

Dr. David A. deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 5, Family and Household , Podcast Audio Summary

Sponsored by [Biblicalelearning.org](https://www.biblicalelearning.org) by Ted Hildebrandt

All right. Strap yourselves in. We're going deep on family and household in the New Testament.

Oh, this is going to be good. I know, right? Yeah. We're using Dr. David De Silva's lecture on the cultural world of the New Testament.

And get this. Yeah. It's not just about like who lived under the same roof.

Right. It's about like a totally different worldview. Absolutely.

One of the things that is so fascinating about the ancient world is that lineage was like the most important thing. Oh, yeah. It was like almost a combination of your DNA and your social security number.

And your credit score. And your credit score all rolled into one. Yeah.

And so it wasn't simply about bloodlines, but your lineage determined your place in society, your honor, even your access to opportunities. So it's not enough to just like know who your great-grandparents were. It's that connection that gives you a certain standing.

It gives you credibility. In the community. Yeah.

That's a great way to put it. Think about it like this. You wouldn't lend money to somebody that you didn't know, right? Right.

And so in the ancient world, knowing somebody's lineage was kind of like having a credit report on their family. It's true. So that makes a lot of sense.

It's like, oh, okay. I can trust you because- you come from good stock. Yes.

Good people. Yes. And so Dr. DeSilva uses a great example from the book of Tobit, where Tobit's sending his son to buy us on a journey and he needs to find him a traveling companion.

Okay. So how does he do that? Does he just like post on ancient Craigslist or something? Not quite. He actually grills this potential companion, Azariah, about his lineage before entrusting him with his son.

That's pretty intense. So lineage was the ultimate marker of trustworthiness. Absolutely.

Yeah. If your family had a reputation for integrity, you were good to go. But if there were some skeletons in the family closet, let's just say you probably weren't going to get very far.

Yeah. Your travel plans might be on hold. That's so interesting.

But this isn't just in like these kind of obscure corners of the ancient text. You see this emphasis on lineage in the gospels too, right? Absolutely. Think about how Matthew starts his gospel with a genealogy.

And it might seem like a boring way to start the story of Jesus, but for Matthew's audience, this was prime real estate. Oh, I see what you're saying. He's connecting Jesus directly to the promises made to Abraham and David, showing his rightful claim as their heir.

Like, look, this is the real deal. That's it. That's it.

You can almost hear Matthew saying, see, this is legit. I love how he even uses numerology too to drive home the point. Oh, yeah.

Tell me about it. The name David equals 14 in Hebrew. And guess what? There are 14 generations listed in the genealogy.

It's not an accident. Not an accident. Matthew's audience would have picked up on that right away.

It's this kind of literary wink emphasizing Jesus's royal lineage and his messianic credentials. It's like a little secret code almost. Right.

I love it. All right. So we've established that lineage is a big deal, but Dr. DeSilva also points out that kinship wasn't always just about who you were related to by blood.

Like shared values and goals could create strong bonds too. This is so interesting because even the Greeks, who weren't all related by blood, considered themselves kin compared to barbarians. Barbarians.

They shared a culture; they shared a way of life, and that set them apart, and it bound them together. Oh, so this is how they kind of decided who was in and who was out. You got it.

Yeah. It was all about these shared values and rituals that were crucial for maintaining that sense of identity and belonging. And then for the Jews, especially those who are living in the diaspora, scattered throughout the Roman world, this sense of kinship must have been even stronger.

Because imagine you're surrounded by all these different cultures, different religions; you'd cling even tighter to your own traditions, your shared heritage. Absolutely. So this emphasis on kinship helped preserve their identity in the midst of all this diversity.

Okay. But here's where it gets really interesting. Yeah.

Jesus kind of comes in, and he challenges this whole idea of who's in and who's out. He does. You're right.

He consistently emphasizes the larger family of Abraham. He urges his followers to see each other as brothers and sisters. Regardless of their differences, their social standing.

It's radical. Radical. Yeah.

Especially in a world that was so obsessed with lineage and social boundaries. Totally. He's turning everything upside down.

Yeah. He's like, forget your family tree. We're building a family forest.

That's a great way to put it. Yeah. And he backs this up with his actions.

He heals the crippled woman who is this marginalized figure in society and calls her a daughter of Abraham, bringing her back into the fold. Yeah. And then you've got the story of Zacchaeus.

Oh, yeah. The tax collector. Yeah.

The tax collector. Now, tax collectors, they were despised. They were seen as collaborators with the Roman Empire.

Not cool. But Jesus sees something different in him. He does.

He sees this change of heart, this desire for something more. Yeah. And so he welcomes him into this new kind of family.

He calls him a son of Abraham, too. He's totally redefining what it means to be a family. He is.

Instead of reinforcing the existing social hierarchy, Jesus is creating this new kind of community based on compassion- forgiveness. Shared faith. Yeah.

Okay. So we've talked about lineage. We've talked about kinship.

Right. Now, let's get into the nitty-gritty. All righty.

Let's talk about the rules of the game, the ethos of kinship. The ethos of kinship. So within these kinship groups, there was a whole different set of ethical expectations.

Different rules for different folks. Kind of, yeah. You know how the ancient world was so competitive? Yeah.

Like a constant struggle for resources. Totally. Well, within your family, you're supposed to look out for each other.

Oh, interesting. Okay. Work together.

So it's every man for himself out there in the Roman Forum. Pretty much. But within your family, it's like all for one and one for all.

You got it. And sibling bonds, especially, were held up as like the ideal of friendship. They were.

They were expected to share values, resources, and always have each other's backs. It's this radical departure from that kind of dog-eat-dog mentality of the broader culture. So this idea of unity and mutual support, that's what eventually becomes this defining characteristic of early Christian communities.

Exactly. Exactly. But there's also this idea that sibling rivalry could be pretty intense, too.

Right. Like Jacob and Esau. Yeah.

Like Jacob and Esau. And Dr. DeSilva mentioned this concept called Cadmean victory. Cadmean victory? What is that? So Cadmean victory refers to a situation where siblings fight each other.

And even if one wins, there's no real victory. The cost of the conflict is so high, the damage to the family so great, that it overshadows any potential gains. It's a lose-lose situation.

It is. It is. It's a cautionary tale.

A reminder. A reminder that true strength lies in unity, not in division. And you can actually see echoes of this idea in the way that Paul addresses conflicts within the Corinthian church.

He does. He constantly reminds them that they are brothers and sisters in Christ, that their unity is more important than their individual differences. Powerful stuff.

So Cadmean victory is this warning about the destructive potential of infighting. Absolutely. All right.

So we've covered lineage, kinship, ethos. Now let's get into the structure of the ancient household itself. Okay.

How did it differ from our modern family units? Well, it was definitely a lot more than just a place to live. It was more like a mini factory. A mini factory.

It's like a center of production, as well as consumption. So not just leave it to Beaver, but more like leave it to the looms. Exactly.

Aristotle actually defines the household as this minimum unit with the husband, father, master at the center. But it wasn't just about him lounging around while everyone else did the work. Right.

Right. He was responsible for managing the household's resources, making sure it was productive, and maintaining its reputation. So he was like the CEO of a small family business.

Yes. And speaking of family business, Jesus grew up in a craftsman's household. His family probably worked together, contributing to the family trade.

Yeah. And we see this in other households mentioned in the Gospels, too. You've got Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, who were fishermen, and then the sons of Zebedee, too.

And it wasn't just the men. Women and children would have been involved in various tasks, mending nets, preparing food for market. Wow.

It's fascinating to picture all this activity, you know, like a hive of industry happening under one roof. And it wasn't just happening in people's homes. Dr. DeSilva mentions this amazing archaeological find in Magdala, which was this fishing town on the Sea of Galilee.

And they uncovered this industrial area within a household structure dedicated to drying and preserving fish. Can you imagine the smell? I can only imagine. It changes our whole perception of the ancient household.

It wasn't just about domestic life. It was this place of economic activity, a vital part of the ancient economy. So everyone's pitching in, working together for the common good.

Yeah. But we can't ignore the fact that the ancient world was undeniably patriarchal. The husband, father, master, held ultimate authority over everybody in a household.

Aristotle even compares the father's rule over his children and slaves to that of an absolute monarch. Wow. That's some serious power.

But I'm guessing this didn't always make for the happiest of homes. So what about marriage? Well, you know, marriages back then were a far cry from what we see on reality TV today. It wasn't about finding your soulmate on a deserted island.

Marriages were often arranged, seen as alliances between families rather than love matches. Okay. It was about strengthening social ties, consolidating wealth.

The less Bachelor in Paradise, more like mergers and acquisitions. Yeah. Yeah, pretty much.

And it's important to remember that women were always conceptually embedded in the household of a male, either their father or their husband. They transitioned from one male authority figure to another. That's it.

So even if a woman was, let's say, a brilliant businesswoman or a talented artist, her legal and social standing was still tied to the men in her life. Exactly. Exactly.

Her identity, her opportunities, they were limited by the patriarchal structure of society. Yeah. And this brings us to this whole complex issue of divorce.

Yeah. Now, in Jewish culture, only husbands could technically initiate a divorce. I'm guessing that didn't go over well with all the wives.

Probably not. Yeah. But it's interesting to note that among the Greeks and Romans, both spouses had the option to initiate a divorce.

Okay. So even within this patriarchal system, you see variations in social norms. Yeah.

It's important to remember that the ancient world was this diverse, complex place. Right. Different customs and practices evolved over time.

Gotcha. So we've talked about husbands, fathers, even brothers. What about the ideal wife in all of this? What was expected of her? Well, the ancient sources, people like Aristotle and Josephus, they definitely stressed male authority within the household, placing the wife in a submissive role.

But there's this common misconception that women were seen as property. Oh, okay. Like slaves.

Right. And Dr. DeSilva really pushes back on that notion. Does he? He says, I haven't found any sources that explicitly use the language of property to describe wives, even though it's freely applied to slaves.

So there's a distinction there, even within this hierarchical system. Right. But if it wasn't property, then how did they view the wife's role within the household? So the ideal wife was characterized by submission, silence, seclusion, and sexual purity.

Oh, wow. It was this very limited and restrictive role, especially compared to the freedoms that were enjoyed by men. It sounds a little intense.

It was. But there is this interesting musical analogy. Oh, tell me about it.

So Plutarch, the Greek writer and philosopher, said that when two notes are struck together, the melody belongs to the lower note. I see. Okay.

It's kind of a poetic way of acknowledging the husband's leadership while still suggesting that actions are done in agreement. The wife's voice might be softer, but it's still part of the harmony. Interesting.

So it's not about silencing the wife completely, but recognizing the husband's dominant role. Exactly. Interesting.

Okay. So we've covered a lot of ground here. We've talked about husbands' wives.

What about the kids? Well, Dr. deSilva paints this picture of absolute obedience to parents, especially the father. Filial piety, or respect for one's parents, was paramount. Children were seen as reflections of their parents, for good or ill.

Okay. And so attacking somebody's parentage was a common way to attack their honor. Even Jesus uses this tactic when he retorts to his critics in John's Gospel, calling them offspring of Satan.

Wow. That's harsh. It is.

But it just highlights how deeply intertwined family and honor were in this culture. Absolutely. So how did they educate these little bundles of obedience? Was it all rote memorization and strict discipline? So education varied widely.

For most people, it was home-based. Children learned the family trade, basic literacy, and religious instruction all from their parents. Religious instruction, especially for Jewish

families, was primarily a family affair, with parents passing on their faith and traditions to their children.

So it's kind of like homeschooling, but with more sandals and less technology. But for affluent boys, there was more formal schooling available, and they might have a pedagogue. Oh, the pedagogue.

If you choose that. A slave who served as a tutor and disciplinarian. So it was a loving tutor who made sure you did your homework and kept you out of trouble.

That's it. But even with these variations in education, there was this one grim reality that permeated the entire ancient world. Slavery.

Slavery. Dr. DeSilva estimates that one in five people in the ancient world was a slave. Can you imagine that? It's a staggering number.

Yeah. And it makes you realize just how deeply embedded slavery was in the fabric of society. Where did all these slaves come from? Well, slavery was fueled by conquest, debt, even birth.

If your parents were slaves, you were born into slavery. It was a brutal system. And Aristotle's definition of a slave as a living tool really underscores their dehumanized status.

It's hard to wrap our heads around a system like that. You know, it's so fundamentally at odds with our modern values of equality and human dignity. Right.

Were there any voices speaking out against slavery back then? Well, there were some ethicists who tried to promote more humane treatment of slaves, you know, encouraging reciprocity and kindness within this inherently unequal relationship. They argued that even though slaves were legally considered property, they were still human beings and deserve some measure of respect and dignity. So at least there were some glimmers of hope amidst a pretty dark reality.

But even with these attempts at reform, slavery remained this deeply entrenched institution, shaping every aspect of ancient society. So it sounds like the early church is emerging in the midst of all this, offering a radical new vision of kinship. Absolutely.

Right in the heart of the old one. Yeah. It's like they were trying to build a new world.

A new kind of family. Yeah. Yeah.

All right. So let's dive into that in part two. We'll explore how this new vision of kinship played out in the early church and how it challenged the very foundations of the ancient world.

You know how we were talking about kinship being like this exclusive club? Right. Right. With like strict membership rules.

Well, the early church kind of flipped the script on that whole thing. They were like, hey, anyone can join this family. So no more checking genealogies at the door.

Exactly. No blood tests required. I like it.

They really embraced this revolutionary idea called fictive kinship, creating a community of love and support that went way beyond, you know, bloodlines, ethnicity, even social status. Whoa. Okay.

So how did they even come up with this concept? Was it like a brainstorming session with the disciples? Well, to really understand fictive kinship, we need to go back a bit further. Remember Philo, the Jewish philosopher from Alexandria? Yeah. Vaguely.

Remind me. He argued that kinship wasn't limited to just bloodlines. He believed that converting to Judaism created this new kinship bond that was even stronger than any blood tie.

So even before Jesus, there was this idea that you could choose your family. Yeah, you got it. That your shared beliefs, your practices could create a deeper connection than just who you were related to.

And this idea really resonated with the early Christian communities. They saw themselves as heirs to this tradition, but they took it even further. It did.

How so? They believed that through faith in Christ, people from all different backgrounds could become part of this new family, the family of God. So no more us versus them. No more insiders and outsiders.

It was this radical departure from the norms of ancient society. And it wasn't always easy. Remember, Jesus himself acknowledged that there could be this conflict between loyalty to your biological family and your commitment to his teachings.

He even said, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. That's a tough one. It is.

It's like he's saying, look, I know this is a big ask, but if you're really committed to following me, your loyalties will be tested. Big time. So how did they reconcile these seemingly conflicting loyalties? Did they all just abandon their families and hit the road with Jesus? Not exactly.

It's not about abandoning your family completely, but it is about recognizing a higher calling, a deeper loyalty. It's about understanding that your identity as a follower of Christ takes precedence over your earthly ties. And Jesus offers this powerful promise to those who make this choice.

He says, everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. So it's not about rejecting your family, but it's about expanding your understanding of what family really means. Yes.

And this idea of fictive kinship becomes this central theme throughout the New Testament. You see it play out in the book of Acts, the letters of Paul, even in the gospels themselves.

Early Christian communities really embraced this concept, creating this network of support and love that transcended traditional boundaries.

So did this fictive kingship have any like practical implications? I mean, it's one thing to say you're all brothers and sisters in Christ, but how did that actually play out in their everyday lives? That's a great question. This new understanding of family had a profound impact on the way early Christians lived, how they interacted with the world. Think about it.

If you truly believe that everyone in your community is your brother or sister, how would that affect your behavior? Well, you'd probably be more likely to share your resources, help those in need, even forgive those who wrong you. It's like taking the rules of family and applying them to your entire community. But that's a pretty radical concept, especially in the cutthroat world of the Roman Empire.

How did they manage to maintain this radical love and generosity in the face of all this persecution and hardship? That's the amazing thing. This ethic of kinship, this radical commitment to love and mutual support, actually became one of the key factors in the early church's growth and resilience. They cared for each other, shared their possessions, welcomed strangers into their homes.

They really lived out their faith in a way that challenged the assumptions of the surrounding culture. So they're living out this whole different set of values. A whole different way of being in the world.

And I bet that was pretty attractive to people who were, like, tired of the same old Roman power games and social hierarchy. Oh, absolutely. The early church offered something radically different, a community of love, acceptance, and belonging.

Yeah. And this was especially appealing to those who were marginalized or excluded, you know, slaves, women, the poor, the sick. They found a place of welcome and dignity.

OK, so it's not just about warm, fuzzy feelings. This fictive kinship had real-world implications. It changed the way they lived, the way they treated each other, even the way they viewed themselves in relation to the wider world.

And Dr. deSilva points out that this new understanding of family was actually reflected in the language they used to describe themselves. Yes. The early church often used household imagery to describe their community.

Oh, really? They talk about the church as the household of God, with Christ as the head of the household and believers as his adopted children. Interesting. So it's not just about believing the right things.

It's about living out those beliefs in a radically countercultural way. Yeah, you got it. It's about creating a community that reflects the love and generosity of God.

But how did this play out in practice? How did this household of God actually function? They met in homes, shared meals, cared for the sick, supported the poor, welcomed strangers into their midst. They really saw themselves as a family, bound together by their shared

faith and their commitment to living out the teachings of Christ. So it wasn't just about going to church on Sunday.

It was about creating this whole new way of life, a new way of being in the world. And I imagine this had a pretty big impact on the surrounding culture. It challenged the social norms of the Roman Empire.

It offered this glimpse of a different kind of society, a society built on love, justice and compassion. So it's not just ancient history. It's a challenge to us today, too.

It is. It makes you think about how we live out our faith in our own communities. Absolutely.

Do we embody this ethic of kinship? Do we welcome strangers, care for the marginalized, challenge injustice? These are the important questions for all of us to wrestle with. Yeah. But for now, let's shift our focus to a specific example of how this ancient concept of kinship played out in the early church.

In part three, we'll dive into the book of 1 Peter and see how it weaves together these themes of honor and shame with this radical new understanding of family. All right. So 1 Peter, now that we've got this whole fictive kinship thing going on, we're seeing this text with new eyes.

Yeah, you're exactly right. 1 Peter is really all about how to live out your faith in a culture that's both kind of familiar but also hostile. And it's packed with all these references to family, to household.

And we can see how Peter is weaving together these traditional ideas with this radical vision of kinship that's really at the heart of the Christian message. Okay. So break it down for me.

What are some of the key passages that jump out at you now that we've got these fictive kinship lenses on? Well, right from the beginning, Peter addresses his audience as exiles, scattered all over the Roman world. Right. And remember how we talked about the diaspora Jews clinging to that shared heritage? Yeah.

Yeah. And Peter's tapping into that same sense of belonging. Yeah.

But he takes it a step further. He reminds them that they're part of this lineage that stretches all the way back to Abraham. So even though they're physically dispersed, he's grounding their identity in this ancient kinship network.

Yes. But it's a kinship that's now defined by faith, not just bloodlines. Exactly.

And then he goes on to describe them as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. And this language would have resonated so deeply with both Jewish and Gentile converts. He's using terms that evoke honor and privilege, but he's redefining them in light of their new identity in Christ.

He's saying, look, you might be exiles in the eyes of the world, but in God's kingdom, you are honored. I got it. He's reminding them that their true belonging isn't found in their earthly families or their social standing, but in their relationship with God and with each other.

But this isn't just about feeling good about yourself. Right. He connects this new identity to a call to action.

Absolutely. He tells them to live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. So actions speak louder than words; show the world what it means to be a part of this new family.

Exactly. But, you know, this was a tough time to be a Christian. They were facing all kinds of persecution, discrimination, social pressure.

How does Peter address that? Yeah. Does he just tell them to, like, suck it up and be good little martyrs? Well, there's this one passage that's really interesting. Peter talks about submitting to authority, even to those who mistreat them.

And he uses the example of slaves who endure suffering for doing good. OK, this is where it gets a little tricky for us modern readers. How do we reconcile this with our understanding of human dignity? Yeah, that's a really important point.

We have to remember that Peter's writing in a specific historical context where slavery was an accepted reality. He's not condoning slavery or abuse of power. He's challenging his readers to live out their faith, even in the most difficult of circumstances, to respond to injustice with grace and integrity.

He's reminding them that their ultimate allegiance is to God, not to earthly authorities, and that their actions, even in the face of suffering, can be a powerful witness to the gospel. It's about, like, choosing your battles. Yeah.

Finding ways to resist evil without compromising your values. Absolutely. And Peter doesn't just leave them hanging.

He gives them really practical advice on how to actually live out this new way of life, this ethic of fictive kinship. OK, like what? Well, he calls them to love one another deeply from the heart. This isn't just some sentimental suggestion.

It's a command. And it's rooted in the ancient understanding of kinship. He tells them to offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

I like that. Without grumbling. He reminds them to use their gifts to serve one another, to be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care.

He's painting this picture of a community that functions like a family. Where everyone's valued and cared for. Exactly.

And, you know, it all goes back to this idea of fictive kinship. They've become this new family, bound together by their shared faith and their commitment to Christ. So they're creating this countercultural community, one that operates by a different set of rules than the rest of the world.

Yes. And it's all rooted in this understanding of family, of kinship. And it's powerful.

It challenges us today, too, to think about how we're living out our own fate. How are we embodying this ethic of kinship? Do we prioritize our communities? Do we show love and support to those around us? Even when it's difficult. Even when it's costly.

So this deep dive has really been about more than just understanding the ancient world. It's about challenging ourselves. Yeah.

Rethinking our own priorities. It is. And building communities that reflect the radical love and generosity of God.

Absolutely. Wow. That's a lot to think about.

This has really been eye-opening. Thanks for joining us on this journey of discovery. It's been a pleasure.

And remember, this is just the beginning. Keep digging. Keep questioning.

Keep seeking deeper understanding. The more we understand the world of the New Testament, the more we can appreciate its message and apply its wisdom to our lives today. So, until next time, happy exploring.