Beyond Family Values
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"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them." (Luke 6:32)

When people talk constantly about "family values," it means we've got a serious problem. If the family was okay, we wouldn't be talking about family so much. The family is in trouble. Even Christian families are in trouble. One sad commentary on Christianity in North America is that the most popular religious broadcasts are the ones that deal almost entirely with family issues. I'm not knocking these programs. Some of them are excellent and much needed. But Christians are in serious trouble when we've reached the point where we feel that our greatest need is stronger families. After all, there's nothing distinctly Christian about loving your family members and treating them well. Jesus says, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them" (Luke 6:32). "And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (Matthew 5:46-47)

But in many churches today, pastors would be overjoyed if only their members would live like decent pagans. If only we could get teens to love their parents enough not to rebel against them, if only we could get husbands to love their wives enough not to leave them, if only we could get parents to love their children enough not to abuse them—if only we could convince church people to love those who love them, many church leaders would be dancing for joy. According to Jesus, though, if you love those who love you, if you focus on your family and you're kind to those who are close to you, you're not doing anything heroic. You're not doing anything especially Christian. You're just doing what any common-sense sinner or pagan would do.

There are people from every religion, and some with no religion, who have strong families. There are people who are crooked and cruel to some people but are still loyal and loving to their family. Even a professional killer can be a good family man. As Jesus put it, "Even 'sinners' love those who love them." So let me say it again: When the top item on the Christian agenda is to focus on the family, something is wrong. It means that many who claim to follow Jesus find it hard even to behave as well as many who don't follow Jesus. Many of us are so messed up that we need psychological suggestions and common sense tips before we can even match the family values of so-called "sinners" and "pagans" who ignore the Bible.

What's more, a strong focus on the family can lead Christians who do manage to have a decent family life to become quite pleased with themselves. They love those who love them, and that's good enough. They think that Christianity is synonymous with "traditional family values," and they direct all their energy and concern to those in their family circle. But Jesus expects more from his disciples. He says: Don't just love your family. Love your enemies.

Love Your Enemies

The Lord Jesus calls us to something much more radical than traditional morality. Christ calls us to far more than family values. He embraces us in the love of God, and then he calls us to love the way God loves. God loved the world even when the world

hated him, even when we were God's enemies (Romans 5:10). Christ died to pay for our sins even though we could never pay him back. When you put your faith in Christ, that's the kind of unselfish love you believe in. And that's the kind of love Jesus expects you to have toward others. Don't love only those who already love you. Don't treat others the way they treat you. Treat them the way you'd want to be treated. Love them the way God loves you. In Luke 6, Jesus says,

> "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

> "If you love those who love you [Jesus continues], what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners' expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:27-36).

How many churchgoers want to hear that kind of message? A lot of people tend to think that Christianity is all about having a happy marriage, raising happy, well-adjusted kids, and lobbying the government to make the rest of society into nice, family-oriented people like us. But according to Jesus, Christian love goes far beyond family values.

Common-Sense Love
> For that matter, you don't even need to be a follower of Jesus to embrace traditional family values. Loving family members is just common sense, not a uniquely Christian virtue. That's what makes our situation so tragic and so embarrassing. Family ties are stronger in a nation like Japan, where only a small percentage of the people are Christian, than in North America, where more than 80% of us claim to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. In Nigeria, too, millions of people say they are Christians, but many don't have healthy families, let alone love enemies from different tribes or religions.

> Jesus tells Christians to go beyond others in love, not fall short of common-sense love. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, and we don't even know how to love our parents and spouses and children. Too many church people don't even qualify as good pagans, let alone good Christians.

> When I say we need more than family values, I'm not saying we should overlook or neglect our families. Christianity is more than loving those who love us, but it certainly isn't less. For example, suppose there's a brand of religion which teaches people to neglect the basic needs of their family members in order to increase their religious donations. That would violate the commands of God himself. Jesus was once in a discussion with people who were doing just that. Jesus said,

> "Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or

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mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition (Matthew 15:3-6).

It is never right to neglect the needs of our loved ones, even if we claim to have the highest religious motivations. So it is certainly wrong to violate our bond to them for any other reason. When you don't help aged parents in need, when you abandon a husband or wife who no longer excites you, when you neglect your children to pursue your career, you're not only violating God's Word; you're not even living up to the standards of a decent non-Christian.

If a man dies, Christian relatives ought to help his widow and orphans. But in some societies there are churchgoers who don't help widows. Instead, the dead man's relatives seize all his property and leave the widow and children with nothing. The Bible says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27). What must God think of people who fail to help their own widowed sister-in-law and their own orphaned nieces and nephews? How angry must God be when greedy relatives invade a grief-stricken family and take what little they have? The Bible says, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8).

When Jesus teaches more than family values, he isn't saying that family values don't matter. He calls his followers to be more, not less, than unbelievers.

Sensible Self-Interest

Even if you do manage to love those who love you, you're not doing anything uniquely Christian. Even a self-centered person may do that. After all, to love your family is in many ways just loving an extension of yourself. Husband and wife are so much one unit that any man "who loves his wife loves himself" (Ephesians 5:28), and anyone who hurts his wife hurts himself. He's not just being sinful; he's being stupid; he's hurting his own self-interest. In general, the happier you make your spouse, the happier your spouse will make you. Husband and wife help meet each other's economic needs, emotional needs, and sexual appetites. It doesn't take someone of deep faith to see that. It's common sense.

The same is true of the relationship between children and parents. Parents naturally have a bond to their children. Even when there seems to be nothing spiritual or moral about it, there are the bonds of biology and natural affection that even many animals have for their offspring. It's not just unholy, but horribly unnatural, when parents abort their babies or abuse their children. Christianity aside, it's just plain normal for people to want to propagate themselves and raise children who are like them. It's natural to feel affection for those who have your blood running through their veins, your features imprinted on their faces, your heritage carried on in their lives.

So even if you're self-centered, it makes sense to love the people close to you and to treat well those who treat you well. That's true of family relationships, and it's also true of friendships and business relationships. You'd be crazy not to be nice to the friends you enjoy being with. It's more fun to have people who share your interests than to have no one. Again, that's not Christianity. It's common sense. Likewise, you'd be a fool not to give the best of treatment to people with whom you have long-term business

relationships. "I scratch your back, you scratch mine." That's not lofty religion; it's good business.

Throughout history people of every religion and no religion at all have generally realized that it makes sense to love those who love you, to treat your friends well, to conduct your business in such a way that people want to deal with you, to get along with your neighbors, and to be loyal to your government. All this is really just part of sensible self-interest. Only an utter fool destroys his ties with those who are in a position to make his life more pleasant. "No man is an island." You are most likely to prosper when those closest to you prosper. You are most likely to get ahead when the people and institutions you depend on feel they can depend on you. Anyone with enough sense to see this will cultivate good relationships with those who can do him good in return. All of this is so obvious that Jesus took it almost for granted that most people would behave accordingly, simply out of self-interest, if for no other reason.

If that is so, then why the breakdown of families and the decay of traditional values in so many places? It's because we've become so mindless that we don't even know how to look out for ourselves. We don't see how much of our own happiness depends on strong, stable relationships with others. Traditional values provide the context in which we can enjoy a richer, more secure life, and in which our genes and our ideas and our culture can continue to live even after we're gone. But many have been infected by an extreme individualism, which bases everything on the impulse of the moment and ignores the wider network of relationships we need to enjoy a happy life. This individualism isn't just sinful. It is stupid and sick and suicidal. When you do anything which destroys your family and your society, you are also destroying yourself.

Even if you're self-centered and your main concern is, "What's in it for me?" it generally makes sense to love those who love you. It makes sense to favor some sort of traditional values. And it makes sense to be involved in a religion which helps to maintain these things. If there's evidence that "the family which prays together, stays together," then you'll pray together. If it seems that "honesty is the best policy" to enjoy long-term success in your business, you'll embrace a religion which encourages honesty and enhances your reputation.

God's Kind of Love

But a religion that focuses only on traditional values is not the religion of Jesus. Traditional values say to love those who love you, build relationships with those who are close to you, and be helpful to those who help you. It's good for you, and besides, you owe it to them. But as for your enemy? Someone who threatens your vital interests? Hate him and fight back. He's not doing anything for you. You owe him nothing.

Jesus, however, takes us beyond traditional values. He says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44). People in Jesus' time knew that God's law said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), but somehow they got the notion that God's law approved of hating enemies. What did God's law in the Old Testament really say? "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him." (Exodus 23:4-5) In short, don't hate your enemy; help him.

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Jesus takes what has already been said in the Old Testament and makes it even clearer. Jesus calls us to love those who have nothing to offer us but trouble. He calls us to love others just for the sake of loving them, not because they can do anything for us. He calls us to give for the sake of giving, not because the person will give something back. He tells us not to focus on ourselves, not to focus on our family and friends and society as extensions of ourselves, but to focus on people just because they're people, to be kind to them with no strings attached.

This takes us far beyond ordinary family values and into the extraordinary values of the family of God. It takes us beyond the earthly rewards of ordinary human relationships and into the heavenly rewards of a relationship with God.

Jesus says that God's children are to be different from all other people—not just different from foolish, nasty degenerates who neglect their own families and destroy their own communities, but different also from the respectable champions of family values. The child of God isn't just a solid, sensible person who knows enough to nurture the relationships that make him happy and help him to get ahead in life. The child of God is a person who loves the way God loves.

And how does God love? Does he love only those who love him? Does he give only to those who can pay him back? Is he kind only to those who deserve it? No, says Jesus, God "is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Luke 6:35). "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

God's love goes even beyond this. The Son of God himself laid aside the glory of heaven to live on earth and bring salvation to wicked, ungrateful people. Jesus didn't come because we deserve it. He didn't come because he needs us. He came and died for us just because God loves this world and its people.

Those who believe in Christ will begin to love with that same love and to give with that unselfish spirit. Jesus gave us a lot more than he will ever get back from us. And when we become children of God through faith in him, we are called to act in the same way. Be kind to people not because they deserve it, not because it will pay off for you, but simply because they need your kindness.

Anyone with the sense to embrace traditional values knows that it generally pays to treat our families well and to offer our business associates nothing but the best. We go all out when we put on a family dinner or go out for a business lunch. But Jesus takes us beyond this. He says:

> "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14).

Christ calls us to live by the family values of heaven's family, and to seek the rewards not of earth but of heaven.

How Are You Different?

Jesus asks each of us how we are different from anyone else. "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them" (Luke 6:32). "What are you doing more than others?" (Matthew 5:47). What is there in your life

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that marks you as a child of your Father in heaven and not just another earthling? Are you really any different from the world around you?

The way of the world is to defend yourself; the way of Christ is to deny yourself. The way of the world is to hate your enemies; the way of Christ is to love your enemies. The way of the world is to get everything you can; the way of Christ is to give everything you can. The way of the world is to look out for yourself; the way of Christ is to look out for others. The way of the world is self-esteem; the way of Christ is God-esteem. The way of the world is to expect repayment here and now; the way of Christ is to seek treasure in heaven. Are you following the way of the world or the way of Christ?

You can follow the way of Christ only if you die to yourself and live to God. This brings us to the heart of what it means to trust in Jesus and follow him. What takes the Christian beyond family values? What makes the Christian way of life different from all others? To put it as briefly as possible, *self-denial*.

Self-denial begins in the way you relate to God. You don't base your relationship to God on any of your own qualifications. Jesus blesses the poor in spirit who come to God with empty hands. He blesses those who mourn over their sin and brokenness. He blesses the meek, who humble themselves before the holiness of God. He blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, trusting in God alone to fill them (Matthew 5:3-6). The followers of man-made religions think that their standing with God depends on their own goodness. But the Christian is different. You are right with God when you deny your own merit and base your confidence only on Christ. As you are caught up in the death and resurrection of Christ, you die to self and live to God. You deny your own will and seek to follow God's will.

Once you belong to Jesus, self-denial also shapes the way you relate to others. The old self, supported by traditional values, tells you to love your friends and hate your enemies. But you deny yourself: you love your enemies and pray for them. When someone hurts you, the old self tells you to hurt them back. But you deny yourself: you choose not to seek revenge or to fight back, even if that means more suffering. The old self tells you to protect your own interests. But you deny yourself: you don't demand your own rights, but instead you look out for the interests of others. The old self tells you to give only to those who pay you back. But you deny yourself: you give to anyone in need, without expecting repayment.

And in denying yourself, you find yourself and your true identity. You realize who you are: You are a child of your Father in heaven. You are a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. You really are different from unbelievers. You're not just concerned about yourself and your family. You are a person who shines with the love of God himself.