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Introduction

Jesus is speaking to an audience very familiar with the idea of the 'household' in a society where the reputation of individuals was interlinked with the reputation of the household to which they belonged. The concept of 'household' included slaves, servants and retainers who may not have all physically lived under a single roof, but shared a duty to a particular master. Each individual in a household had a joint responsibility for the reputation of the others, and a duty to behave well themselves. The head of the household was usually a senior male and his reputation would also reflect on the household members. Equally an insult paid to the head of the household would be an insult to all the members. Gossip was particularly powerful in building or destroying reputations and people were aware of the power of the spoken word to bring another down, or build their reputation up.

Does this code of ethics seem distant to us today? Is it too gendered? Or perhaps too structured? Where would we encounter an idea of shared reputation In our society? In a workplace? In a school? Do we still have this idea in our family structures? Do other families in our neighbourhood? How do shared reputations feed into conflict? Do some members or a community have a right to control the behaviour of others? Could a pastor censure her flock in a church setting? Or a head master suggest that pupils wearing a particular school uniform had a duty to reflect the values of the school? What happens when we rebel?

Text

Matthew 10:24-39

“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny

before my Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. 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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Comment

‘A disciple is not above the teacher.’ For the audience in Jesus’ day the concept of household, with a head of the household whose word would carry, and whose advice would be sought, was a very common social model. Many businesses were ‘household’ businesses, with the slaves who brought economic prosperity living with their masters as part of a wider social group. For teachers, students would often leave their family home to live in with their teacher and form a new ‘household’ of learning, just as apprentices would move to live with their masters.

In this social system, if religious leaders or others ascribed to Jesus the power of the devil, or said that his good was in fact powered by evil, then these insults would also apply to his disciples equally, but perhaps more damagingly as the disciples had less social standing on their own behalf than the teacher had.
‘Have no fear of them’ Jesus says, by fearing the people who would call God ‘Beelzebul’, the disciples would be giving credence to their lies:

‘What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.’

Given the context of the importance of reputation, and the damaging nature of gossip – what is Jesus saying to his audience in this statement about dark and light? To speak a lie in the open is to call it into question. Truth bears the light better than lies and gossip. Conflict is unavoidable between the disciples and those who wish to bring them down. It is a conflict which Jesus suggests the disciples fight in the light, even shout from the rooftops. This command from Jesus to head into conflict rather than avoid it, to actively be the voice declaring the lies to be lies from the rooftops, for some people is an easy choice, but for others it can be very counter-intuitive.

If we feel that we are unworthy, then Jesus has an answer, the worth of a sparrow is known to God, so we are valued much more than the sparrows. One must decide whether Jesus is speaking here metaphorically or literally – the slaves of a household had indeed a monetary value, a price upon their head, just like the sparrows in the market, and each would know their worth, a market Jesus knew well, but now alien to us – perhaps because generations before ours were willing to speak for justice from the rooftops.

There is also here the reciprocity of the household system, the ‘economy’ – a word which comes from the Greek word for home or household. If a disciple, a household member, acknowledges their place in the household, Jesus will honour this by acknowledging them. A simple two-way relationship of belonging which would be comfortable and familiar. Denial of Jesus by his followers will also lead to a denial of those followers by Jesus. In all of this we can imagine the listeners to Christ hearing a familiar message in a family structure made up of ‘households’ which gives an accessible meaning to his building of this new household of Christ, the economy of the gospel.

If the audience around Jesus was now in a place of comfort and familiarity the concluding ideas would blow this apart decisively.

‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be

members of one's own household.'

It is as if he has just taken that harmonious model of household, familiar and socially acceptable, and thrown it back in their faces. A hammer blow to the listening disciples – it had seemed until this point that the values of the family unit, containing students, slaves, and family members, were the values of the kingdom itself, but now Jesus reveals the opposite, the values of the kingdom will make each of us re-write what we consider to be a 'happy family'.

Jesus tears down the myth of the 'happy family' and replaces those comfortable rules of household membership with the radical rules of being a follower of Christ, a person of the way, a member of a new household which is eternal, and which may not translate easily into the social groups prevalent in Jesus' day. Steering into conflict is just that, a deliberate speaking out of truth which may not be acceptable to those in our own family relationships, or in our wider 'households' however we understand that term in our modern society. Just as in other places Jesus uses the concept of Kingdom in a radically new way; he takes the idea of the oikos, or household, and reworks it in an eternal and spiritual new truth which is in fact a challenge to the household structure, rather than an affirmation of a social norm. There is no softening for the audience, if they try to save themselves, or their households in this life, then they will lose the eternal life they seek in Christ.

Response

What have you heard 'whispered in darkness' which might be better shouted from the rooftops? Is there an issue, or injustice, to which you could lend your voice? How would your voice be heard? Why not investigate Amnesty International, *** or *** to see if there is some way you could lend your voice to the good priorities of Christ's household on earth?

OR

The metaphor of family is often used today where in Jesus' day the idea of 'household' once functioned. What are the differences between modern family groups and the ancient idea of a household? What are the similarities? The cliché that a person should do 'anything' for his or her family often underpins movies and TV shows – in reality, though, we often have reason to have a more complex relationship with our earthly families and sometimes effectively include within a wider 'household' friends or colleagues who are closer to us than some family members. Why not draw two diagrams, one of your biological or adopted 'family' and another of the wider grouping that might be described as your modern day 'household' – do the values of the Kingdom of Christ challenge either of these pictures? In what way?

Prayer

'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.'

God of the shining sword,
Of the Angels of ethical war
God of conflict and division
Of the Matyrs and saints

We come today full of contrition

For the conflicts we have avoided
The days we have saved our own skin
Put our own family first, justified ourselves.

We lay before you the trouble conscience
The worried mind, the anxious heart
Which is the fruit of such self-preservation
The high cost of valuing others less than sparrows.

Making peace a God, we have bought only self-delusion.
Where conflict is needed to cry your kingdom
From the rooftops, we have instead whispered
In the dark corridors of power, brokered
Compromises and dissatisfaction in the corners of the night.

Forgive us the stale air of conflict without conviction,
The tired campaign, the heartless hope extended without
Proper thought or care. The shallow commitment, easily
Seen through, the expressed desire to follow
Christ which fails in denial or in lack of action.

Forgive us, for we are truly sorry
Forgive us for we long to be worthy of your Household
Forgive us, for we wish to work for the economy of the Gospel.

Thanks be to you, merciful God, who counts each hair
Upon our heads, and loves each one,
Who values each of us and welcomes us home
To your Household.

AMEN