

If you weren't here last Sunday, or see in the midweek, the next few weeks we are doing a sermon series on
How do we show up?

In some Christian spaces, there is an emphasis on Christians gaining control over the different spheres of society. We've been talking about the Seven Mountain Mandate, which identifies family, religion, education, business, media, arts, and government as spheres of cultural influence. In its dominion-oriented expressions, the idea is that Christians are called to take authority over these areas and shape them according to their understanding of God's will.

Now full disclosure, I don't think domination is the call of the gospel, or God's intent for how we show up in the world. And yet if don't think we are supposed to dominate. Are we to be silent in these spheres of society? Or How do we show up? Those are the questions we are exploring today, and today we are going to think and talk about Family.

One thing this series has forced me to do is to pay attention to my assumptions, and the emotional reactions that are often immediate and subconscious.

Doug invited me to join him to attend a monthly Hispanic pastors group in town. So I did! To one connect as a fellow church in Statesville, and also to share some of the resources we have at the NC Council of Churches.

So there I was in a room of a male pastors, who were in suits and I was in my jeans and a nice shirt feeling a little underdressed. They had prepared snacks and were more than hospitable. The one pastor that seemed to be the convener and engaged with me the most, we talked for a while and in that conversation he told me he was doing a sermon series on family.

And immediately my defenses went up.

Then I noticed it-

Maybe that was the Holy Spirit. Maybe it was growing self-awareness. But I realized I was a female pastor in a room full of men, assuming—without evidence—that they led churches that wouldn't let women be pastors.

And yet all I had encountered was hospitality and respect.

Perhaps it was that hospitality that allowed me to respond with curiosity instead of skepticism.

Because I care deeply about family. I love my family. So much of my life revolves around them. Why, then, did a pastor mentioning a sermon series on family bring up that reaction? Why does hearing the name "Focus on the Family" make me squirm?

That window of curiosity has stayed with me.

I realized that I had become so accustomed to hearing the language of family used in faith contexts to draw boundaries and exercise control that I was bracing myself before this pastor had even told me what he meant.

That made me wonder: Have I become so concerned about how faith can be used to control families that I've become hesitant to say what faith can offer them?

That became the question I wanted to explore. How does Christianity show up in the sphere of family? How does our faith shape what we teach about families, which families we recognize, and how we help them flourish?

Because when a church says it values family, that should mean something for the people who encounter us. What can they expect from us? What do we have to offer?

Y'all, preparing for this sermon has been a doozy.

I decided I needed to spend some time listening to what other expressions of Christianity were saying about family, so I could get clearer about where we agree and where we differ. So I spent some time on the Focus on the Family website.

It said “You can help families thrive”

When you give today, you’ll build marriages that go the distance, equip parents to raise great kids and put Jesus Christ at the center of homes worldwide!

The further I read the more I felt unsettled, And I am even a white cis gendered mom married to white cis gendered man, and we have 2 children and a dog. Just missing the white picket fence.

Now, Focus on the Family and the Seven Mountain Mandate are not interchangeable. I’m not suggesting everyone who holds traditional beliefs about marriage endorses a theology of dominion. But reading their stated values helped me examine some of the assumptions that enter Christian conversations about family.

And I found something I could affirm: families help shape society. They nurture and educate the next generation.

Yes. That matters.

Now what I mean by that is, We enter this world dependent on other people. Someone has to feed us, hold us, comfort us, and keep showing up. In those relationships, we begin learning what care feels like, whether we belong, and how people treat one another.

As we grow, we learn from what happens around us. How do the people in our home handle disagreement? What happens when someone makes a mistake? Who carries the responsibilities? Whose needs get noticed? How do we treat people beyond our own household?

Those lessons travel with us into classrooms, workplaces, churches, and neighborhoods.

And this care continues across generations. We give it, and we need to receive it. The people who once cared for us may eventually need our care.

Families matter deeply. And families need help. Schools, congregations, friends, neighbors, and public institutions all share in the work of nurturing people. Families help communities flourish, and communities help families flourish.

But here is where I began to see a difference.

Recognizing how deeply families shape our lives can move us to support them. It can also tempt us to control them—to believe that securing society's future requires us to control families. The fear underneath that can become: if we lose control of the family, we lose control of what society will become.

I kept encountering this idea of "God's design for the family. What does that actually mean?

Some teachings describe God's design is one man and one women to be married for life. The man is the head of the household. And they raise their children making sure they follow the Christian way. That arrangement is understood to be what God intends.

When I think about what God desires for families, I think about relationships where people are committed to giving and receiving care, taking responsibility for one another, across generations and beyond biology.

Now, people who hold that first understanding would also say love and care matter. There is real agreement here.

Where I begin to differ is when one arrangement becomes the standard by which every other family is judged.

Because I believe faithful family life takes many forms. in single-parent families, families with two moms or two dads, blended and adoptive families, and relationships of committed care beyond biology.

God's love can be practiced and encountered in these families. Their commitments have goodness and sacredness of their own.

And I want to pay attention to what we mean by sacred.

To me, that means something of our relationship with God is lived out in how we care for one another. These people matter to God. The promises we make matter. What happens in our homes matters.

Calling family sacred gives us a reason to pay closer attention to the lives within it.

Families pass on traditions, convictions, and ways of living. That matters. There are things I deeply hope my children learn from me.

But what happens when preserving our expectations conflicts with the needs, gifts, or conscience of someone we love? When their life takes a direction we didn't anticipate?

Are we helping people grow into love and responsibility—including the ability to think, discern, and sometimes challenge us? Can they do that and still know they belong?

I understand why that can be hard. When we love people, there is so much we cannot guarantee. We cannot protect them from every hurt. We cannot make every decision for them. And sometimes we may hope that if we can just get everyone to follow the right path, we can keep them safe.

But our concern needs examination too.

When we attach God's authority to every expectation we hold, disagreeing with us can get treated as disagreeing with God. It becomes harder for someone to ask a question, name harm, or tell us something we need to hear.

Every family needs to examine how it loves and how it uses power. Having the expected family structure doesn't answer those questions for us. We answer them through the way we treat one another.

And I think underneath this is a question about how we read Scripture.

Sometimes we come to the Bible looking for the rules. Tell me what a family is supposed to look like. Tell me who is in charge. Tell me what to do so I can get this right.

I understand wanting that clarity.

But when I read Scripture, I encounter people trying to live faithfully in the middle of complicated lives. There are marriages and children, widows and people who never marry. There is loyalty and generosity, and there is favoritism, betrayal, grief, and reconciliation.

There are commands, too. We are given responsibilities toward one another. But we still have to discern how to live them out.

So when I turn to Scripture with questions about family, I want to pay attention to all of that. What is being asked of these people? Where are they faithful? Where do they cause harm? What does care require in their circumstances—and what might it require in ours?

And that's part of why this story of Jesus and his family in Mark is so interesting to me.

Jesus' mother and brothers arrive at the house where a crowd has gathered around him. They stand outside and send word asking for him. Earlier in the chapter, his family has gone out to restrain him amid claims that he is out of his mind.

We aren't told everything they are thinking. But we can see that Jesus' calling has created tension within his family.

Then Jesus asks who his mother and brothers are. Looking at the people sitting around him, he identifies those who do God's will as his family.

That is a startling response. His relatives' relationship to him does not give them the final word over his calling. And the people gathered around him are being invited into a relationship that carries the weight of kinship.

I hear a challenge in both directions.

The people closest to us have real claims on our care. Yet loving them does not mean we possess their lives or determine their calling.

And our care must reach beyond our own household. Jesus is gathering a wider family. Calling one another family gives us responsibilities toward one another.

So how does our faith shape what we teach about families, which families we recognize, and how we help them flourish?

I think some of the work in our communities is learning to hold a both/and.

Sometimes we get so caught up in reacting against a narrow understanding of family that we don't say clearly enough what we do value. And sometimes we become so protective of what we value that we have trouble recognizing goodness anywhere else.

We can celebrate a lifelong marriage between a man and a woman and celebrate the love and sacred commitments of a marriage between two men or two women. Honoring one doesn't diminish the other.

We can believe marriage is worth tending, that promises matter, and that people deserve help keeping them. And we can recognize that sometimes a marriage ends, sometimes separation is necessary, and the people involved still deserve dignity, care, and belonging.

We can acknowledge how demanding single parenting can be and recognize single-parent families as whole families, with love, wisdom, and gifts of their own. Needing support does not make a family less than. Every family needs support.

We can celebrate parenting and the work of nurturing the next generation and recognize that people who don't have children lead full, faithful lives. They, too, give and receive care, nurture others, and belong.

We can treasure the bonds of biology and recognize the depth of family relationships formed through adoption, marriage, friendship, and years of showing up for one another.

We can teach our children convictions that matter deeply to us and make room for their questions, their conscience, and their growing ability to discern. Their belonging in our family cannot depend on agreeing with us about everything.

And we can call family sacred and still examine what happens within it. We can ask questions, name harm, and expect accountability. Taking those relationships seriously gives us a reason to do that.

Holding these things together takes some practice. It asks us to pay attention to actual people and actual relationships. To honor the goodness we know in our own lives and remain open to recognizing it in someone else's.

Because I do believe our faith has something to say.

So what does that mean for how we show up as Christians in our shared public life?

It means that when we speak about family, we need to pay attention to whose families we are speaking about. Whose commitments are we recognizing? Whose losses concern us? Whose needs are we willing to take seriously?

Our concern for families needs to include immigrant families, families living in poverty, families with two moms or two dads, single-parent families, and families whose religious beliefs differ from ours.

Their lives matter. Their care for one another matters. And that needs to have consequences for how we show up.

If we say families are foundational to society, then we need to care about the conditions in which they are trying to live.

Those are family questions. They belong in our conversations about family values.

Now I realize that there is so much more to say, but that will have to wait for another day. And perhaps at some point I will do a series on “family”. But I want to offer space for any reflections or questions from you... as we think about what does our faith have to offer to how we approach “family”