

Jesus on Family and Freedom

On putting away childish things

By Dan Ofstedal – August 29, 2025 ¹

“Spread your wings and fly away” —Queen, “Spread Your Wings”

Personal note: I was practically raised in the church, yet never heard many of these bible passages which, when put together, give a clear message of what it means to “grow up.”

Jesus Gores a Sacred Cow

In the landscape of religious history, Jesus stands out as a revolutionary thinker who challenged not only political and religious institutions but also the most intimate of human structures: the family. His teachings on family relations were radical—startlingly so — advocating for a form of spiritual independence that often requires breaking from inherited beliefs and social expectations.

In a great irony, most modern Christians (and non-Christians) adopt their religious identities by copy/pasting their parents’ beliefs—precisely the kind of unexamined allegiance Jesus warned against. His words invite us to engage in deep spiritual inquiry and authentic self-discovery, even when it leads us away from our family of origin. This tension between spiritual truth and familial loyalty remains a central challenge—often ignored—for Jesus’s followers today.

Historical and Cultural Context

To appreciate the radical nature of Jesus’s message, consider its context: in first-century Jewish society, family was not just a personal matter—it was a spiritual and legal obligation. The Fifth Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12, NRSV), formed a cornerstone of Jewish life. The Book of Sirach, popular in Jesus’s time, further reinforced this ideal:

“For the Lord honors a father above his children, and he confirms a mother’s right over her children. Those who honor their father atone for sins, and those who respect their mother are like those who lay up treasure.” — *Sirach 3:2–4 (NRSV)*

Against this backdrop, Jesus’s repeated redefinition of family ties wasn’t just countercultural—it had to be deeply unsettling to many of his contemporaries. His message placed spiritual truth above social harmony, individual self-awareness and conscience above inherited identity.

Jesus Challenges Traditional Family Roles

The Prophet Rejected at Home

In *Mark 6:1–6 (NRSV)*, Jesus returns to his hometown only to face rejection:

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“He came to his hometown and began to teach in the synagogue. Many who heard him were astounded. They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...? And they took offense at him.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’ And he could do no deed of power there... because of their unbelief.”

This moment captures the deeply human challenge of transformation: when we grow, evolve, or awaken spiritually, those who knew us “before” may resist our change. They may feel a need to make us “wrong,” or even a heretic. Jesus is identifying a universal truth—true visionaries are often dismissed by those closest to them because familiarity breeds blindness to potential.

The Cost of Authenticity

In *Luke 14:26*, Jesus delivers one of his most jarring statements:

“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.”

Here, “hate” is not a call to resentment but a Semitic expression meaning to *detach* or *love less*. Jesus is demanding radical re-prioritization. Spiritual commitment, in his view, cannot be partial or secondary—it must be central. He is warning that clinging to familiar bonds can block the deeper journey toward divine union.

A gentler version appears in *Matthew 10:37*:

“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

This wording emphasizes that spiritual loyalty must transcend even the deepest natural affections. It is not a condemnation of family love, but an invitation—even a command—to place the search for spiritual truth above all.

Let the Dead Bury Their Dead

In *Matthew 8:21–22*, a would-be disciple hesitates:

“Another of his disciples said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.’”

This cryptic reply points to the urgency of spiritual awakening. Jesus is not dismissing grief or ritual; he is asserting that those spiritually “asleep” are already dead in a deeper sense. The path to life—true life—requires immediate, wholehearted engagement. The call of the spirit will not always wait for perfect timing or social approval.

Redefining Family

In *Matthew 12:48–50*, Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are waiting to speak to him:

“He replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”

This is a radical redefinition of family—not by blood, but by shared spiritual knowing and intention. Jesus elevates kinship in spirit over biological connection, creating a new model of belonging rooted in purpose, not pedigree. For anyone whose spiritual path differs from their family’s, these words offer both permission and solace.

Truth Above All

Finally, in *Matthew 10:34–36*, Jesus openly acknowledges that his teachings will disrupt family harmony:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother... and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”

This is not a call to conflict, but an honest recognition that spiritual truth can divide as well as heal. When a person begins to live from a place of authenticity, they may no longer fit into the roles others expect of them. The “sword” is discernment, not violence—cutting away expectations and pressures that bind us to inherited identities.

Beyond Tribal Religion: Toward Universal Consciousness

Jesus's radical reframing of family relations also serves as a broader critique of religion rooted in tribal loyalty, inherited identity, and social conformity. Traditional religious belonging often functions as a form of group identity—a way to distinguish “us” from “them,” reinforce egoic roles, and maintain inherited worldviews. But Jesus’s call points in another direction: toward an inner awakening that transcends boundaries of blood, tribe, and culture. Ultimately, we are all One.

This path is not about rejecting religion but transforming it—from a doctrinal static belief system into a *living experience of truth*. The kind of faith Jesus modeled is not about group allegiance; it’s about union with something deeper and more universal—what mystics across traditions have called *Oneness, the kingdom of heaven within, or universal consciousness*. Spiritual maturity has nothing to do with what group you belong to and everything to do with whether you recognize the truths imparted by Jesus and other mystics (see my paper “On Becoming a Mystic”).

A Universal Spiritual Theme

Jesus's teachings about family and identity are echoed in many spiritual traditions, suggesting that this conflict between familial loyalty and spiritual growth is a universal stage of human development.

- **Hebrew Scriptures:** God commands Abraham to leave his father’s house (Genesis 12:1), and the Levites are honored for placing divine duty above blood ties (Exodus 32:29).
- **Buddhism:** Siddhartha Gautama leaves behind his wife and newborn son in search of enlightenment. His path required renouncing familial attachments while cultivating compassion for all beings.

- **Hinduism:** The *Bhagavad Gita* teaches detachment from family expectations in the pursuit of spiritual duty (*dharma*), even when it causes familial conflict. The *Bhagavad Gītā* tells of Lord Krishna telling Arjuna that he must physically fight his own family, but “keep his heart at the lotus feet of lord,” or in other words stay equanimous even in action, and spiritually grounded.
- **Sufism (Islamic mysticism):** The path of *hijra*—leaving home and familiar surroundings—is seen as essential to inner transformation. Rumi writes, “Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?”

Across these traditions, the message is clear: true freedom often requires letting go of the identities and roles that keep us small—including those reinforced by family.

Psychological and Contemporary Relevance

Modern psychology confirms what Jesus intuited: spiritual development often involves a process of *individuation*—separating from parental expectations and social conditioning to discover a deeper, truer self. Jesus’s teachings speak directly to this inner movement.

For people raised in religious traditions they no longer fully resonate with, his example offers both validation and guidance. He invites us to honor our origins while pursuing the truth courageously, even when it leads us away from the beliefs of those we love. After all, the mere fact that we were born to particular parents does not make their beliefs true. To not acknowledge this is simply dogmatism.

This does not require hostility or estrangement. On the contrary, Jesus’s teachings point to a higher love—one rooted in truth and freedom rather than conformity and guilt. Family can still be loved deeply, even as we follow a different path.

And of course these teachings extend beyond family—to friends, colleagues, and anyone unable to embrace our spiritual growth.

Conclusion: A Call to Universal Love

Jesus’s radical message about family is not a rejection of love—it is a deeper, much more meaningful definition of it. He calls us to love not just our relatives, but truth itself. He invites us to risk misunderstanding, loneliness, and even rejection in order to live authentically. Indeed, this is what his life demonstrated.

His words are challenging because they speak to the deepest attachments we carry. But they are also liberating, reminding us that spiritual awakening is worth the cost. In redefining family, Jesus offers a new kind of belonging—one grounded not in blood, but in shared devotion to the universal divine.

For today’s spiritual seeker, his message is as vital as ever: Do not let fear of disappointing others keep you from your path. Honor your family, yes—but follow your soul. In doing so, you will discover freedom, a deeper, broader family, and a richer, more expansive form of love.