to that.

We're part of that. Whatever that looks like, whether we have individual angels that have our kind of guardians, whether it's just a more general thing, I don't know. But it reminds us that these angels, whatever relationship they have to God's people are before God's face.

[8 : 24] In other words, we are at the center of God's mind. We are part of the audience that God sees.

And that's a hugely significant thing for us. You know, when you feel that nobody cares about you and nobody is interested in you, it's not amazing if somehow somebody really important gets in touch with you and says, well, I was thinking about you today.

I'd really like to get in touch with you. You go, oh, I suddenly feel quite significant. And that's really what we're being reminded of there, that God is always thinking about His children.

The angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. And we're reminded as God's children all, as little ones that we've got angelic support, but that He looks out for us.

So you've got this little parable from verse 12 to 14, which talks about the 99 and the one that's gone missing. But that's very, you know that parable, do you? You know it well.

[9 : 27] But it's also in Luke's gospel. And in Luke's gospel, it's used as evangelistically so that God looks for the lost sheep that is not a believer and brings it back into the kingdom.

And this is a different application that Jesus uses for the same story or same parable. It's figurative. And he's saying that within the family, within the community, within the kingdom of God, God is interested and cares for the ones who tend to wander away.

And it's a recognition that God doesn't let anyone go from His kingdom. Father in heaven, His will is that none of these little ones should perish.

And He brings them back as they recognize once again their need of Him. And that's a great security for us to remember and know that we belong to God and that He is interested and cares for us and reaches out for us even when we're wandering, even when we're drifting.

And isn't that our tendency? Our tendency is to drift from the 99, to drift from the body of believers, to go our own way, to think that they've hurt or upset us or done the wrong thing and we'll just, we'll pass them, we'll give up on them.

[10 : 47] But Jesus, He brings, He looks out for us and brings us back and helps us to recognize that we're a family together. And we belong to God.

And He gives us these little pictures of what it means to belong to be part of the kingdom and what His attitude, His loving attitude towards the little ones, the ones that maybe know that generally in the world are insignificant and unimportant.

How would I apply that? Don't be a spiritual snob. That's how I would apply that. In verse 10, He says, See to it that none of you despise one of these little ones.

So within the Christian community, there's no place for snobbery. There's no place for looking down on any one of the little children that we all are in Christ. You know, we're really living just now in a harsh and judgmental world, and status is very important in the world in which we live.

And there's a lot of trash talk going on, probably especially online. And that should be absolutely not the case in the Christian community at which we're apart.

[11 : 55] So in church, the idea of status, the idea of being big shots, pride, considering anybody in church as a nobody, not worth my effort to speak to or get to know or care for, ignoring the children or pushing them as to the side as if they're insignificant, saying some people are just ordinary and not worth it.

It's anathema to God. That's anathema to His way of understanding what it is to be part of this counter-cultural godly kingdom to be part of, to be one of His little ones.

And we'll go on to explain a little bit more why that's the case. I think it's a key truth. It's a key truth for me. It's a key truth for our elders, for our pastoral teams. It's a key truth for all of us as we think about our attitude to the local church, the kingdom of God in that little microcosm.

So we belong to God. But we also belong to one another, you know? And that involves two things. Well, it involves a lot more than that. But from this passage, it involves at least two things.

And again, this is very important because it's counter-cultural and it goes against our individuality that we sometimes think, or maybe our selfish or sinful individuality that sometimes rears its head.

[13 : 12] The first thing that belonging to each other means as a gospel community is that we should reflect an honest grace with each other. Today, so verses 15 to 20, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.

If he listens to you, you've gained a brother. Then if he doesn't listen, go and take one or two others so that there's witnesses to what's happening. And then if he doesn't listen to any of them, take it to the church. And that's speaking more formally about the overseers, the shepherds, those with spiritual responsibility, the elders.

And if he doesn't listen to even the church, then you treat him as an unbeliever. And I'll just unpack that a little bit, what that means. And this is a really, this is a big passage historically, and it's a huge passage that's been used with respect to formal church and formal church discipline, as it were. Probably pretty unhelpfully institutionalized, I think, in a lot of ways. But what has been taught here by Jesus, there's a few things. First is the church ought to be a loving family.

That's what it ought to be. Then your brother or sister sins against you, go and tell them his fault. And this is the family dynamic that he's been explaining right through the passage.

[14:27] And it's the repeated theme of chapter 18, that we are all God's little ones together, and we're all brothers and sisters, and there's a deeply implied love and trust and humility.

This isn't speaking about someone, a big boot's coming up and saying, yeah, you're making a big mess of your Christian life. Not like that at all. It's not talking about Mr. Nosy Parker in the church, or Mrs. Quick Defined Fault in the church.

It's not that kind of issue that's been dealt with here at all. This is a humble, loving community where relationship and trust is so deep and real that you sense the hurt and the damage that might be caused if someone walks down a road that's really going to be unhelpful for them spiritually, where they're deliberately sinning against God and against themselves and against the community.

It's a recognition that there can be hurtful and damaging behavior spiritually and relationally that can't be ignored. Why can't it be ignored? Because you love them. Any parent knows that.

Any parent knows that they have to sometimes just swallow, gutsily, and speak to their children about the way they behave. And best friends do it as well.

[15:45] And that should be the way the honesty and trust should be in the church. A loving family that is willing to recognize that level of depth.

But as part of that, it should be a place of healing. Because the whole idea behind speaking into someone's life is that they recognize that and repent and turn from it, the example given here is someone who's not healthy and who just digs in and says, gee, get lost.

I'm not going to listen to anything you say. But when there's mutual trust and honesty and repentance, matters don't go any further. And there's healing and there's hope. And something good has happened.

It's only a immature Christian and an immature church that just surfs the shallows. And it is always just, yeah, OK, everyone's fine. I'm good, cool.

No problems, nothing wrong. A church that's marked by peak and by gossip and by taking offence and giving offence and by defensiveness and by an unwillingness to deal with and speak into deep challenging issues in life.

[16:59] But in all the motive of love has got to be absolutely crucial. And the willingness to listen, absolutely crucial. Because in this little passage, the guy, the person who is not willing to respond to any approaches of love, three times we're told, they're not listening.

They're not listening. And isn't that so true of what we can be like as Christians? With God and with one another? I'm not listening. We have stubborn refusal to admit our failing, to admit maybe out of pride and just be defensive in no way.

And that then becomes damaging for the whole community. It involves other people in the last resort. As a last resort, it involves the church elders who have spiritual oversight.

And the whole point of what Jesus is saying is that backsliding or deliberate rebellion against God is never just your own decision. It's never just about how you want to live or how you choose to work out things.

When we fall away from God, it affects our relationship with God, with our best Christian friends and with the whole church, because we're a family together.

[18:20] And there's always consequences for that. It's never simply our own decision. We know that, don't we? And we know that as a church. Generally, we know that as individuals in our families, you know, if we choose to do things that are hurtful and painful, then it's not just our decision that hurts people that we love, but our tendency.

And Jesus knows it. It comes across in this passage all the time. Our tendency is to run away because hearing can often be too painful. And He finishes this section by saying there's a rubicon that gets crossed in the church, and this verse has caused a lot of difficulty for people that treat them as you would if they don't repent and don't turn, if they refuse to listen, treat them as you would a gentile and a tax collector.

What does that mean? I think simply, well, you know how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors? He loved them. But He didn't call them believers.

He didn't treat them as part of the family of God. He wanted them to repent and come to faith.

That's so often our attitude when we see something like this, we think, treat them like gentiles or unbelievers, cast them out.

No, that's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying, yes, you regard them as unbelievers because they're not following Jesus and they're rebelling against Him.

[19 : 40] And you can't call them believers, but you love them and you're still praying for their repentance. Because Jesus, earlier on in the Ascension of the Mountains, says, buy your fruit.

You shall be known. And so we can be known by how we live. So I think that's really important, honest grace. But so is open-ended forgiveness.

And in this parable, the next parable, lots of little parables, Peter says, whoa, wait a minute. So how often do I forgive someone? Seven times. And Peter thought he was doing really well there.

Seven times. Yeah, I'm really generous and gracious. Jesus says, no, either. Seven times seven or seventy times seven. And Jesus is basically just saying, you just keep on doing it.

He doesn't say after forty-nine or four hundred and one, you stop forgiving. It's just an illustration.

And he's saying in our minds, where there's always, when people come to us and ask for forgiveness, whether genuine repentance, when someone falls, doesn't there come a point when we just say, well, enough's enough, eh?

[20 : 47] You've had plenty of opportunities. You've gone off the track enough. Jesus says, no. He's my little one.

He's your brother or sister. And if we truly understand ourselves, then we will forgive others until the day they die or we die.

Why? Because God never stops forgiving us when we repent. And there's a sense in which we should be repenting every day of our lives.

I know that the price has been paid, but He asks us to have that spirit of repentance in our lives and not to give up on others. So it's really a reminder not to give up on the church and other people, and of course implied that we never give up on our relationship with God.

But don't you find, and I know I find that our forgiveness for other people is so often reserved. It's miserly. It has a sell-by date.

[21 : 50] We'll give them, so we'll give them a last chance to loon, last time. But if they fall again, that's it. Ping! Time up. And I write you out of my life.

I've got to only spend my time with people that are really nice and good and will say nice things and will not be difficult. Sorry, loser, you're off. You're off the scene.

That is not God's family dynamic. God's family dynamic stems from an understanding that He's never done that for us when we've come back to Him genuinely for a fresh start.

And He drives that home with what I'm finishing with is this punchy and challenging parable that any of us can understand.

I updated it with the kids earlier on. But it's very clear. I hope, and I'm sure they could understand what was behind the story that I told and what Jesus is trying to say.

[22 : 53] It's famously called the parable of the unmerciful servant or the unforgiving servant. And what is Jesus summing up this whole passage, this whole chapter with this parable?

He sums it up with this parable of the guy who owes an indefinable amount and he can't pay it and the king forgives him and then he goes out and there's a guy owes him a couple of quid and he punches him and they say, you know, give it to me or I'll put you in jail until you've paid back every last penny.

You know, what's that saying? What's that saying to you and to me? What's he reminding us, the summary of all this thinking of what it means to be a Christian in the community of God's people? Well, he's reminding us first that we are bankrupt before God. Never forget that as Christians. It's the basis of everything we are and have become and everything that we do and how we act in life that we are bankrupt before God, but he has paid the price of the debt we owe himself in the person of Jesus.

Jesus knew that when he was telling this parable. He knew he himself would be nailed to a tree for this rotten, rebellious, unbelieving people who walked away from him and denied him.

[24 : 11] And he understood the bankruptcy of humanity and the cost of setting us free and of being forgiven. And it's good to always remember that because we have a tendency to think, actually, we're not so bad.

I'm kind of one of God's special ones because I'm not so bad. It's easy for us to think like that. It's great to remind ourselves that spiritually we are bankrupt.

Christ pays the debt. A good phrase, I can't remember who, it'll never have been my phrase, it's someone else's phrase, probably Tim Keller's. We are unworthy but never worthless.

In fact, I actually think it's Corey Brock's, but he probably got it from Tim Keller. We are unworthy but never worthless.

We're bankrupt, but we're not poor in Christ. We have incredible riches.

[25 : 16] And he's the great shepherd that looked for us and who brought us home and who forgives us, who's forgiven us. So Christ has paid our debt. That's part of the great teaching of this parable.

But also forgiveness then becomes our heartbeat. It becomes a heartbeat of the Christian church and makes church the safe place that it should be that it's so often isn't for people.

The community, that is, church community. If we truly understand ourselves and what Jesus has done for us, how incalculably guilty we are before Him without Christ, to know His cleansing, it helps us to put into perspective the failings and the mistakes that other people make against us.

We're tiny in comparison, especially when they plead for forgiveness and when we are encouraged by God to be patient and to recognize that we all stumble and fall.

Don't we all need that? Don't we need other people to think of us like that when we stumble and fall so that we know when we want to come back we're not going to be judged or we're not going to find it, people are three strikes and you're out.

[26 : 35] Kind of attitude. Forgiveness becomes our heartbeat. And also I think what He's teaching in this last parable is to see others, not just ourselves, but to see others as God's little ones.

Because we are all God's little ones. And so pray for humility. That's really the whole foundation of this section of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God.

That there is no place in your heart for spiritual pride, or in my heart for spiritual pride. No place for loving with short memories about our own sin and long memories for other people's failings, that we live as His little ones with grace and patience and kindness and self-control and self-sacrifice for others and treating others as we ourselves want to be treated.

The church, the community is to be such an honest and accountable and loving and safe place of acceptance that spiritual bankrupts feel really at home.

But if we don't see that, we'll kick out. We'll kick out when our spiritual safe space is invaded by someone else, when someone challenges us maybe about our life or about what we're doing, and maybe with great trembling and fear that they might even work up the courage.

[28 : 23] And I think that's the best attitude to have to your kind of working up the courage to speak to your closest, one of your friends, closest friends about maybe their spiritual life.

But even if people come to us that way, we'll find we'll be resentful and we'll not want to have a changed heart and we'll resist and resist and we'll walk away and we'll wander and we'll drift so much so that we'll really live like unbelievers and maybe even the church will have to take us to that place where we're regarded, can't be regarded anymore as believing and trusting in the same things that Jesus wants us to.

But even that is with the perspective of bringing us back home. So what's your understanding?

What's my understanding of the local church? It's an institution.

Is it just a friendship or a social circle? Is this it? The building that we've all come back to today? Is it just take it or leave it?

Has the six months of watching online made you feel church is much more consumerist? Oh, Derek's going on a bit today. He's a bit boring. I think I'll put on the Chalmers church today that we'll stick on something else for five minutes or something like that and then we'll put on something else and it can...

[29 : 43] And I know I was doing it myself. It was... I did it after two minutes when I was listening to myself, but that's different. You should try it sometime. Let's see yourself for half an hour. It's murder.

A service in that kind of consumerist way, it can become that, can't it? Because it's... It can be cost free at one level, isn't it?

Being among people is costly. It's a pain sometimes and it's nice just to be in your own home and you can take it or leave it and gain from it.

And yet Christ says, look, I go for the one and I leave the 99 and I go out into the dangerous place for the one, the one who's ruining their life. I go for them.

You go for that person too. You go for the one that's struggling and far away and recognize that this church is to be full of His little ones whose angels are before God's face every day and may the Holy Spirit teach us all about that.

[30 : 46] And if you don't know Jesus, that's what it means to belong to Jesus is that we're accepted and forgiven and we belong and we become one of His little children and belong to His family with all our faults and failings that we're to understand that and care for each other.

So let's pray before we hear another song. Father God, we pray that you would help us to understand a little bit more about what you teach about belonging to Jesus.

We thank you for the freeing, beauty, power and revolution of the nature of belonging to Jesus.

And forgive us when we've made church stuffy or snobby or institutionalized or a place of ranker or division or whatever it happens to be that is ugly and un-Christ-like.

Forgive us for lowering our standards and remind us Lord, as we... I talked at the beginning about coming for prayer on a Friday for renewal, remind us that we need renewed, that we are people that constantly need renewed and that prayer is the best place for us to go for that renewal because it is reminding us from where a renewal comes.

[32 : 10] So maybe dig our roots deep down into the living water so that we may bear fruit even during this time of drought and may Jesus renew us and resource us and hear our cries for Jesus' sake.