

Who is First?
A Cultural and Exegetical Study of Family to Communicate Biblical
Principles Regarding Familial Obligations for Indian Hindu Culture

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Introduction

The following study presents a biblical understanding of the importance of family to people from Indian Hindu culture who have recently relocated to an urban, middle-class city in the Midwestern United States, with emphasis on the responsibility believers have to the family of God.

Familial obligation for Indian Christians is important cross-cultural exploration for Indian Hindus who place a high value on family. In particular, this tension regarding familial obligations increases when Indians become a part of the family of God and their extended family does not. Eastern Hindu views on family differ significantly from those of a Western Christian. However, the degree to which Indian Hindu culture esteems family paves the way for a richer, more biblically-aligned understanding for both earthly families and the family of God.

The research began by contacting an Indian Hindu family who, having recently moved to America, shared their personal and cultural histories through a series of 2-hour interviews from June 2015 through July 2015. During these interviews, the importance of family emerged as a recurring theme.

Studies in anthropology are foundational for cross-cultural communication of biblical truths because missions is inherently interdisciplinary. Cross-cultural ministry not only operates on the theological level, dealing with sin, but also on the anthropological level, dealing with drastic differences in culture which profoundly separate groups of people on internal and external levels. Understanding both the universal human plight

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and the unique cultural condition of a people group are necessary for communication to occur. Anthropological findings are necessary to separate the forms of biblical expression from the message itself, since the gospel cannot be equated with any one earthly context—even with those found in the Bible.¹

To analyze the cultural traits of Indian Hindus, the most helpful theoretical perspectives for research and analysis have been those of anthropologists Mary Douglas, Gert Hofstede, Sherwood Lingenfelter, and Michael Rynkiewich. Their theories on the social factors of grid and group as translated into social games, on collectivism within the family and the state, and on dimensions of national culture have guided the following cultural analysis of the Indian people. These anthropological perspectives determine the differences in the elements of culture between the interviewer and interviewees, identify cultural biases, and serve as a basis for constructing the biblical message about family in a manner relevant to Indian culture.

The research conducted herein is suitable for use in the life of a church, small group, or by individuals who wish to engage Indian Hindus living in America in a meaningful way. As churches become increasingly multi-ethnic, being equipped with a cross-cultural understanding is no longer an option reserved for a few but a necessity for all believers.

Cultural Interviews and Analysis

Interviews

In the summer of 2015, an Indian Hindu family of three completed their first six months of living in America. On a 3-year contract, the family will live in Missouri while the husband works for a stateside engineering company that employs both Americans and Indian nationals. Still in the early stages of adjusting to a new culture, this family—two parents in their early 30s and a three-year-old son—were the first members of their family to leave India and settle in another country. In a series of cultural interviews occurring in June and July 2015, Akhil Kunju and his wife, Darshana,² shared personal histories before and after marriage, cultural differences between Indian states and between Indian and American culture, and life priorities as shaped by culture and religion.

The first interview opened with an invitation to freely share about Indian culture, and Darshana immediately responded, "In India, there are two types of families: a joint family and a nuclear family. After marriage we had a joint family, and we think this is better. Here in America, we have a nuclear family."³ After delineating the difference in which joint equals extended family and nuclear equals only the parents, the couple explained that a joint family is preferred "to pass on tradition. Because parents must work and grandparents stay at home, grandparents are the ones to pass on tradition to children. So we learn what is Indian tradition through grandparents—through family."

The couple continued their discourse by explaining the importance of family: "Father and mother are first god," Darshana asserted. "We come from them, and they care for us, and in India, we honor them in everything." Akhil added, "We consult parents for all major decisions. For example, I wanted to start a new job, but I had to ask my father first, and he and my brothers and family, they all agree that this is a good decision, and I have his blessing and receive money." Acting outside of the parents' will is out of the question. People may choose to do it, but they would be violating their role in the family.

"Parents are important through all of life, not just childhood," explained Darshana. "In India, there are two types of marriages: arranged marriages and love marriages. Ours was a love marriage," she smiled, "but we still need parents' blessing first." At this point, the conversation turned from general to specific as Akhil shared his story.

My parents had arranged marriage for me. I was supposed to be married to a doctor in our village, a woman who was twelve years older. But before I knew what my parents wanted, I met Darshana, and we fell in love. When I found out about my arranged marriage, I told my parents, "I cannot marry this doctor because I love someone else," and they would not accept it, so we did not do anything. Because we cannot get married without parents' blessing, we waited. We waited for two years. It was very hard; it was so long. Finally, we took a risk to get a marriage license, and my parents, they saw that we were serious, and they accepted our relationship. With their blessing, we all planned the wedding."

The conversation occasionally veered toward religious and geographical aspects of India, including the location of important Hindu temples and the climates of various Indian states, but it kept coming back to the extended family's involvement in marriage.

The couple began the next interview by opening their wedding album and

explaining the elements of a traditional Hindu wedding, starting with rituals intended to honor and thank the parents for raising them. A traditional Hindu ceremony, lasting nearly four hours, begins with the new couple touching the feet of the parents in gratefulness for preparing them for married life.

When asked what the most important moment of her life thus far has been, Darshana cited the first time she met her husband's family: "I did not want to leave. I cried after first visit because they treat me like their own daughter. I look to Akhil's oldest sister as my mother."⁴ Akhil clarified: "Darshana did not have a good family, and she did not learn tradition from them. She learns from my family, and they are her family now." With that, Darshana shared her story.

Her grandmother had a son and a daughter, the daughter being Darshana's mother. Shortly after Darshana's birth, her mother died, and when Darshana turned twelve, her grandmother sent her out from her village to a boarding school in a large city: Darshana was not an asset to the household because she would eventually marry and leave the grandmother's house since culture dictates that she belongs to her future husband's family. Darshana would visit her grandmother on holidays, but they never grew close because the son and his family took priority. When she and Akhil began a serious relationship, neither wanted to risk pursuing marriage without the blessing of family because they would be isolated from family on both sides. As soon as Akhil's family accepted the marriage, thereby accepting Darshana, she was welcomed as a valid family member for the first time. "That is why my cultural traditions are from Tamil Nadu, where Akhil is from, not from Kerala, where was my birth."

The couple explained that they define themselves in relation to the group: "When I introduce myself, I say, 'I am Akhil's wife and my son's mother,'" Darshana explained. "And when I introduce," Akhil interjected, "I say, 'I am son of my father, from this family, and village, and state, and my profession.'"

Darshana was quick to identify what matters most to her in life: "Family, of course. Akhil, his family, my son, my grandmother. Then my friends. Sometimes I ask God for a sign, to know if something is good or not, and I ask Him for things for my family and friends." Akhil echoed his wife's priorities in part. "Family is most important to me. Then my profession." Akhil's family supported the move to America, although

saddened by the distance. "It is only temporary, and we can use Skype every week to see grandparents." The couple concluded the interview sessions by displaying their wedding jewelry and promising to share more photos and items from India at a future meeting.

Analysis

The operative definition of culture for the purpose of this research is a combination of explanations from missiological anthropologists Paul Hiebert and Michael Rynkiewicz; that is, culture is an integrated, coherent way of mentally organizing the world in order to innovate and change themselves as their environments change.⁵ A cultural analysis will then utilize anthropological research to identify the ways in which the Kunjus mentally organize their world, especially as regards their emphasis on family.

The ways in which cultures understand the concept of self in relation to the parts and responsibilities of family can be organized into a cultural dimension termed by social psychologist Geert Hofstede as Individualism versus Collectivism, with each at opposite ends of a quantifiable spectrum. This and five other cultural dimensions have been qualified and measured, but only this dimension will receive attention in this study because it measures the concept of self, which is directly related to a culture's emphasis on familial obligations.

In the Individualism versus Collectivism index, Collectivism is a closely-knit relational system in which members, integrated into groups from birth, derive their identity and offer lifelong loyalty in exchange for protection.⁶ Extended families, such as the Kunju family, fall into this category. In contrast, individualism places responsibility for welfare on the self, fostering personal preferences, and taking responsibility for one's own choices, not the choices of others. Adults are not encouraged to live as dependent on their extended families.⁷

In these groups to which members belong for life, determined by nature rather than voluntarily chosen, the worst offense is a breach of loyalty; therefore, group members foster mutual dependence.⁸ As seen in the Kunjus' response to how they define and, therefore, introduce themselves, their orientation to self centers on a "we," rather than "I," viewpoint: This was evidenced when Darshana explained that she introduces

herself by naming the people or groups of people to whom she is connected: her husband, her son, her husband's family, and her native state. Akhil's explanation that all major decisions—including money, moving, and marriage—are only made pending family approval places Indian culture further up on the collectivism index.

On a scale from 0-100, India's collectivism score is 48.⁹ This rather median score can be explained by the tension that Hindu religion exerts on the understanding of self. Whereas collectivistic Indian family culture does not see a self apart from the group, Hinduism stresses the fruit of each individual's choices, called *karma*, which has consequences for the next life, whether good or bad.¹⁰ Individual choices bring each Hindu either closer to or further from their ultimate goal of *moksha*, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth and death.¹¹ Thus, for the Indian Hindu, spiritual destiny is determined by personal choices, not the choices of the group.

Related to the cultural dimension of collectivism is what social anthropologist Mary Douglas terms, "group," referring to the ways in which people define their identity and relationships to the extent that they are socially incorporated.¹² Group is not merely a designation defining people in reference to who they are not. To the contrary, it is a system to which an individual belongs, either with weak ties, serving a functional purpose and dissolving after the goal is achieved, or strong ties, forging a lifelong bond, as is common in Indian culture. According to Douglas' model, Indians are strong- or high-group, meaning that associations and relationships are permanent and involve lasting social obligations. These lifelong bonds are evidenced by the measures taken to give honor to the bride's and groom's parents in the traditional Hindu wedding ceremony, by the absorption of the bride into the groom's family after marriage, and by the role of Indian grandparents in the socialization of children.

The other social factor Douglas deems "grid" to describe the extent to which a society defines its rules for social expectations.¹³ Strong- or high-grid societies place more restrictions on the roles of individuals, while weak- or low-grid societies make fewer distinctions. Indian culture is high-grid, due in large part to the remaining yet waning influence of the Hindu caste system. Although now outlawed, the caste system previously organized society into five classes, each of which had distinct roles and stringent rules about associating with people from other castes. While India is moving

toward a weaker-grid society with a more-competitive environment, its history and tradition lend themselves to a hierarchical system in which a few people hold power at the top and most people operate in the middle- and lower-levels of society.

Missiological anthropologist Sherwood Lingenfelter also addresses grid and group tendencies, organizing them into a maximum of five "social games" that people play when interacting in all spheres of daily life.¹⁴ By placing "grid" and "group" on perpendicular x-y axes, respectively, Lingenfelter creates a graph on which the combined degrees of "grid" and "group" place cultures in one of the following four quadrants: Hierarchist, Authoritarian, Individualist, and Egalitarian.¹⁵ Because Indian culture is, as discussed above, high grid and high group, it lands in quadrant I, or the Hierarchist social game.¹⁶ The Hierarchist game emphasizes group accountability and sharp social distinctions while a small number of individuals fill societal roles of power.

The hierarchical culture from which Indian Hindus come has clearly defined rules and roles for members of society. Hierarchical society functions on the understanding that the people at the top of the authority structure are the experts and can be trusted.¹⁷ A distinct top-down flow of authority exists, and because the people at the top are the ones who distribute resources and legitimate action, inequality is not only customary but preferred.¹⁸ On a family level, the people in power in high-grid Hindu society are the parents. The goals in a system with this distribution of power are to create and preserve harmony and, as such, confrontation is to be avoided.¹⁹ This is done through sustaining interpersonal relationships, with each person fulfilling prescribed roles in society and religious life. Safeguards are put in place to diminish such conflict, including group approval before major decisions to curb any individual tendencies to differ too widely from the group or make choices unforeseen to the group. Conflicts are often muted through subtle communication because direct conflict is seen as dishonorable.²⁰ Mutual acquaintances may mediate and restore peace to both parties.

Indian Hindu culture is patrilocal—that is, a couple resides with the groom's family, or at least near it.²¹ This was why Darshana's grandmother sent her to boarding school: Darshana's culture mandated that she eventually leave her mother's household, and since her uncle's wife and child lived with the grandmother already, it was an extra financial burden to support someone destined to leave and join another family unit. Thus,

for an Indian Hindu woman, one major shift in identity is from birth family to marital family, though both are forms of collectivistic identity.

Summary of Findings

The preceding anthropological analysis provides explanation for why the Kunjus demonstrate a deep respect for family, especially parents, treating them as “god[s],” in Darshana’s words. Akhil and Darshana value filial obligation above all else, sacrificing personal preferences for the will of the whole family. In Indian Hindu culture, honoring one’s family, especially one’s parents, fulfills a duty to the parents and to the self, keeping individuals on track to enter the new life cycle as a higher life form.²²

The Bible has much to say about honoring family, in some ways akin to the honor called for in Hindu culture, although the reasons for giving such honor and the expressions thereof, differ. If the Kunjus accept Christ while their extended family in India remains Hindu, the Kunjus in America will belong to two families—one earthly, one spiritual—which must both receive honor. Indian Christians’ membership in two families creates tension when the families hold opposing viewpoints on the same topic—a tension exacerbated by the intentional avoidance of conflict emphasized in Indian high-group, high-grid culture. To navigate situations in which the expectations of both families conflict, the Kunjus must understand where their greatest obligations should lie.

To inform the Kunjus’ understanding, the following biblical study drawing on texts from Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Matthew clarifies God’s command for parental respect, the reality of membership in God’s family, and appropriate behavior when one’s earthly family is in conflict with one’s heavenly family.

Researcher’s Cultural Bias

Identifying personal preference for social order and comparing it to that of Indian Hindus’ preferences is crucial before a biblical examination of the topic of family because it alerts me to the cultural lenses I wear while reading Scripture. My cultural bias, according to Lingenfelter’s social games, is individualistic authoritarian, also called low-group, high-grid. This differs significantly from an Indian Hindu’s high-grid, high-group social game and, consequently, affects my understanding of family and obligations to the family of God.

As an individualist, I hold that each person can determine his or her own way of life apart from any group.²³ As such, I value my family, but I also prize mobility, and I maintain connection with minimal obligation to my nuclear family, much less my extended family, who mutually agrees to amicability but to no lifelong, obligatory services on their part or mine. Any assistance or care I show to family members, or they to me, is completely voluntary rather than required. Individualists value truth-telling and expressing how they feel, and I confront family members directly if I have an opinion which differs from theirs.²⁴ My family relationships are more binding than my friendships in the sense that family is the one group which I did not choose and to which I will always be related on earth, but obligations therein are sparse, save that of honoring parents. As an adult, I honor my parents as an individualist by providing spiritual support and inviting them to share in significant moments. I have no familial history of newlyweds living with in-laws, of having no opinion different from that of the group, nor of grandparents being the chief figures in transmitting cultural history, as are customary in Indian family culture.

As an authoritarian, I do not believe in collective considerations for each decision I make.²⁵ My priority in decision-making is my own good rather than the good of the group, although I do not intend my choices to be to the detriment of my family. Consequently, my understanding of the power structure within a family is that I do not, as a rule, submit my wishes to parental approval and let their word be the final say on my choices. I inform my parents of events in my life and ask for their input, not so much for approval but for the sake of inclusion, because I care that they know how my life progresses.

My cultural bias leads me to view family ties as far less binding than they are in Indian culture. Family does not have such binding ties for me as it does for those in Indian culture. Additionally, my culture does not place a significant emphasis on honor, so I need to study the original context of Bible verses regarding honoring parents because I have little in my culture that provides an example resonating with this topic. Because choices are a personal matter and approval is not needed from all members before making a decision, I need to make great effort to understand the hierarchical family structure in which Indians are entrenched since it is foreign to me. As I study the passages of

Scripture related to earthly families and the family of God, I must remember that, like Indian culture, the family cultures of the Old and New Testaments were much more collectivistic and hierarchical than my own, making the family unit substantially more important to all facets of life.

Exegetical Study on Family and the Family of God

The Bible speaks of two types of families: earthly families and the family of God. Proper treatment of both families, and parental treatment in particular, first receives definition in the Old Testament. The earliest directives humanity receives regarding treatment of parents comes from the fifth commandment: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (Exod. 20:12).²⁶ Whereas the first four commandments pertain to our conduct in relation to God, this is the first of six commandments regulating our treatment of others. The first word of this commandment is *honor*, a verb which in Hebrew means “heavy” or “weighty” and is used elsewhere in the Old Testament in reference to God’s glory.²⁷ Proper treatment of parents is respecting the authority God has given them in the household: to honor them is to recognize their position as a gift from God.²⁸

Exodus 20 opens with the words, “I am the Lord [Yahweh] your God,” by which God defines himself and clarifies His relationship with humanity. After this declaration, He utters ten commandments by which people are to relate to Him and one another. He gives of himself first, and people respond in kind—first to Him, and then to one another. This is a recognition of His role as Creator. This intentional ordering of God-first, people-second is the same pattern people should follow for filial obligation. In Exodus 20, God established the proper posture children must take with their parents in that God should always be honored first.²⁹

Honor is no light matter for a member of God’s family. Just as honor is treated seriously, dishonor is held with as much repugnance as honor is with esteem. Leviticus and Deuteronomy list curses and severe punishments ending in death for those who dishonor their parents.³⁰ As a result, many Jewish interpreters of the Torah have considered the fifth commandment as the most important.³¹

The fifth commandment, the first commandment God gave His people to govern their conduct with others, addressed the family unit. While people in Western cultures

frequently quote this commandment to children, in its original context it was a directive for adults with living parents. It was through the example of adults honoring their parents that children learned to do the same.³² From the outset of God's covenant with His people, He clearly intended His people to carry a lifelong obligation of honoring their parents.

In both the Israelite culture of Jesus' time and the ancient Roman culture which ruled it, any slack on allegiance to family was far more dishonorable than it is today. However, in Matthew 12:46-50 and Mark 3:31-35, Jesus clearly fails to place His physical family first.³³ In these passages, Jesus offers explanation about the true nature of His family at the expense of offending the culture. He asserts that his "brother and sister and mother" are "those who do the will of [His] father who is in heaven" (Matt. 12:50). In other words, He affirms that His true family incorporates those who do the will of His Father, regardless of biological ties.³⁴ This distinction between physical family and spiritual family was unheard of for the Judaism of Jesus' era, which employed ethnic terms for spiritual realities, most often with the term "brothers" meaning both Israelites and children of God.³⁵

In the time of Jesus, family ties were defined by hierarchy: the duty of wives, children, and slaves was to obey the father.³⁶ Thus Jesus' statement of His true family, while being unarguably culturally objectionable, remains, at the very least, understandable since family members operated in relation to the father. By doing the will of the Father people do not make themselves part of Jesus' family, but rather doing the Father's will identifies people as family members.³⁷ It is with this identification that Jesus recognizes His true family, making this passage less about his earthly family and more about what it means to be His disciple.³⁸ To be a Christian—to be a disciple—is to do the will of the Father.³⁹

In Matthew 12 and Mark 3, Jesus no longer speaks to the crowds about His disciples but *as* His disciples.⁴⁰ Here they are offered an invitation to become His family. By speaking in such divisive terms and re-defining family, however, Jesus does not lessen the importance of His mother and brothers standing outside,⁴¹ nor does He deny the validity of the family unit or the nation of Israel.⁴² Instead, He emphasizes that the will of the Father takes precedence over the will of physical relatives.⁴³ He casts light on

a new family, later to be called the church, with relationships more binding than those of blood.⁴⁴ Due to this extension of Jesus' family, it is clear that while earthly families are temporary, there exists one spiritual family, and it is eternal. In the eternal family, loyalty must lie first with the Father.⁴⁵ Jesus entered the earthly societal structure of family in order to lay the groundwork for and point to a spiritual relationship system with infinitely greater significance; He did not confuse the means with the end.⁴⁶ With the literal family, God has given us a basis for understanding the spiritual family of which we are a part through identification with Jesus.⁴⁷

Once a member of the family of God, a disciple must view all earthly relationships in terms of the new family and its relationship to the coming kingdom.⁴⁸ In Jesus' family, the will of the Father takes priority over even the deepest human relationships, should those be at odds with the values of the kingdom of God and invite persecution. This truth is reflected in Matthew 10, in which Jesus addresses behavior and allegiance for His disciples whose earthly families are not part of the family of God.

In Matthew 10:35-37, Jesus explains that the kingdom of God may divide earthly families whose members are not all of His family. Jesus, in this passage, warns His disciples about family strife and cautions against misplacing their loyalties to avoid it.⁴⁹ Conflicting values regarding familial obligations relationships bring on societal persecution, especially in the hierarchical, patriarchal family culture to which Jesus spoke.⁵⁰ Allegiance to Jesus' family can "set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Matt. 10:35): aptly-chosen examples, given that brides lived with the groom's family during Jesus' time.⁵¹

According to Matthew 10:37, those who do not love their family less than they love Jesus are not worthy of Him—a point made in the cross-reference of Luke 14:26, which employs "hate" in most English translations. Originally hyperbolic rather than literal, Jesus' use of "hate" is not meant literally, but rather emphasizes the contrast between the allegiance due to the Father and that due to earthly families, phrasing all the more striking to an audience that viewed respecting parents as the highest social obligation.⁵² Indeed, honoring family is, in Judaism, only second to honoring God himself.⁵³ Matthew here clarifies the meaning, asserting that the danger lies in loving

one's earthly family more than Jesus.⁵⁴ In the face of persecution, Jesus' disciples can maintain confidence in the placement of their loyalties because they are part of a family to which He, too, belongs.⁵⁵

When faced with opposing obligations to two sets of families—one's earthly family and the family of God—Jesus says one must choose which to obey. In Matthew 10:37, Jesus exhorts His family not to honor parents at the expense of honoring God. If God is dishonored by one's treatment of parents—that is, by obeying their will over and above the dictates of Scripture insofar as to cause one to sin—one must determine whose allegiance is worth following: that of the temporary or eternal family.⁵⁶

Scripture's Message to the Kunju Family on Familial Obligations

The message of Scripture to this people group about family is three-part. First, the Kunjus should continue honoring their parents because God, in Exodus 20:12, commands children of all ages to honor their parents for all time. This is something the Indian Hindu culture, in general—and the Kunjus in particular— already do well. Conversely, dishonoring parents is a sin with earthly as well as spiritual penalties, which is also already reinforced in the Kunjus' culture. The Kunjus can rest assured that God takes honor very seriously. The message of the fifth commandment to the Kunju family is one of affirmation of the honor they already show to their family. Loyalty to parents, and loyalty to the father, in particular, such as is practiced in Indian Hindu family culture paves the way for an understanding of the loyalty due to God as Father of the Christian's true family. A collectivistic culture is more accustomed to deferring to parents' wishes, even when it means suppressing personal preferences, than is an individualistic culture.

The second and third parts of Scripture's message to the Kunjus pertains when the Kunjus have accepted Christ. The following is existing reality but only becomes the Kunjus' reality at salvation: Matthew 12:46-50 states that they have a *truer* family beyond their physical family. This spiritual family is lasting while the earthly family is limited to blood relatives and ends at death. The Kunjus can know that God has placed people in earthly family units to better understand how they should fulfill their duties in Jesus' family, and that earthly families can be viewed, in a sense, as a means to an end—the end being the eternal family of God. Jesus did not come to deny the validity of the earthly family but to join them into a greater and lasting family—into Jesus' own family.

The Kunjus are identified with this family as they do the will of their ultimate Father. To be a disciple of Jesus is to be part of His family. Because the Kunjus, upon salvation, are part of two families, they can honor both since the commandment to honor earthly parents and the stiff penalties against dishonor are still in effect as moral laws.

Matthew 10:35-37 tells the Kunjus that if their extended family does not know Christ, conflict with them is inevitable. When the conflict is such that the Kunjus cannot honor both families simultaneously—that is, when there is a moral conflict in which to obey the earthly family would be to sin against God—the Kunjus must obey their true parent who is the Father of their ultimate family. Harmony is disrupted when they do not honor earthly parents, meaning a main goal of a hierarchical society is not achieved. The Kunjus will want to preserve—or rather, restore—harmony and may avoid conflict by acquiescing to the demands of their earthly in-group. By remembering that the temporal family serves, in a sense, as a symbol of the ultimate family, the Kunjus can know that they are still fulfilling their duty of giving honor to family if times arise when they must obey God to the exclusion of culture.

For Indians to accept the biblical understanding of family, they must broaden their collectivistic concept of identity to the group to include both families. They can continue to live out lifelong familial obligation according to a hierarchical power structure in order to obey their ultimate family—their spiritual one—over and above their earthly family. This shift in understanding of family cuts at the heart of Indian identity: to what group do Indian Christians belong first and foremost, and to whom do they live in lifelong obligation, if not exclusively to their earthly families? The answer lies in the reason that Jesus came for Indian Hindus: to ransom them into their true family, completing their identity.

Contextualizing the Message for Indian Culture

“Indian culture loves story,” explained Darshana, her three-year-old son crawling on her lap. “It is how we pass tradition and teaching to our children. If we want to teach something, we tell a story.”⁵⁷

If I were to communicate the tri-partite truths about family detailed in this essay, I would tell a story. I researched some of the earliest recorded Hindu stories for illustrative parables specifically dealing with treatment of parents by their children. The Sanskrit

epic poem, the *Ramayana*, tells the story of Prince Rama's quest to free his wife, Sita, from the clutches of a demon king. It focuses thematically on *dharma*, which in Hinduism is divine law, loosely translated as righteousness and encompassing a higher morality involving deep respect for and devotion to parents.⁵⁸ To explore *dharma*, the *Ramayana* includes several short stories depicting a series of ideal relationships between people, including that of children to their parents. One such story is "Shravan, the Dutiful Son," summarized below.

Shravan was the only child of two blind parents. He served them faithfully through childhood and into his adult years. When they grew old, they expressed the desire to pilgrimage to all the holy sites of Hinduism. Shravan could not afford transportation for the three of them, so he secured a basket to each end of a bamboo pole, placed one parent in each basket, and then put the pole on his shoulders. For years he faithfully carried his parents from one pilgrimage site to another. One day, as he drew water from a lake to quench the thirst of his parents, the noise he made by the water caught the attention of King Dashratha, who was hunting in the nearby forest. Thinking the noise from the water was an animal, Dashratha shot an arrow in the direction of the sound, and it pierced Shravan's chest. Shravan cried out, causing the king to approach and, to his horror, realize his mistake. With his dying breath, Shravan explained his quest to King Dashratha and asked that the king look after his parents. Then Shravan died, and the king went to Shravan's parents and to tell of their son's death. They were overcome by grief and cursed the king with putrashoka, grief that comes from the loss of a child.

In the original story, the moral is that children of any age should honor parents until their last breath to be considered a dutiful and in right relationship with the universe. In the re-telling, the moral is for children of any age to honor both parents and God to be considered dutiful and in right relationship with one's true family. I alter details, including the addition of the character named "Yeshu," to re-define what it means to be a dutiful child in the biblical sense of honoring the two families to which Christians belong.⁵⁹

Shravan was the only child of two blind parents. He served them faithfully through childhood and into his adult years. When they grew old, they expressed the desire to pilgrimage to the holy sites of Hinduism. Shravan could not afford transportation for the

three of them, so he secured a basket to each end of a bamboo pole, placed one parent in each basket, and then put the pole on his shoulders. For years, he faithfully carried his parents to every pilgrimage site. His burden was very heavy, and he struggled to keep his parents on his shoulders for extended periods of time. One day as he drew water from a nearby lake to quench the thirst of his parents, the noise he made startled some hunters in the forest, who shot arrows in the direction of the sound. The arrows pierced Shraavan's chest, and he fell over and began to die. Suddenly a man appeared, and Shraavan explained his quest and asked for help. The man identified himself as Yeshu, God incarnate, who knew what a dutiful son Shraavan was but came to tell him his devotion was incomplete: he was devoted to earthly family but not spiritual family, and that was why carrying his parents was such a heavy burden. To be dutiful in the eyes of the heavenlies, he needed to be part of two families. Yeshu said he came to Shraavan to die in his place and make him part of His family, but it would only be possible if Shraavan accepted Yeshu's death for Him. And with that, Yeshu died. Shraavan lay dying, looking at Yeshu's body and thinking of his offer. Finally, he accepted it, and all at once, he was standing on his feet! The arrows were gone! He looked for Yeshu to thank Him, but He was nowhere to be found! Shraavan walked back to his parents to tell them the good news, and he found Yeshu, alive, talking with his parents! Shraavan was now part of two families—his parents' family and Yeshu's family—and he wanted to honor them both. He decided he could do this by keeping his parents and Yeshu with Him always: he placed both parents in one basket, and Yeshu in the other. To his surprise, the burden was much lighter, and Yeshu's side actually outweighed the side of Shraavan's parents! When the burden became too heavy for him, he deferred to the heavier side, Yeshu's and then was able to continue carrying both. Shraavan began carrying his parents and Yeshu everywhere he went. He was now "the dutiful son" in its fullest sense.

¹ Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 31.

² All interviews were confidential; the actual names of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement and have been changed to protect anonymity.

³ Akhil and Darshana Kunju, interview by author, Springfield, MO, June 28, 2015.

⁴ Akhil and Darshana Kunju, interview by author, Springfield, MO, July 5, 2015.

⁵ Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 16; Michael Rynkiewich, *Soul, Self, and Society: A Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Postcolonial World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 19.

⁶ Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2005), 76.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰ Shirley Firth, "End of Life: A Hindu View," *Lancet* 366 (August 2005): 682.

¹¹ Ibid., 683.

¹² Mary Douglas, *In the Active Voice* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2011), 190.

¹³ Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 27.

¹⁴ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵ Ibid. The autonomous "social game" is a fifth option that is outside the quadrant and is not mentioned because it is not conducive to the purposes of this study.

¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹⁷ Lingenfelter, 35.

¹⁸ Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 57.

¹⁹ Ibid., 86.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Rynkiewich, 96.

²² Firth, 683.

²³ Lingenfelter, 30.

²⁴ Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 86.

²⁵ Lingenfelter, 57.

²⁶ All Scripture quotations are cited from the NASB, unless otherwise noted.

²⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 603.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ John Durham, *Exodus, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 4, ed. David Hubbard and Glenn Barker (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1987), 290.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 81.

³² James Bruckner, *Exodus, New International Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 186.

³³ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 331.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 81.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Matthew and Mark, The Expositor's Bible Commentary* 9, ed. Tremper Longman III and David Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan: 2008), 345.

³⁸ Ibid, 344.

³⁹ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 33 (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1993), 360.

⁴⁰ Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 249.

⁴¹ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," 345.

⁴² Hagner, 360.

⁴³ Ibid, 345.

⁴⁴ Hagner, 358.

⁴⁵ "Family," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 267.

⁴⁶ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," 345.

⁴⁷ "Family," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 264.

⁴⁸ Hagner, 360.

⁴⁹ David Turner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 2008), 281.

⁵⁰ Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 330.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 75.

⁵⁴ Gundry, 200.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁵⁶ Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, 611.

⁵⁷ Darshana Kunju, interview by author, Springfield, MO, July 5, 2015.

⁵⁸ Robert Goldman, ed., *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 53.

⁵⁹ *Yesu* is the Hindi name for Jesus.