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(Mark 3:31–35)

Introduction

Perhaps you recall the song that begins, “I’m so glad I’m a part of the family of God.” Sometimes we might be gladder than at other times. Nevertheless, it beats the alternative. Just observe the previous passage where the children of the devil were front and centre.

The words of R. Kent Hughes, though true, are not always our experience, but we should strive for this. He writes, “Obey the Lord, and an unparalleled family experience awaits you.”

It really is a wonderful thing to belong to the family of Christ. And this is the theme of the passage before us.

This scene before us is intended to teach us that Jesus Christ not only established his kingdom and a new nation; he also established a new family. His is a family characterised by radical obedience to the revealed will of God—a family that sticks closer than a blood brother, because it is the family of God.

As Witherington summarises, verses 31–35 “present Jesus’ vision for a new community where spiritual kinship and not physical relationship is the fundamental basis of family.”

Jesus was here redefining family. He was reorienting the thinking of his followers. He was reprioritising relationships. He was reassuring his disciples of his relationship to them. He was revealing the mark of a true Christian. And concerning this mark, James Edwards observes, “It is still obedience that most clearly demonstrates relationship to Jesus.”

As we will see, clearly the crowd thought that blood relationships took priority with Jesus. But he defined the most important relationship as being a familial relationship with the Father, and therefore with him. Such relationship is inseparable from obeying God’s will, that is, God’s word.

When a person becomes a true follower of Jesus, they are called to a whole new world, including to a new set of relationships and final loyalties. These closing words in Mark 3 reveal this to us.

The Call from the Outside

“Households normally have family members on the inside and crowds on the outside,” observes Edwards. “But here the order is reversed.” Consider Mark’s account: “And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you’” (Mark 3:31–32).

The present narrative picks up where vv. 20–21 left off. There, his family in Nazareth heard about what he was doing and set out from home to fetch him, fearing that he had lost his mind. Verses 22–30 record what happened perhaps as his family were making the journey. The scribes from Jerusalem, probably arrogantly having forced their way through the crowd, confronted Jesus and sought to discredit him with the absurd claim that he was casting out devils by the devil. They might have been inside the house, but they were outside the household of God.

As Jesus concluded that encounter, his family arrived. Assuming he needed to be restrained for his own safety, they sent word to Jesus, calling him. They had likely travelled the forty kilometres from Nazareth to Jerusalem to rescue him from himself. Perhaps they thought they could take him back home to Nazareth and restore him to common sense.

I believe Mark is using a play on words here. Jesus had called twelve men to himself to send them on his behalf. Here, the family of Jesus sent someone to call Jesus away from what he was supposed to be doing. Jesus was spending time with those called from the outside to be on the inside, and now his family was on the outside calling him to leave those on the inside! And the disciples, you can be sure, were watching closely.

The disciples had left all to follow Jesus. We know that, at least in the case of James and John, they had left their father and the family fishing business to follow him. They responded to the radical call of Jesus to become insiders. Their response would radically affect their relationships. Jesus makes this clear in the scene before us.

Jesus used this scene to drive home an important point: the priority of relationships in his kingdom. The disciples, of course, needed to understand this lesson. After all, most, if not all, the disciples were from this region and so the familial ties would be strong. But Jesus helped them to gain a new perspective on, and a new priority of, family relationships:

relationship with Jesus and with those who follow him. As long as the first remains first, and the second remains second, all is well.

A Mother's Love

Jesus' mother, Mary, is mentioned. It may be at this point that she did not fully understand the uniqueness of her Son. Or, if she did, perhaps the pain of submitting to the truth she knew is just too painful for her. I prefer the latter view.

Having witnessed his intense schedule, and the various pressures that his ministry was placing upon him, his mother and siblings tried to get him to take a break. They concluded that he must be "out of his mind" (v. 21).

After all, just look at his behaviour. He was preaching that the kingdom of God had come, and the clear implication is that he was the embodiment of this kingdom. In fact, it's clear that he thought that he was the King of this kingdom!

Further, his continual preaching and teaching, and his ministry of healing and delivering the demonised, had put him at great odds with the religious powers that be. It was one thing to embarrass the local scribes, it was quite another to antagonise scribes from Jerusalem. The family of Jesus could only conclude that he must be out of his mind. So, to protect him, they sought to restrain him. Some have suggested that they intended on tricking him to kidnap him! But he would have nothing of it.

When Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary took him to the temple to be circumcised and named. Simeon met them and pronounced that Jesus was Messiah, and that he would be victorious, yet opposed. Simeon also pronounced the ominous warning to Mary, "A sword will pierce your own soul also" (2:33–35).

In other words, Mary lived for thirty years under the shadow of the cross. The pain of his death was perhaps too much for her to bear, so she wanted to restrain him from more publicity, and from more conflict. If so, this would be understandable—but also wrong.

A Surprising Response

You get a sense from the tone of the text that the crowd was expecting Jesus to immediately stop what he was doing and give preference to his family. That is reasonable when you consider the culture of those times. In fact, some have criticised Jesus for the way he responded. The crowd doubtless expected him to make way for his physical family. But his response was rather shocking. It seems as if he ignored their call. Why?

His family calling for him was not merely a simple request for filial company. The word “seeking” is used ten times in Mark with reference to Jesus Christ, and in each case those seeking him were driven by their own agenda. So here.

The family of Jesus was not seeking Jesus to submit to and follow him. On the contrary, they were seeking him assuming they knew what was best; they were seeking him contrary to God’s will. This is a case of wrongheaded love. Like Peter, many in the church still suffer from this malady (see Matthew 16:21–23).

Likewise, it appears that the biological family of Jesus was more committed to their agenda than to his.

We must note the point Mark is making: Familial relationship was no guarantee of access to Jesus. As Jesus would make clear, spiritual proximity to him is not a matter of flesh and blood (see John 1:12–13). This was an important principle for the crowd to understand.

History Repeated

This is not the first time that Jesus’ family was at odds with his mission.

About eighteen years earlier, when Jesus was twelve years old, he was at the temple with his parents (and, perhaps, his siblings). As the family departed for home, after the religious festival, Jesus remained behind, interacting with – and amazing – the scribes.

His parents only realised after a full day’s journey that he was not with them. They immediately returned to Jerusalem, where they found him in the temple. In a rebuke, they informed him of the anxiety he had caused them. He replied, both forthrightly and respectfully: “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” For whatever reason, they didn’t know this, for Luke records, “And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them” (Luke 2:41–50).

Even though he had been virgin-born, even though his birth announcement was heralded by angels, even though kings paid him homage, yet they “did not understand.” And Mark seems to be showing that they still did not understand. Why was this?

We need to appreciate that the Christian faith has always been grounded in the principle that we do not walk by sight but by faith (2 Corinthians 5:7). Yes, even Mary.

No doubt, Mary held the scribes and Pharisees in high esteem. It perhaps would have confused her when they began to contradict and accuse her Son. Consider also that Jesus was a human being. Yes, he was the God-Man, but there was no exceptional beauty that would indicate deity. As the Christmas hymn puts it, “veiled in flesh the Godhead see.”

Yet none saw it clearly. Even Mary would need the power of the Holy Spirit to see that Jesus was God's Son. In fact, I think that it was a grace from God that she did not see this clearly.

Can you imagine the burden of carrying such a revelation? Imagine thirty years, knowing that you are living in the very presence of God. Think back to the effect that such a communion had on Moses or Isaiah. Think of Peter's encounter on the shore, when the light broke in and he realised that he was in the presence of God. He fell to the ground and cries out, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:7)

Of course, even the disciples would falter in their faith. Even with such experiences like this, along with Matthew 16:13–20 and the numerous miracles and the flashes of unveiled deity (John 18:1–11), Peter would fail to maintain consistent belief. We should not be surprised by Mary's stumbling when it came to faith.

It may also be noticed that there is no mention of Joseph, neither here nor when Mary was at the cross (John 19:25–27). Mary was probably widowed, and now her Son was causing all this trouble. We can sympathise with her situation.

But, to return to Luke 2, there is a difference between how Jesus responded here and how he responded then. When he was twelve years old and his family rebuked him, "he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them" (Luke 2:41–51). But, not now.

Now, Jesus had already been baptised and anointed by the Holy Spirit. He was on mission, establishing his kingdom. This time, he did not heed their call (v. 31). Instead, he continued to do what he had told his parents eighteen years earlier: He was in his Father's house, spending time with his new family.

Jesus came to the Father's house to restore it; indeed, to recreate it (Malachi 3:1–4). This was symbolised by his cleansing the temple on two separate occasions. But, all along, he knew that a new multi-ethnic, spiritual (not spatial) temple would become the new house, the new household of God (John 2:18–22; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 1 Peter 2:4–5; Ephesians 2:19–22).

All this to say that, in the scene before us, Jesus was very much at home with this circle of worshippers. He was amid what would become his Father's house. His biological family could become a part of this family, but they would not take priority over it. This is a very important lesson for all of us.

Hughes pastorally comments, “Every earthly loyalty, if it is made central, becomes idolatry, and all idolatries eventually destroy their worship.” Will you be the kind of family that has Jesus’ agenda as its own?

The Crowd on the Inside

Mark next records Jesus’ response to his family: “And he answered them, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:33–35).

As mentioned, his was very countercultural—some would say even rude. But we know Jesus, and he would never violate God’s law (see Exodus 20:12). But, because we know him, we should not be surprised at his speaking the truth—clearly and without apology.

France makes an important point when he writes, “The implication here is not so much that family relationships are in themselves unimportant, but rather that a higher priority (the call to discipleship in the light of the proclamation of the kingdom of God) may need to take precedence.”

Family Matters

We want to be careful of going too far and concluding that family is not important. On the contrary, Jesus rebuked those who played fast and loose with God’s word to avoid familial responsibility to care for their parents (Matthew 7:11). As we will see, at the cross, Jesus was concerned about the welfare of his mother (John 19:25–27). The nuclear family is very important; it is highly significant in our lives, and this should never be minimised. Sadly, it often is. Entertainment and sports and careers and the pressures of life can often eclipse the importance of family. A godly family is such a joy. We should do all we can to produce one.

And what a joy when one’s physical family is also a part of one’s spiritual family! Some time ago, I was going through a dark time in my ministry. My daughters asked my wife what time I woke up on a Sunday morning. She told them, and they woke up earlier that morning to pray that I would wake devoid of the darkness I had been facing. By God’s grace, I found myself awake that morning, singing “It Is Well With My Soul” as I dressed. (My singing may have produced its own kind of darkness in my wife!)

A Closer Family

Later, some of the Jesus’ siblings would come to repentance and faith. James and Jude, called the Lord’s “brothers” may be two of these. (There is debate about the use of the

word “brother,” which can be used of a cousin.) Regardless, we know that Mary believed, along with at least some of his siblings (Acts 1:12–14). The point that Jesus was emphasising is that his family was not limited to biological family. It was much bigger than that. But it does not necessarily exclude blood relatives. Thank God!

We were privileged recently to witness two baptisms, and both bore witness to the fact that God saves families. One was the son of a former church member, who moved to Malawi, and the other was the father of a church member. God is saving families at our church. What a profound joy to witness this!

Oh that we would believe, and then behave like we believe, that God saves households as a means to fill his household (Acts 3:19; Psalms 78:1–8; 128:1–4; Ephesians 6:1–4; Titus 1:6; see Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31, 34; 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:16; 16:15; Hebrews 11:7).

Those who have believing households must never take this blessing for granted, and neither can we take credit for it. All glory goes to God. But neither should we be dismissive of this grace. We should encourage others that God saves households, and a means towards that end is the church.

I will remain forever grateful for the way the Lord has used Brackenhurst Baptist Church in the salvation of my household. Perhaps this is another reason that we should do all we can to seek a mature unity in Christ. Households are at stake. Don't take that lightly.

Intentional Inclusion

The words “looking about at those who sat around him” is a powerful and loving picture of the Lord's comprehensive love. The word translated “looking about” is used several times by Mark and, in each case, it speaks of an intense, deliberate, searching gaze. One might even describe it as personal. Sometimes the word is used in an ominous way (See 3:5; 11:11), but here we might characterise it as a gracious gaze.

As Jesus “looked” at this circle around him, these insiders no doubt felt loved and accepted. By God's grace, they were a part of the family of God. As the Shepherd looked at these people, he could say, “I know my sheep and I call them by name” (John 10:3–4).

To hear Jesus call them “my mother and my brothers” must have filled them with great joy. As we contemplate that we are in God's family, that God is our Father, and that Jesus is our elder brother (Hebrews 2:11), we should be deeply encouraged and our hearts should be joyful.

So yes, family is important. But one of the lessons here is that, though the family should not be minimised, neither should family be maximised. Idolatry can take place with anything that is a good gift from God.

A Sweeping Encouragement

Before moving to a close, we should note that Jesus added a word that was not used when they called him. He adds the word “sister.” That was radical. Jesus was making the point that women feature equally in his kingdom. Women feature as significantly as men in his family. As a church, I believe we are learning to appreciate our sisters in a more meaningful way. We still have a way to go.

The Distinguishing Factor

Jesus’ response was driven neither by sentimentality nor by favouritism. Rather, it was driven by truth. Jesus made clear the defining trait of his family: “For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” This is called elsewhere in Scripture “the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 6:16; 16:19, 26).

According to Jesus, the family of God is characterised by obedience to God’s will. As Edwards puts it, “Anyone can be an insider who sits at Jesus’ feet and does the will of his Father, and no one can be an insider who does not.”

We are not called so much to choose sides as we are called to choose Scripture; not to choose relationships rather to choose revelation. And the rest will take care of itself.

Fruit, Not Root

Of course, Jesus was not teaching here, nor did he teach anywhere, that one becomes a member of God’s family by good works. Obedience, in other words, is not the root of household entrance; it is, however, the fruit that reveals household membership.

So, what does this fruit look like? What does Jesus mean by doing the will of God?

When Jesus spoke of doing God’s will, he was not speaking of the personalised plan for each believer’s life. He was not speaking of God’s decretive will. No, Jesus was speaking of God’s will as revealed by Jesus, the Word of God. That is, Jesus was speaking of that which God commands of all people as revealed in God’s word. The mark of the child of God, the mark of belonging to Jesus’ family, is faithfulness to God’s word. Submissiveness to God’s word distinguishes the siblings of Jesus.

Jesus was submissive to the Father’s will and word; so must be his disciples. If we want to know something of what this looks like, all we need to do is to listen to what Mark has

written. So far, we have seen Jesus do the will of God by either doing or teaching the following: being baptised (identifying with the people of God); repenting and believing the gospel of God as proclaimed by the Son of God; answering the call to follow Jesus as his disciple; proclaiming the gospel of God; commitment to the kingdom of God; and being with Jesus. In each of these, the word of God is central.

The word of God commands us to repent and believe the gospel. The word of God commands us to be baptised. The word of God calls us to follow Jesus (as each of our recent baptismal candidates vocalised). the word of God commands us to preach the gospel of God. The word of God commands us to seek first the kingdom of God. The word of God commands us to be with Jesus.

Yes, the Sunday school has it right, “Obedience is the very best way to show that you believe.” Do you believe? The answer is, are you obeying (see John 8:29–31)? Jesus made it clear that one’s relationship to him had everything to do with a belief demonstrated in obedience. It had nothing to do with genealogy and everything to do with grace—the grace of faith manifested in obedience.

Disciples are Different

In his prayer on the night he was betrayed, Jesus said that one’s relationship to God’s truth—that is, God’s word—is what sets one apart from the world (John 17:17). Those who are spiritual outsiders foolishly follow their own will; but those who by the grace of God are insiders faithfully follow God’s will. They don’t merely know it, they also do it. They don’t merely subscribe to it, they submit to it. They don’t merely listen to it, they live it.

Loving, faithful obedience to God’s word is God’s will for you. It is God’s word for all his children. It is the characteristic of his family. When someone hears the call of God the Holy Spirit to leave their sin and follow Jesus, they are being called from being an outsider to becoming an insider. As James Edwards comments, “The status of insider or outsider is determined by one’s proximity and receptivity to Jesus.” Not physical proximity, but rather relational proximity as measured by obedience to God’s word.

On Which Side Are You?

Do you remember the children’s Sunday school song “One Door”? It goes, “One door and only one, and yet its sides are two. Inside and outside, on which side are you?” That is an important question—for children and adults. Let me put it another way: “Are you an insider or an outsider?” The answer is found in v. 35: Are you doing the will of God? If you are a member of the family of God then, as the saying goes, like father, like son.

Paul exhorts Christians, “As dear children, be followers of God” (Ephesians 5:1–2). We are to imitate God. God’s will is to be our will. God’s desires are to be our desires. God’s word is to be our authoritative word.

Jesus proved he was of God’s family by doing the will of God. Hear these words of the writer of Hebrews:

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

(Hebrews 10:5–7)

Ferguson said it so well: “Jesus bore the weight of an eternal homesickness on the cross, for the sake of the gospel.” Jesus demonstrated his commitment to do the will of God when he took on the body God prepared for him, perfectly lived according to God’s will and word in that body, and then when he offered up his life and his life’s blood in that body, on the cross.

Because he did the will of God perfectly, the Father vindicated him by raising him from the dead. And now he lives to save everyone who comes to him with a heart of repentance, a heart that is committed to doing the will of God.

Do you want to be in God’s family? Do you want to know the joy of having God as your Father and Jesus as your brother? Then do the will of God.

“But, wait a minute,” you say, “I cannot do the will of God.” That is another mark of the child of God: humble honesty. And guess what? That is the will of God! Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up.

If you will repent of your sin, rejecting yourself and others as your lord, receiving Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, then you will become an insider, a member of the family of God. What a glorious hopeful way to live! But perhaps more importantly, what a gloriously hopeful way to die.

Conclusion

For some of you, family is a heart-wrenching, maybe even a nonexistent experience. But know that, in Christ, you have a family. We must make the most of this (see 1 Timothy 5:1–2).

The Family of Christ

Mark 3:31–35

Doug Van Meter

For some of you, following Jesus has been, and will be, relationally costly, but take comfort: “In place of broken family relations, ostracism and persecution, [is] the close and intimate relation to the Son of God” (Wessels). “And there is a loving word for those whose families reject the faith. Your family is much, much larger than that!” (English).

AMEN