

**“Christ’s Kin”**  
Mark 3:31-35 (NRSV)

Picture the scene with me. **Jesus was back in Capernaum** where he’d performed so many of his first miracles, **where the crowds had been so intense** that some had even torn a hole in a neighbour’s roof to get to him. **And now even greater crowds**, attracted by his subsequent miracles and his words (no one ever spoke like he did), **were pressing in on him**.

**This pressing multitude was a varied mixture.** At the centre were the newly chosen disciples, the Twelve, admirably hanging on to Jesus’ every word. In contrast to these eager faces, there leered the pained visages of the scribes and the Pharisees, also turning over every syllable, having just accused Jesus of being in league with Satan. Every extreme in the society of the day was represented: from friends and nationalist zealots to collaborationist tax collectors, from ignorant fishermen to the trained intelligentsia. Some in the multitude were eager, some ecstatic, some quizzical, some perplexed, and some hostile, livid and angry.

**Also, at the periphery of the surging throng, standing by -- unsure and nervously -- was Jesus’ family.** Mark says,

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent [word] to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they [upon receiving the message] said to him, “Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you” (3:31-32).

Unbeknown to the crowd, **Jesus’ mother and his younger brothers and sisters hoped to lure Jesus away** so they could take him back to Nazareth **where perhaps they could protect him from his own mania** (cf. 3:21). A message was passed from person to person. When it reached Jesus, many of the crowd knew the nature of the request and would likely have expected Jesus to defer to it. **They certainly weren’t ready for his startling, rather hard-hearted, reply: “Who are my mother and my brothers?”** Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him – and the implication is that he gave them a searching look (Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 1981, p. 246); Matthew’s Gospel adds that Jesus gestured to those sitting around him with his hand (12:49) – and said, **“Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother”** (3:33-34).

**This reply must have seemed startling, even shocking, to the crowd because it seemed to be so insensitive. Surely, Mary, his mother,** who had nursed and dressed Jesus from infancy, who had loved him all the way into his magnificent manhood, and who had now come in loving concern for his wellbeing, **would've had a right to have been crushed and offended.** Where were Jesus' manners? **And Jesus' brothers and sisters were probably likewise chagrined with his response.** It didn't seem respectful to their mother, or to them. Perhaps they were even angry. After all, they'd only come to help him. This was all getting out of hand.

**I suspect we also may find Jesus' words rather harsh.** Thus this is what the scholars characterize as **one of Jesus' "hard sayings."** **Renan,** the famous skeptic, used it to accuse Jesus of "trampling under foot everything that is human – love and blood and country" (George Arthur Buttrick, Sermons Preached in a University Church, 1959, p. 125, quoting Renan's Life of Jesus, 1910, p. 313).

**What then did Jesus mean by his shocking answer?** Well, **he didn't mean to sever his family ties.** His family was dear to him. The Bible tells us that in the final hours of his life, while he hung in agony on the cross, he thought tenderly and compassionately of his mother's needs. He asked his most "beloved" disciple, John, to take care of her (Jn. 19:26-27). In his teaching, Jesus held parenthood in the highest regard and he castigated those who failed to give honour to their parents (7:9-13). Jesus wasn't suggesting that it was good to break family ties, even though he acknowledged that Christian commitment would sometimes bring division within the family (cf. 10:28-30). Later, as a sign of family solidarity, his own brother James became a devoted leader of the Christian Church in Jerusalem, and a martyr.

What Jesus did mean was that **there is a deeper kinship than flesh and blood, a spiritual kinship that is characterized by obedience to God.** For this reason he said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Obedience doesn't originate our relationship with God – faith does that – but obedience is a sign of it. Jesus was saying that **there are new family relationships among people of Christian faith which are far superior to the relationships within the human family,** for these relationships are actually more satisfying, stronger, yes, even more demanding, and lasting, than any family relationships, as loving and lovely as these might be. **Those who are part of Jesus' spiritual family are dearer than his human family** with whom he had lived for over 30 years!

What Jesus said here is of massive importance.

### 1. The implications of Jesus' statement for the church.

Put another way: **following Jesus**, developing a relationship with him, “abiding” in him, and responding in a positive way to his commandments (Jn. 15:9-10), **is the key to experiencing “family” with God**. This was true even for Jesus himself. Early in his ministry Jesus told his followers, “My food is to do the will of [God] who sent me and to complete his work” (Jn. 4:34). And, in Gethsemane, in a bloody sweat, he cried to his heavenly Father, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want but what you want” (Mk. 14:36). Every beat of Christ’s heart was given to perform his Father’s will. This was essential to his experience of “family.”

Is this was so for Christ, how much more for us? We are children of God but **our subjective awareness of the sweetness of being in God’s family is conditional upon our obedience to him**. Expositor **Alexander Maclaren** paraphrased Jesus’ statement to the inner circle in Mark’s Gospel ((3:35) as this: **“Whoever does God’s will is [and feels himself or herself to be] my brother and sister and mother”** (Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol. 8, p. 133). It’s no wonder that in the Lord’s Prayer Jesus also commended us to pray, “thy will be done,” for it is in paying attention to and obeying God that we open our souls to the fullness of being a part of his family.

But there is even more, for **obedience** – an uncommon word and experience today – **is the key to experiencing “family” with our brothers and sisters in Christ on earth**. When we work together to make our wills conform with God’s will, we will experience a dynamic relationship with one another that will transcend our usual human relationships of harmony and unity. **Have you had the experience of meeting other Christians in other places and experiencing an instant sense of being family?** You begin to talk and soon you are talking about Christ and ministry for him; then you quickly realize you’re experiencing a sense of “family” which goes beyond flesh and blood. This is what I mean. **When we are committed to the same purposes and working for similar goals Christian community suddenly happens**. You could never make it happen, but it happens by the powerful, all-embracing, transforming work of God’s Holy Spirit.

Jesus spoke of this rich experience later in Mark’s Gospel when he said,

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields (with persecutions) -- and in the age to come, eternal life (10:29-30).

Jesus was talking about the sense of family which comes to those who are obedient.

**Can there be any more positive call to do the will of God?** Such are the implications of Jesus' statement about **our spiritual sense of family**. But there is more, because it also has wonderful implications for **our actual flesh and blood husband-wife, parent-grandparent-child families**.

## 2. **The implications of Jesus' statement for our families.**

We are often aware of **the joys of our human families**, perhaps particularly during times of the new birth of children or grandchildren in our family, or during Christmas and other special seasons or family celebrations. At those holy times there is **a special kind of family love or affection** which courses through us. **It is a kind of love**, as C. S. Lewis has written, **which makes us use "old" as a term of affection** (*The Four Loves*, 1960, p. 55) – that is, "good old Uncle Jim" who may, in fact be only 30, or "good old Susan" who is really 40! Such **comfortable love develops with the years, like a favourite old pair of slippers or other clothing**. At the same time it is built upon and sustained by all the other loves we human beings experience: the love of friendship (philia), godly love (agape) and sexual love (eros). Next to God and his will for us, **the love found among our earthly families** is of greatest importance.

Despite this, today we are witnessing **the disintegration of the family** all around us, even in the Christian church. **One reason for this is that societal pressures are hostile to the extended family**. The current busyness of life in our so-called "developed" world – there are so many things to choose and to do -- and the ever-increasing drive for individual satisfaction (backed up by universal self-absorption) all contribute to the devaluation and the breakup of the corporate family. **We care more about the value of individual rights than about our common connections and our societal responsibilities**. How often do we argue for these?

Ironically, there may be **another reason why the family is in trouble: it's worship!** In a valiant attempt to stem the tide many Christians and non-Christians, like the Mormons, **have made the family everything.** Every moment of every day, every involvement, every commitment, every engagement is measured and judged by the question: "How will this benefit my family?" While this is generally commendable and better than the alternative of not caring about the family at all, it can degenerate into a **familial narcissism.** The four walls of the home become a temple, and only for what goes on within these four walls are any sacrifices made. Thus we come to **domestic idolatry.** Family is more important than anything else. Thus Christ, or his church and community interests will always come in second, third or fourth, or even later, place.

The tragedy is this: **every earthly loyalty, even to family, if it is made central, becomes idolatry, and all idolatries eventually destroy their worshippers.** The truth is, many of the psychological problems in our families can be traced to parents whose affections bind rather than release and liberate (Lloyd Ogilvie, *Live Without Limits*, 1975, p. 79). Avoiding **the permissive destruction** that is ravaging our society, some parents (and grandparents too) perpetrate a **possessive destruction**, which is equally devastating. Jesus warned us about this when he said, in Matthew's Gospel,

Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it (10:37-39).

**What then can we do to preserve and elevate our families?** The answer begins with **the family also putting love and obedience to Christ** above everything else. What does this mean? For example, **none of us can love our spouses as they ought to be loved.** I hate to break it to you, but it's true! We can't do it. We need Christ's love to assist us. We need Christ's sacrifice to guide us. We need Christ's Spirit to empower us. John wrote, "We love because he first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19). Most of us need to be better lovers, but being a better lover begins, for the believer by letting God love us and by loving him, and then loving others, in return.

Christ is to be first in everything!

**The same is true for our children and our grandchildren.** Giving them everything and doing everything for them will not enable us to love them as we ought, or make it possible for them to love us as they ought. We must love and obey God's commandments first. Anything less is idolatrous. And we know that the greatest thing is when our children and grandchildren (and great grandchildren) also come to love and obey God. And when they come to faith in Christ, we have a fellowship that transcends and eternalizes our earthly relationships.

When **St. Augustine** finally came to faith in answer to the prayers of his mother, Monica, the two, according to his famous Confessions, stood in a window in Ostia, Italy realizing that they were more truly kindred than ever before. **When family is church something wonderful has happened!**

Over two thousand years ago, when Jesus gave his startling answer, he shocked his mother and brothers and all who heard him. The shock waves have reverberated down through the centuries. But it has been a therapeutic shock, for it teaches us that **when we “trust and obey” him we enjoy the blessed sense of being “family” with his other devoted children here.** This loving obedience to him is also the key to happiness in our earthly families, for when we please him first, we can love our wives, our husbands, our children and our parents, and others, as they ought to be loved.

How about you? **Do you have a growing sense of being family with God?** Is there a joyous sense of being one with his people? Is your own human family being elevated and perpetuated by the eternal sense of being part of the family of God? If not, or if you want it to be more so, commit yourself right now to be obedient to do his will.

Amen

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