

Picture #4: The Family

“For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God [or members of God’s family].”

—Ephesians 2:18–19

As we continue looking by faith into the mirror of God’s Word to find out what kind of people we are in His sight, God truly wants us to understand how central we are to the outworking of His purposes in the earth.

We now turn to the fourth picture taken from Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians: the family. In this list of seven pictures of God’s people, the fourth is in the center. I believe this is appropriate because the family is central to our understanding of God’s people. In the New Testament, His people are very seldom referred to by the title Christians or even believers. The most common title used is brothers, emphasizing membership in one spiritual family.

For through Him we both [Jews and Gentiles] have access by one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:18)

Notice again that all three persons of the Godhead are represented here: Through Jesus the Son, we have access to the Father, by one Spirit. The next verse reveals the wondrous result:

Now, therefore [because we have access to the Father], you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. (Ephesians 2:19)

The word “*household*” would be best represented in contemporary English by *family*. Because Christ has gained us access to the Father, we have become members of God’s family.

Relationship to the Father

God's family is determined by relationship to the Father. In New Testament Greek, there is a very close similarity between the words *father* and *family*. The word for father is *pater*; the word for family is *patria*, which is derived from *pater*. This relationship is brought out clearly in Paul's prayer:

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named. (Ephesians 3:14–15)

There is a direct play here on the words "*Father*" and "*family*." From God the Father (*pater*) the whole family (*patria*) in heaven and earth is named. Family comes from fatherhood. So, again, having God as our Father makes us members of His family.

This truth is further brought out by the writer of Hebrews:

For it was fitting for Him [God the Father], for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons [believers] to glory, to perfect the author [the Lord Jesus] of their salvation through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies [Jesus] and those who are sanctified [the believers] are all from one Father; for which reason He [Jesus] is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying [quoting from the Old Testament], "I will proclaim Thy name to My brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing Thy praise." (Hebrews 2:10–12 nasb)

There is a beautiful revelation in this passage. God has made us His sons through Jesus, and Jesus Himself is the only begotten Son of God the Father; therefore, Jesus acknowledges us as His brothers because of our relationship to the Father. Jesus never did anything without the Father leading the way. Jesus did not call us "brothers" until the Father called us "sons." Once His Father called us sons, then He acknowledged us as His brothers.

There are two main features of this particular revelation that emphasize the idea of fatherhood: The primary, decisive feature is a shared life-source. When we all share the same life-source, we are members of the same family. The Father is the source of every family, heavenly or earthly. A family is not a denomination or a label, nor is it an organization or an institution. A family is a family because it has a shared life-source.

Second, God's fatherhood has relational implications in two directions: vertical and horizontal. The vertical is the relationship that each of us has to God as Father. The horizontal is the relationships we all have to one another as members of the same family. The vertical relationship to God is primary, but it also gives us a horizontal responsibility to one another. We cannot claim to be God's sons if we do not acknowledge His other sons as our brothers!

These two relationships, the vertical and the horizontal, within the family of God are beautifully exemplified by the opening words of the Lord's Prayer:

In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. (Matthew 6:9)

Two very important words occur right at the beginning of this prayer: "*Our Father*." In the original Greek it is actually "Father our." So the first word is *Father*, which is the decisive word. Jesus is saying, "Keep in mind that, through Me, you become children of God. Always approach God as your Father. Don't come to Him only as God, because He is God over everyone. Come to Him as your loving heavenly Father, with whom you are now in right relationship."

The second word is *our*—not "my" Father, but "our" Father. What does this mean? In coming to God as "our" Father, we acknowledge that He has many other children. You are not an only child. All of God's other children are your brothers and sisters. This acknowledgment rules out self-centeredness on our part.

There is so much in those two simple, introductory words to the Lord's Prayer.

In John 14, when Jesus was talking to the disciples about the Father, one of them said, "*Lord, show us the Father*" (verse 8). This grieved Jesus, and He said,

Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, "Show us the Father"? (John 14:9)

Just before that, in John 14:6, Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*" People often quote

that Scripture, but they very rarely complete it. Jesus said, “*I am the way*”; but a way is not an end in itself. A way is meaningless unless it leads us somewhere. Where does Jesus, the Way, lead us? To the Father! We have not fulfilled the purpose of God if we merely find the way. What we have to find is *the end* of the way! The primary mission of Jesus Christ is not to bring us to Himself, but to bring us to the Father.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God. (1 Peter 3:18)

God’s purpose is to gather in a great family of sons patterned after the pattern Son, Jesus. Everything is working together for good along the line of that purpose, to make us sons conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that [the Son] might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Romans 8:28–29)

The Central Concept of the Family Is Obedience

The central concept that these passages evoke concerning our relationship to God as our Father is *obedience*.

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (Hebrews 2:10)

The “*Him*” spoken of in this passage is God the Father; the “*captain*” of our salvation is Jesus; and the “*many sons*” are we, the believers.

The writer of Hebrews told us that the captain of our salvation was made perfect through sufferings. Jesus was morally perfect, but in personal development He wasn’t perfect until God brought Him to maturity. He grew up as the pattern Son under the discipline and discipleship of the Father, who brought Him to full personal development. He then became the pattern for all sons on their way to maturity. Again, the process through which He was perfected was suffering.

For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren. (verse 11)

Jesus is “*He who sanctifies,*” and we are “*those who are being sanctified.*” The “*one*” from whom Jesus and we proceed is the Father, from whom we receive our sanctification. Because we each go through the process of sanctification and maturity, we are given the right to our place in the family of God.

Quoting from Psalm 22, the passage continues,

He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: “I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You.” (Hebrews 2:11–12)

It is exciting to note that Jesus is going to sing in the midst of the church!

There is to be an unfolding revelation of God the Father to His children in the church through His Son Jesus. The revelation of God’s fatherhood is what will bring the children to maturity even as they are perfected through suffering.

Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. (Hebrews 5:8)

The relationship between the Father and the Son is a study of the relationship of a father bringing a son into maturity. Thus, Jesus became the pattern and the pathway for us. Jesus was never disobedient. Yet He had to *learn* obedience. You and I have to learn it in the same way He did: by obeying! There is just no other way. We don’t find out what obedience is by sitting and listening to sermons on obedience. These sermons may help us or motivate us, but obedience is learned by *doing*.

The key phrase in the obedience of Jesus was, “*Not My will, but Yours, be done*” (Luke 22:42). Every step of obedience in the Christian life is a step of self-denial. Jesus said if anyone desires to come after Him, he must deny himself. (See Matthew 16:24.) This is always painful because our ego never likes to be denied. The ego wants things, and following the Lord is a continual denial of ego.

Our Responsibility to Our Fellow Believers Is Love

While our vertical relationship to God can be characterized in this context as obedience, our horizontal responsibility to our brothers and sisters is a special kind of love. There are various Greek words that all tend to be translated as “love.” Four of them are *eros* (sexual passion), *storgé* (natural family affection), *philadelphia* (brotherly love), and *agape* (divine love).

Love is not a spiritual gift, but the outworking of *character*. In 2 Peter we see seven progressive steps that bring us to this special kind of *agape* love:

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love [agape]. (2 Peter 1:5–7)

The Scripture says, “*Add to your faith...*” So, we start with the basis of faith, and then we add the seven things to that in succession:

1. Virtue (excellence)
2. Knowledge (knowing God’s will)
3. Self-control (temperance)
4. Perseverance (patience, endurance)
5. Godliness (holiness)

We have come a long way down the list, but we have not yet come to love. The attitude that love means merely giving somebody an embrace at a prayer meeting is not in line with Scripture. Love is something that has to be cultivated and achieved, and it is really high up the ladder. Then,

6. Brotherly kindness (goodwill toward men)
7. Love (*agape*)

The word *agape* means, in particular, “I love my enemies.” When you can love your enemies, you have made it to the top.

Many religions have martyrs who will die for their faith—Judaism, Communism, and Islam, to name but a few. But there is one difference about the genuine Christian martyr in that he loves his enemies. If he does not, he is no better than the Communist or Muslim martyr.

Most of us are not qualified to be martyrs; God could not give us that privilege. I am convinced that if you are going to be a real martyr, you have to train for it by laying down your life daily. A martyr does not become one by a sudden, dramatic accident, but as the result of a process.

I have learned that every time I minister fruitfully, it is due to self-denial. As long as I am pleasing myself, I am not ministering the life of Christ. The two are opposites. Christ's life flows only where self has been denied. Jesus said we are to take up our cross daily. Your cross is the place where your will and God's will *cross*—and you have to come to that place of surrender on a daily basis. A person can be very religious, yet never die to his own will.

Many Christians have not even achieved “brotherly kindness.” It is not always easy to love every one of our fellow Christians. Sometimes, it is easier to love nonbelievers than Christians because it doesn't matter to them whether you are baptized by immersion or sprinkling or if you raise your hands in prayer or not.

I recall an incident in my life when I was involved in some meetings with about thirty other leaders. We were to be paired together with a different leader each night at a different meeting. There was one brother with whom I totally disagreed about baptism. I said to myself, *I just hope I don't get put together with him!* And, you guessed it—I was put together with him for three nights. He and I are now close friends.

In conclusion, let me relate a little incident from the days when some of the Scottish Christians up in the Highlands were being severely persecuted by the English Army. As a Scottish lassie was on her way to a secret meeting of believers, she was arrested by an English policeman who asked her where she was going. She did not want to lie, but she did not want to betray her fellow believers, either, so she lifted her heart to the Lord in prayer and asked Him for an answer. This is what she said to the policeman, “My Older Brother died, and I'm on my way to my Father's house to hear the will read.” What a good answer! Jesus is the Elder Brother, God is our Father, and it is our Father's house. We are a family!

Again, the essential feature of this picture of family is our shared life-source. God our Father in heaven is the life-source of His entire family. We all share a common life. This is what binds us together—not denominations or doctrines or labels.

We need to accept one another as brothers and sisters because God has accepted us as His family. It is one thing to know that we are accepted by God, but quite another to know experientially the acceptance of our

brethren. Some of us have never known the warm, loving embrace of an earthly father or brother. May these ones be destined to find it for the very first time in the family of God!