

Has family become an idol?

The Bible gives no sense that the family is an end in itself.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [January 1, 2020](#) issue

I've been keeping my eye on a cultural trend: love of family is fast becoming an idolatry. My observation is based more on hunch than on scientific research, but nevertheless there are signs that devotion to family is in some quarters a religion in its own right, with family the object of ultimate allegiance.

The self-enclosed or ingrown nature of many families—where all dreams and expectations are wrapped up in family togetherness—means that one's absence from a family activity is perceived as serious insult. Miss the nephew's soccer game, skip a cousin's birthday party, pass on watching Sunday Night Football together with the extended family, and you've essentially broken ranks. You've disrespected the tightness of the family bond.

Family affection and togetherness is lovely. A healthy family system is where we learn unconditional love. It's an ideal laboratory for navigating relationships and learning where we fit and how we express ourselves. But the object of parenting should be to raise kids who don't just serve the family but who move beyond it.

The scriptures give us no sense that the family is an end in itself. Isn't one of the chief purposes of family to teach us to turn outward toward others? If you love only those who love you, Jesus said one time, what credit is that to you? In other words, so what! There's nothing noble about spending all your energies of love on those closest to you or on those easiest and coziest to love.

A recent Pew Research survey confirms my hunch. The number one source to which Americans look for meaning and fulfillment in their lives is the family. In fact, when it comes to those activities that provide a great deal of meaning and fulfillment, religious faith falls far behind spending time with family, being outdoors, caring for pets, and listening to music. No wonder funeral eulogies often saturate listeners with

the deceased person's adoration of family.

In the Gospels, the family is always secondary to Christ's claim on his followers. Jesus never asks us to choose him over the devil; he asks us to choose him over the family. This message is hard for many believers to swallow. What Jesus implies is that fixating on love of family will not make one a disciple. It may even get perilously in the way.

Jesus creates a new concept of family, one based not on blood but on love in action. "Woman, behold your son . . . [and] son behold your mother," he said to his mother and beloved disciple at the cross. Elsewhere, he referred to those who do "the will of my Father in heaven" as those who are his "brother and sister and mother."

What's going on in these and other utterances? Jesus is dethroning the biological family and asking us to transcend our genealogy and clan enough to become members of a larger family of faith.

Family can be a beautiful means to even greater affections. But when it becomes an end in itself, our availability to and for others shrinks dramatically. That makes for a very small religion.

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