“Therefore take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.” And His mother and brothers came to Him, and they were unable to get to Him because of the crowd. And it was reported to Him, “Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see You.” But He answered and said to them, “My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:18-21, NASB)

INTRODUCTION

Ever heard the expression, “Blood is thicker than water”? When we use it today, we mean that family ties and loyalties come before outside friendships or commitments. The “blood” is a metaphor for shared ancestry. But it appears that the phrase originally meant that the “blood of a covenant” was thicker than the “water of the womb”—just the opposite! In other words, comrades in war are closer than family members, or people bound by a blood covenant are more loyal to each other than biological relatives.

The shift in meaning is reflected in differing ideas people have about what is more important—blood relatives and family honor, or the church of Jesus Christ and the honor of the Father. And that’s what the Lord Jesus speaks about today in our text from Luke 8. This passage has always puzzled me, especially as it always seemed to be tossed into the section without any obvious link to the argument of the text. But I had never studied the passage closely, and I think I get the point a lot better now that I’ve had a week to think it over.

We’ll begin by meeting Jesus’ family relatives so we have a better familiarity with characters we seldom think about in the gospel story. Then we want to back up in the context to understand why Luke placed this event where he did. And we’ll wrap up our study by thinking about how Jesus’ instruction helps us place family and church relations in their proper perspective.

I. MEET JESUS’ BIOLOGICAL FAMILY . . . AND UNDERSTAND IT!

Jesus’ mother and brothers are trying to get access to Jesus at a time when He is speaking to crowds. Like the paralytic and his four friends they cannot reach Him. The first thing we need to do in understanding this very short account is to recognize the faces of these close relatives who stand out from the crowd. The first is a character who has already appeared in the book of Luke in chapter two. The others have been mentioned not even once. Allow me to make a few introductions. At times we’re going have to get a little technical, so please stay with me . . .

A. JESUS’ MOTHER MARY OR MIRIAM. She has already been introduced in Luke’s gospel as a godly, humble young woman from Nazareth. From the moment of the annunciation she seems to have believed Jesus was the coming Messiah. But she did not yet understand God’s timing in her Son’s mission. That is why she had tried to precipitate Jesus’ revealing His power at a wedding in Cana (John 2). But Jesus had gently put her in her place. Jesus’ adopted father Joseph is not mentioned by Luke, so many Bible students believe he was dead by now, having perhaps married the younger Mary when he was already at an advanced age. We cannot know for sure. At any rate, Joseph does not figure in the family group who is trying to talk to Jesus.

B. JESUS’ BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

1. They were the sons of Mary and Joseph. The common words (adelphoi “brothers” or adelphai, “sisters”) mean literally “from the same womb” and thus denote members of the nuclear family by common birth. This is consistent with other statements in the gospels about the marriage between Joseph and Mary. Some suggest that Joseph the adopted father of Jesus was an old man and that he never had any children by Mary, who remained a virgin all her life. This interpretation—held by Roman Catholics and defended by citations from the fictional account of the family background of Mary in the Protoevangelium of James (circa AD 150)—does not line up with several other important facts from the New Testament.
   a. Matthew 1:25, “Joseph kept her a virgin until (heós, cf. Matthew 2:9) she gave birth to a son, and she called His name Jesus”. This means that Joseph and Mary lived together as any other married couple after the birth of Jesus.

2. They are listed by name in Mark 6:4. Unless we accept the accuracy of the discredited apocryphal Protoevangelium of James, there is no reason to believe that these men are sons of Joseph by an earlier marriage, or the sons of a later husband of Mary after Joseph’s death, or the cousins of Jesus. Who then are these men and what do we know about them from other texts in the New Testament?
   a. James would later see Jesus raised from the dead (1 Cor 15) and would become the leader of the church in Jerusalem, as Paul mentions in Galatians 1:19 and 2:9. He would be the author of the epistle of James that we know from the NT.
   b. Joses. We know nothing about him since he is not explicitly mentioned elsewhere in the gospels or the NT letters.
   c. Judas would later become a believer and become the author of the epistle of Jude (Jude 1).
   d. Simon. He is not explicitly mentioned elsewhere in the NT.
   e. The sisters. They are not mentioned by name in the NT.

3. They were not “cousins” or half-brothers/sisters by a previous marriage of Joseph. Let me expand just a moment on this detail. The NT language has several words for the more distant relationship of “cousin”. It is never used in the New Testament in the sense of “brothers” in a nuclear family. Note these examples . . .
   a. suggenés, (12x NT)
      (1) Mark 6:4, “A prophet is not without honor except in his home town and among his own relatives and in his own household”. Note the distinction between the concentric circles of extended and nuclear families.
      (2) Luke 1:36, “. . . even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age . . .”. Elizabeth was Mary’s cousin, so that John the Baptist and Jesus were actually second cousins.
      (3) Luke 2:44, Jesus’ parents “began looking for him among their relatives and acquaintances”.
      (4) Luke 14:12, “do not invite your friend or your relatives, or your brothers or your rich neighbors…” Again note the distinction between relatives and brothers.
      (5) Luke 21:16, “you will be delivered up by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death”. Can you see the expanding circle of betrayal? “Relatives” encompass more people than “brothers”.
   b. anepsios, “nephew”, Col 4:10 *NT referring to John Mark the nephew of Barnabas.

We cannot therefore conclude from the New Testament that Mary was a perpetual virgin, conceived without sin and ascended into heaven instead of dying. Instead the gospels affirm she was the mother of a godly Jewish family from the town of Nazareth in Israel, selected in God’s grace to bear the Messiah in a unique way so that He would not inherit the sin of Adam.

4. They did not yet believe that He was the Messiah of Israel. What an experience it must have been to live side-by-side with Jesus as a sibling! Imagine an oldest brother who likely knocked his milk to the ground because He was not yet coordinated enough to always grab it correctly, but who never threw His milk to the ground in anger . . . a brother who always was kind and shared, who never was in the wrong . . . although we can’t exclude the possibility of his being punished unjustly because his brothers or sisters blamed Him for doing something He wasn’t guilty of!

Yet the apostle John wrote in John 7:5, “not even his brothers were believing in Him . . .”, thus indicating the brothers of Jesus did not believe in His deity or Messiahship. They must have been impressed by His miracles (John 2:12) but they wanted to influence Him in a worldly direction to make much of Himself by showing off at the festival of the Jews (John 7:3).

Of course Jesus was not alone among the prophets of God among the Jewish people to be looked down on by His immediate family members. Joseph’ brothers ridiculed him when he told them his dreams of elevation over them and his parents. Moses’ people did not look at him as the Jews’
deliverer from Egypt. David’s brothers disdained him when he came to fight Goliath. Jesus as the supreme prophet shared that experience.

Before we go any further, think about this. We sometimes suppose that if we had been closer to the historical events we’d certainly have believed in Jesus more easily. After all, family links give us a leg up on life; why not on faith? But not all His family members did. His mother Mary did believe in Jesus’ identity; His brothers and sisters did not. Proximity is not necessarily an advantage. If you think you are a Christian because your father or mother is, then remember that God has no grandchildren. By the time we get to the third generation after the conversion of two people from a life of sin, it’s very often the case that the grandchildren no longer realize how important the faith is, and wonder if they are missing out on something. If you have a Christian heritage, rejoice in it and take full advantage of it, but don’t depend on it to know Jesus. A relationship with Him will have to be your choice, just as it was for Jesus’ own siblings.

II. MEET JESUS’ SPIRITUAL FAMILY . . . AND BELONG TO IT!

Okay. Time to get beyond the facts. Why did Luke include this little section here? The parallel gospel accounts (Matthew 12:22-50; Mark 3:19-35) place this event in the context of the controversy about Jesus’ doing miracles either by the power of the Holy Spirit or by the power of the devil. The Pharisees had challenged Jesus to show them a sign to prove His authority. Jesus insisted that an evil generation—an evil family line—showed its unbelief by demanding signs. He had come back to Capernaum after an intensive time of ministry throughout the region of Galilee, and crowds of people had gathered around Him to such an extent that He did not even have time for a meal (Mark 3:20).

The whole situation seemed to be getting out of control. Jesus is doing things His family does not expect Him capable of. The pressures are escalating. He seems to be neglecting Himself. He acts like a rabbi without rabbinic training. The crowds are making unfair demands. Religious leaders are bringing strong accusations. If Jesus were your family member, how would you respond?

I suspect the family members are intervening now just as Mark says they had at an earlier time (Mark 3:21). They had tried then to rescue Him from what they considered mild insanity: “He has lost His senses”. The poor fellow is over-worked; they must save Him from what He knows is the Father’s will! So they had come from Nazareth to “arrest” (take custody of) Him and lead Him back home. Now again they want to approach Him, doubtless for similar reasons. Even Jesus’ mother is present! Jesus just needs to be a bit more reasonable! At a human level this is all quite understandable. But it is fails to see who Jesus really is.

But why does Luke include the passage if he does not bother to give us more details about their motivations? As always the answer lies in the context! The paragraph is an opportunity to emphasize something has been saying to the crowds who are not at all in his family line. And that you can read in the beginning of Luke 8. The crowd—who has been listening to Christ give the parable of the four soils and teaching about how important it is to hear rightly—tell Jesus His mother and brothers are here to speak to Him. Jesus emphasizes that if someone listens to His word and obeys it, he is a mother or brother of Jesus in an even more intimate way than Mary or James or Joses or Simon or Jude or His sisters!

Jesus says that if we wish to have His hearing ear as a family member, we need to first listen to His Father in heaven. To be heard, we must first hear and obey! And by hearing and obeying we have a relationship with Him that is even more privileged than that of His mother and brothers!

The theme of hearing has been developed earlier in this section. It is mentioned in Luke 8:4-15. A great crowd of people had come out to him from various places in the region, including women of means who helped pay the bills (8:2-3). As they congregated around Him, he spoke a parable that linked hearing to obedience (8:5-8). Those who heard with faith in His preaching and in His person would bear fruit because the seed of His teaching would have found fertile ground in the listener’s heart. Their faith, which no one could see, would shed light around then because it would become visible through action and obedience, just like a lamp placed in a public place to give light (8:16-17).

It was the disciples who had asked what the meaning of the parable was, and Jesus had explained to them that it had been given to them to know the mysteries of the kingdom. To others it was not given to know, but rather simply to hear and not understand. In each of the situations the listening people must hear and believe, and then they can bear fruit. “And the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance” (8:15). There could be no fruit—no changed life—without this right kind of hearing, a listening in childlike trust. That is why He insisted, “Therefore take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him shall more be given; and
whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him”.

One of those “more things” that would be given was membership in God’s family. The person who trusts in Jesus’ teaching becomes His brother! He is brought into a spiritual family whose ties are tighter and better founded than even those of the nuclear family! Remember that the brothers of Jesus had no special advantage over anyone else because they lived under the same roof in their boyhood years. It was only after they trusted in the resurrection that they would become Jesus’ brothers through the new birth, and therefore twice brothers! James would see Jesus raised (1 Corinthians 15:7) and that would change his mind about his older brother’s identity. Matthew 28:10 notes that Jesus wanted to have His brothers notified that He would go before them into Galilee. This phrase may refer to the apostles or to Jesus’ physical brothers. The brothers of Jesus would be part of the 120 early disciples gathered in Jerusalem before Pentecost (Acts 1:14). And 1 Corinthians 9:6 indicates the brothers of Jesus and their wives would become missionaries for Jesus much later! Now that’s something to rejoice over!

III. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

So where does this all leave us? Consider a few simple implications . . .

A. HONOR THE HEAVENLY FATHER SUPREMELY
   If God has not become your Father by trusting Him and taking His word about the identity of His Son, Jesus Christ the God/man, who died as your substitute at the cross, then it doesn’t matter what kind of a family you come from. Your father can be royalty, nobility or wealth incarnate—it matters not a whit. We must be born again—born by faith in Jesus alone into God’s family. We have been created to know Him and worship Him, not our parents or our sterling genetic line. Paul the apostle could have boasted about being descended from the tribe of Benjamin through a Jewish family that lived in Israel. But he counted it as nothing—rubbish, in fact—in comparison with being in Christ, associated with the Son of God (Philippians 3:5,8). To do this you will need to listen first of all to God’s Son, even before your earthly father, mother, brothers, sisters or other relatives. Your identity is not determined by your relationship to any earthly family, but by your membership in the family of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord.

B. PRIZE GOD’S SPIRITUAL FAMILY DEEPLY
   The church of Jesus Christ is not a club. It is not a business. It is not a state. It is more like a family. And the relationships and love that believers from all across the world can have toward one another will often be closer than what people find growing up in their own families. Are you part of God’s church? Then you will prize the local fellowship of believers and give yourself to her cause and her work, even when it means you may have to sacrifice some things you’d like to do with your family. It may mean that you say “no” to the wishes of parents who want you to live for money and worldly success, simply to magnify the family name. Nothing can be more worthy of the heavenly Father than to give our lives for His family and its growth! Godly parents will encourage their children to move into the Lord’s work as a great calling, rather than to turn up their noses at it as something unworthy of the family name.

C. HONOR YOUR BIOLOGICAL FAMILY SACRIFICIALLY
   Jesus did not speak ill of His physical family in this text. Luke does not record that Jesus said, “Are my mother and my brothers dropping by to see me? They count for nothing. They do not believe in me anyway, so I have no interest in seeing them. The only ones who count to me are spiritual family”. No! Not at all! Jesus provided for His mother Mary so that at the cross He committed her into the care of John the apostle (John 19:26-27). He loved His brother James enough to appear to Him after the resurrection. As elsewhere in Scripture family ties do not determine spiritual destiny; only spiritual ties do. But . . . those who trust in God’s Word and thus enter His family care for their relatives with self-sacrificing love! If you honor God supremely, you will want to reach your biological family with the gospel. Your allegiance will be to God first of all. You will want to obey Him alone, but that will mean you will care for your parents in their old age, train up your children when they are young, and love your teens enough to correct them when they need it, instead of letting them go their own way.

CONCLUSION

If you’d been a face in the crowd listening to Jesus two thousand years ago, and if you’d believed what He taught and obeyed it, you would have had an even more privileged relationship with Him than Mary, James, Joses, Judas, Simon and the sisters. That’s still true! The blood of Christ and the bonds created between His people are indeed thicker than the water of the womb, and that is as it should be. Let’s love Him supremely, prize His family deeply and honor our families sacrificially because we are obedient listeners to His Son!