

## Lies of Little Gods - Even Your Best Calling

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Matthew 8:18-22

*Now when Jesus saw great crowds<sup>[a]</sup> around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. A scribe then approached and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Another of his disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." Matthew 8:18-22 (NRSV)*

My only regret this morning is that you all did not remain standing, and we see what you pulled out of your sleeve. That piece we just heard, that offertory, I don't know if you noticed in your bulletin, but that was a world premiere. St. Luke's commissioned that for our chancel choir, that piece, and it was stunning, and thank you too, Molly, for that beautiful clarinet. That was awesome to hear.

Let's pray. *God, I pray that the words, the message that you have for us this morning, will be something that each of us needs to be heard and that our hearts might be softened and open to it in the way that we need. We love you and we pray this in your name. Amen.*

I'm not sure if you use the Safari or web browser app on your phone in the same way I do, but I use all of those individual little tabs to remind myself of things. If I see something that I want to research further I'll open up Safari, open a tab up and put it in. And look at it and save it for later. When I see a product, I'm interested in I do the same. Something I want to buy or something I'm thinking about buying, and I kind of want to wait on. There's some event that I hear about, and I just want to look it up. I open up the information in the tab. So, the other day I had this vague notion that I might have researched something - I was trying to remember something, I was trying to figure out something. I thought maybe it will be one of the tabs in my browser. I opened up the Safari app on my phone and looked through them and it took me a minute because I had 50 tabs open.

My friends, my brain does not hold space there's no way I'm interested in 50 things. Let me be frank: I don't have room for 50 pieces of interest, so I'm going through and clearing out and deleting a bunch of stuff that sort of expired in my mind. And here's something I found that surprised, well, actually shocked me or shook me. This is something I found. It's that many or most of the tabs were about parenting. They were about how to get your two-year-old to sleep later in the morning. They were about what she should pack in school lunches. They were about how to get your kid interested in reading. They were about events or activities coming up - where to take your kids on the weekend in Houston. Five of them were about how to add vegetables in dinners. Five different recipes with hidden vegetables in them.

I am not ashamed to tell you that I want to be the best parent I can be. But I'd be ashamed to admit to you that I care more about being a parent and that I love my family more than God. So, I'm not saying that out loud to you, but I wonder what my life would say? If you looked at my life, if you looked at your own life, I wonder what it would say about you. My calendar, my time, if you could see inside my brain my preoccupations, worries, and obsessions, they would say that I'm good at making idols. And one of the idols I've made is family.

Tom and Colin, over the last couple of weeks, have lifted up this quote by the Reform theologian John Calvin, where he said, "Our hearts are perpetual idol factories." Our hearts make idols. Anything that pleases you more than God is an idol. But anything you aim to please more than God is also an idol. It's a natural inclination for us to make idols out of the things in our hearts. That's partially how we're built in our nature. And we can do that with anything, even the best things. Even the things that we sort of think of as holy - like family.

And families are a good and awesome thing. God put us in families for a reason. I deeply believe that at the beginning of creation, God made a family, and then at the beginning of Israel, God used a family to bring that people about. God made them into a family, and there are all kinds of things in Scripture written in the Old and New Testaments about how we are to be with our children, our spouses, our siblings, our extended family, and our parents. But whenever we have a family, whether it's our biological family or our chosen family, as many of us have, we tend to take those people and put them first and foremost in our lives. That they are the most important thing to us. And when we put anything, when we put a good thing, and we make it a main thing, the problem is that we edge God out of things.

You might remember the story of Samuel the prophet. He was raised in a temple by Eli. His mother gave him to the temple - to God - and Eli raised him. But alongside two of Eli's own sons, Eli had two wayward boys who took advantage of women, who stole the best offerings, and who were greedy. And Eli just let them run wild. He let them get away with all of this stuff, and finally, God confronts Eli. He says, "Why do you honor your sons more than me?" (1 Samuel 2:29). That's a haunting question for us. Why do you honor your sons more than me?

I can't speak for Eli, but I can tell you that there are a number of things in our culture, in our context now, that cause us to honor our families more than God. I wonder if you might recognize yourself in any of these things.

Your family is an idol when what is most important to you is having a family, when you believe that they are all you need. Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, described idols as "whatever you look and say in your heart of hearts if I have that [such as family] If I have a family, then I will feel my life has meaning. Then I know that I'll have value, and I'll feel significant and secure."

There's a pervasive sense that having a family means you have unlocked some level of achievement. Tom talked about this last week when he mentioned that when we go to our 20th high school reunion, we tend to do the assessment of others. We look at them and say, how professionally successful are they? Does it look like they're doing well financially? Are they still beautiful? Do they have a family?

There were two studies in late 17 that the Pew Research Center did about what means giving and fulfillment to Americans. In one of the studies, they asked folks an open-ended question: "What brings you meaning and fulfillment in your life?" And there were many answers. Then, they asked, in a second study in which they gave 15 close-ended options. They said, "Of these things that might bring meaning and fulfillment, rank them. From most important to least important." In both of the studies, no matter how they asked the question, things like caring for your pet, being with friends, traveling, and even working all ranked similarly for people in bringing meaning and fulfillment. Far and away, the most common answer was that 40% of people said that their family brings them the most meaning and fulfillment in life. Half of that - 20% - said it was their faith that brings them the most meaning and fulfillment. Then, the other answers were scattered below that. There is a consensus in our culture that having a family,

whatever it looks like, whatever phase of life you are in, but having those chosen people, a biological family around you is what brings you the most meaning and fulfillment.

The thing is, the problem with that is that families are not only not the key to our meaning and fulfillment to our happiness but they're not even a requirement for it. Because if you put all of your eggs in the basket of family bringing you your meaning and fulfillment, friends, we're going to be disappointed if we do that. And it will not take us long. We won't have to wait long. We are finite, we are fallible, we are flawed, and we are bound to disappoint each other. Our families are bound to disappoint us. We are bound to disappoint them. We may have made family an idol in our lives if not only do we believe that they are all we need, but that we are all they need.

How many of us think, "Oh, they will find meaning and fulfillment in me if I am the perfect wife. If I am the perfect mother or perfect child, or the perfect sister. If I can anticipate every problem that may arise and meet it with a solution. If I can take care of every need that they have. If I can solve every problem." And we wouldn't necessarily admit that about ourselves, but one look at our lives finds us as the chief problem solvers, caretakers, and need-meeters for our kids and maybe for adult kids. That could and frankly should do much of this. For parents aging, parents are still capable, but we need them to need us, so we've created a situation where we are in the midst of everything so that they need us so that we can be their fulfillment.

Or maybe you recognize this in your family. Your family has become an idol if the thing you care most about is their success. Their achievement or even perfection. We all want, of course, to have kids that do great on tests. We want our child to be the first in their class to read or at least not the last to read. We want them to be piano virtuosos or competitive tennis players. So we over plan and over the program and over schedule and over subscribe our families. Because isn't a performance-driven mindset the key to success? Isn't that how we will find meaning and fulfillment if we make sure that everyone in our family is achieving the best they can? Is the most successful. Too bad that becomes our entire identity. All of our worth.

Or maybe you have experienced when somebody has things going on in their lives that are not... let me do it this way... maybe when things have not been going great in your life, but you have needed this sense of perfection for others. So when people say to you, "How are you doing?" you can't let them see the crack in the facade, and you say, "Great! Fine!" No matter

how many bad things are happening or how much you're struggling with, everything's great! Your family is an idol if you need others to think it's perfect.

And hear this – the idol of a perfect family will steal joy from a good one. The idol of having a perfect family will steal the joy you can have from having a good family. Your family is an idol if they must be protected at all costs. If they can never be hurt. If they can never be frustrated, if they can never be disappointed. If no one in your family ever experiences anger or frustration or disappointment, then everything's good, right? They're good, they're protected.

If you have a child or someone in your family, someone who's struggling with addiction, and you continue to protect them, to become the buffer between them and their consequences, and you jump in to save them to cover for them. If you have a child who does something at school, and there's a natural consequence to whatever they did, you call the principal to get them out of it. If you call the principal to prevent that consequence, and you're a buffer, and people are not feeling the ache of what happens in life, the natural disappointment the frustration that comes. Your family and the protection of your family is an idol.

And here's the sad news. If people aren't able to develop their reactions to that on their own, if they're not able to face those things they can't ever develop the muscles to deal with it. But what they're not doing as well, they're not interfacing with God directly. Because you've become this buffer between them and problems, they're not having to face their problems because you're dealing with them, so they don't cry out to God. They don't develop their own faith muscles. When we buffer our families too much, we prevent them from actually growing in their own faith.

Your family is an idol if you care more about your desires than about God's desires. If you care so much about your desire for safety for your family you hesitate or maybe don't even roll down the window to give food to a homeless person if your kids are in the car. Your desire for protection is more important than God's desire. I ask myself this. If I don't roll down the window when the kids are in the car, I say, "How am I forming these kids into people who will care about other vulnerable people?" And I'm not forming them if I'm so much more obsessed with my own concern for their safety past reasonable amounts.

If you care a lot that your child is excellent at volleyball so you sign them up for a travel team that's going to be gone every single Sunday instead of bringing them to church. Instead of

prioritizing this time as a family, getting them involved in student ministries, you might care more about your desires than God's.

If you want your child to be independent and financially successful, you encourage them every summer to take an internship at a bank instead of spending time on mission trips or serving the people in their community. You might care more about your idol, of your desires rather than God's.

Even Mary, the mother of Jesus, struggled with this. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, she went from encouraging him to do a miracle at Cana at Galilee of turning water into wine to when things got hard when he was being sought out by the Pharisees and the Romans and his life was in danger. To coming to find him in the crowd and calling out to him because she wanted him to come home. Because she wanted him to be protected because she cared more about her desires than about God's desires.

All of these things, having a family and being needed by our family, seeing them be successful, be protected. These are good things. The problem is when we make them the main thing. When we get them out of order. We have to figure out how to put things in the right order. We need to re-order our lives so that God is first. Our Scripture for today might sound harsh at first reading. "Let the dead bury the dead." But I want to give us some context to understand this. When people in Jesus' day would say, "But let me bury my father," they weren't talking necessarily about having a dead father that they had to go bury. They might have had someone who was alive and well, parents who were alive and well. What they're saying is, "Let me live out the rest of this part of my life. Let me live until my father is dead and take care of his estate, bury him and take care of all that, and then I'll be free to come and follow you. And this comes right after Jesus has just said, "I have nowhere to lay my head." He's saying, no, discipleship is more than that. It's not about comfort. It's not about your own timeline. It's not about all of these things that you think would make you happy so then you can come follow me. I called you so come, follow me. Do it now. Do it in this way. Do it as a priority.

In Matthew 22, when Jesus is challenged, and they say to him, the lawyer says to him, "Master, which of these is the greatest commandment?" And Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength. And the second is like it – love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang all of the law and all the prophets." Jesus is ordering our love. He's putting things in the right order for us. God is the one who orders our

disordered love. It is good to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is good for family to honor them, to be kind to them, to raise them up, but we have to do it with God first. And when God touches all of our other loves, it's not competing; it's not that they're pushed out of the way, so they aren't a part of our lives, and they're not important. But it just reframes and reshapes how we love other things. We love from a different well.

I want you to do this. Picture in your mind a big round table with seats all around the table. And you place the things that you love at each seat. Your family, your friends, your job, your neighborhood, your hobbies, and your pets and traveling. All of the things that are meaningful to you that you love. Where's God sitting? Do you have God between golf and your pet? God doesn't want to be at a seat at the table. Picture it this way: God is the centerpiece. If you have this beautiful floral centerpiece right in the middle, that is God. And here's the thing: from every seat, you see that centerpiece. But what's more, the view from every seat is changed because of it.

You can't help but look out from the seat of your family, the seat of your golf game and from the seat of your pet and your friends without seeing God. And without God changing your entire view. We re-order our loves so that we can love better. When we have a centerpiece things are better.

Ben Johnson was a Renaissance playwright who was a contemporary of Shakespeare. He is famously quoted as saying, "I love and admire Shakespeare just this side of idolatry." That's where we're meant to get with all of these things, especially our family. We're not to cast them aside, but we need to love them this side of idolatry. How do we do that?

If you're a parent, let me talk specifically to you for a moment. But many of you might recognize this in yourself, how you parented, or have wisdom for others. In 1990, there was a seminal book published called *Parenting of Love and Logic*, which contained marvelous information on how to parent and discipline. Much of our children's ministry programming is based on a lot of that work. But they were the first to identify the authors of this book and were the first to identify what we now call "Helicopter parenting." You've heard of this. It's the parent who hovers over their child, who watches everything they do. They're overbearing. They're mindful of everything that is happening that they can see under their child. Later that decade, a style of parenting was identified called, "The Tiger Parent." That's the one that pushes their child to be the best. The most successful. Best academically and best with extracurriculars. And then a

few years later, the style of parenting was identified as “The Lawnmower Parents”. So, these are the people who go ahead of their child. They mow down everything in their path. They mow down all the obstacles, all the hurdles, anything that can be hard or painful. They mow it down and get it out of the way.

Or maybe you’re familiar with “Sheepdog Parents.” The people who go behind their kids and nip and bite to keep them in line. Maybe sometimes painfully, kind of fussing or nagging at them. To keep them in line. Keep them to do certain things. Keep them in order in that way.

I want to propose a different way. I want to propose a way that I think God would have us parent – to be shepherd parents. Actually, to be shepherd family members. I don’t think this is just about parenting; this is about any type of family relationship that you have with a sibling, a parent, or a spouse. With extended family or your chosen family. A shepherd is the one who chooses the pasture where the sheep are going to graze and then leads them to it. This is where I aim for us to go, and I’m going to go in that direction, and I’m going to lead you along with me.

Remember how the Lord is described as a shepherd in the 23rd Psalm. “He leadeth me beside still waters, he leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” So as parents, as family members, as shepherds, when we lead other people to the thing we want them to graze on, we’re not controlling them, we’re not saying if you don’t do my way, it’s the highway. We’re not trying to manage every aspect of it. What are we leading them to? Where do we want our kids and our families to graze? I want them to graze on Jesus. I want to lead them to Jesus.

The most important thing to me is that my kids grow up to live and love like Jesus. And if I want my kids to love Jesus more than anything, I have to love Jesus more than anything. You cannot fake an intimate relationship with God. For anyone, but especially not your kids, who will see through all of this. If my idol is a family that has achievement and success and is protected at all costs and is the most important thing in the world then that will rub off. On them, it will rub off on the people around me. If my idol is anything other than God, it is going to shape everyone around me. But if the most important thing in the world to me is my relationship with Jesus, then I’m inevitably going to pour that out on everything else that I do. And it will rub off on everyone else around me; it’ll rub off on my kids, my parents, my siblings, and my extended family. It’ll rub off on all of the people around me.

And can you imagine if we were an entire community of people who loved God more than anything who loved God more than the idols of money or of work or our families and of the



opinions of others how that might shape and transform all of the people around us. All of the people in our community. All the people in Houston. May it be so.

*God, I give you thanks for all of the good things that you have given us. For our families especially. For the love that you have instilled in us for them and them for us. God, I pray that you would bless us and our families so that we may go out and be a blessing to others. But I pray that you would keep it in the right order. That we might keep our eyes ever focused on you so that we then overflow with your love and your grace and then that spills out to everything else around us. We pray all of this in your name, Amen.*