

## Mark 3:20-35 The Household of Faith

Mark sets the scene in Galilee. Large crowds are following Jesus wherever he goes. They are drawn by reports of miracles and messianic rumors. Jesus proclaims the gospel, “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (1:15). People are “amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as teachers of the law” (1:22). He has the power to cast out “impure spirits” (1:25) and heal many who suffered from various diseases (1:34). The crowds are intense, so much so, that when four friends brought a paralyzed man they dug through the roof and lowered him down to Jesus. But instead of simply healing him, Jesus said, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (2:5). The teachers of the law are tracking all of this. They’re asking, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (2:7). Admiration and opposition are building. This brings us to our story.

“Then Jesus entered a house (οἶκον), and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not able to eat” (3:20). The Greek word for “house” (oikos) is related to the English prefix, eco - for *ecology* and *economics*. Jesus works out the *ecology* of the kingdom of God in an ordinary house. You can’t get more familiar, more down-to-earth, or more personal than around the kitchen table. The apostles used “household” language to speak of the fellowship of Jesus. The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus:

“You are no longer foreigners and *strangers*, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his *household*, *built on* the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole *building is joined together* and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a *dwelling* in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:19-22).

With the literary care of a poet, Paul orchestrated a word play on the Greek word for “house” (οἶκος). In Christ we are no longer *aliens* (ἄρροικοι), but members of God’s *household* (οἰκεῖοι), *built on* (ἐποικοδομηθέντες) a sure foundation, and the *building* (οἰκοδομῆ) is *built together* (συνοικοδομείσθε) into a *dwelling place* (κατοικητήριον) of God. Paul’s intentional selection of the household of faith language underscores the relational nature of the church.

Mark’s description focuses on three areas: *a house divided, a house defended, and a house defined.*

**A House Divided** – Jesus interacts with three groups of people, an admiring crowd, a controlling contingent of family and associates, and a condemning cohort of religious leaders. These three groups are with us today.

*1. An Admiring Crowd* – Jesus was admired by the crowd, an object of admiration and a source of excitement. Jesus does not trust the crowds. “Largeness is an impediment, not a help.” Popularity distracts, dilutes, flattens, and diminishes the gospel. Eugene Peterson writes, “A

crowd is an exercise in false transcendence upward, which is why all crowds are spiritually pretty much the same, whether at football games, political rallies, or church.”<sup>1</sup>

*Admirers are consumers.* Admirers enjoy the object of admiration for their own sake. Their admiration is based on personal satisfaction. If their felt needs are met, whether those needs are real or imagined, tangible or intangible, the admiring crowd offers its devotion.

*Admirers are also critics.* They sit in judgment and critique the object of their admiration. An admiring crowd freely evaluates the object of their admiration because they feel entitled to their opinion. The rich, young ruler, was an admirer of Jesus, but he reserved the right to draw the line between admiration and discipleship (Matt. 19:16-22). Admirers are *critics*, offering their assessment from a safe distance.

*Admirers are carefree.* They can come and go as they please. Admirers bear no other responsibility to the object of their admiration other than their admiration. The object of their admiration has no claim on them. There is no personal responsibility and commitment, let alone meaningful exchange between the admirer and the one being admired. The performer is only as good as the last performance.

Jesus saw through the popularity of the crowd. John reports that Jesus “would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person” (John 2:24-25).

Mark distinguishes between the crowd and the disciples. Jesus and his disciples were so crowded with the crush of people that they couldn’t find either the time or the space to eat. The crowd was an obstacle, not an asset. The message: beware of the crowd. It gets in the way of Jesus’s mission.

2. *A Controlling Family* – Mark’s description of this second group is deliberately vague. “When the ones around Jesus [*family, associates*] heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” They think Jesus is crazy. They’ve come to seize him. The idea of “taking charge” or “seizing” conveys the idea of “attempting to bind Jesus and deprive him of freedom.”<sup>2</sup> In other places, “taking charge” is translated as arrested (Mark 3:21; 6:17; 12:12; 14:1, 44, 46, 49, 51). This is the language used to describe the plots of the religious leaders and the actions of the Roman guards.

These well-intentioned family and friends believed that Jesus had gone too far. They may have accused him of playing to the crowd. His ego-driven over-the-top claims had gone too far. They are the type of “followers” who were offended by Jesus’s “Bread of Life” message when he said, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Their reaction was, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” And from that point on many of his ‘disciples’ turned back and no longer followed him (John 6:53, 60, 66).

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 157.

<sup>2</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 118.

C. S. Lewis sums it up this way: *“In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words [promising forgiveness] would imply what I can only regard as silliness and conceit unrivaled by any other character in history . . . I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. **A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.**”*<sup>3</sup>

Have you noticed that no one is calling Jesus crazy these days? It is politically incorrect to call Jesus crazy. It’s his followers who are crazy. Today’s critics and academics make the case that Jesus didn’t say what the Bible says he said. They claim that the early church put these words in the mouth of Jesus. So today it is not Jesus who is crazy, it’s his followers who are crazy. They are the weird ones for taking up a cross following Jesus. They are foolish followers for embracing suffering and sacrifice, for accepting a biblical sexual ethic, for believing in the reality of hell, for holding to the conviction that the universe was created by the personal Creator and Redeemer. They are crazy in eyes of the world because they believe in God’s mission, to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are crazy because they believe in the church, a community of flawed, weak, saved sinners, like themselves, who are called to serve others and experience God-centered worship. They are crazy because they seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. They are crazy because they say with the apostle for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. It’s not politically correct to call Jesus crazy these days but it is popular in secular and religious circles to call his followers crazy.

3. *A Condemning Cohort of Religious Leaders* – The religious leaders represent the “official opposition arrayed against Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> We read, “And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.’” (Mark 3:22). What is interesting in their perverse charge is that they acknowledge that Jesus has the power to perform miracles (drive out demons and heal many with various diseases). The good news of the in-breaking of the kingdom is perceived by the religious leaders as a threat. They level an accusation against Jesus: “By Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons.” To say that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul is the worst thing that could be said of Jesus. Interestingly his accusers do not deny that he has the power to drive out demons, but they condemn the source of his power as demonic. The evidence of transformation is there for all to see but they insist on attributing Jesus’ power to the evil one, Beelzebul, not God.

Beelzebub, a Syrian god of Ekron (“Baal-Zebub” - 2 Kings 1:2), was turned into a term of contempt in the *LXX*, which meant “Lord of the flies.” This name inspired the title of William

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<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Edwards, *The Gospel of Mark*, 119.

Golding's 1954 novel *The Lord of the Flies* on the subject of human depravity. Literally Beelzebub meant "Baal the prince," the arch ruler of a dynasty of demons and evil spirits, "the prince of demons," and the chief rival to the Lord God. Can you imagine the religious leaders attributed Jesus's work of healing and exorcisms to the devil?!

Luther wrote, "*From this we learn not to be surprised when our doctrine and life are blasphemed and stubborn hearts will not be convinced nor converted, although they are overwhelmed, as it were with tangible truth and completely put to silence.*"<sup>5</sup>

Three groups, *consumers, controllers, and condemners*, respond to Jesus. And these three groups remain in and around the Household of Faith today.

**A House Defended** – "So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables."

Jesus uses an analogy/parable (a house divided against itself cannot stand) and a pronouncement/warning (whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven).

1. Jesus's ministry has reached a communicational impasse. His momentum has been building but so has the ugly opposition. The religious leaders have dedicated themselves, allegedly for the good of the nation, to bring down this non-conformist Galilean rabbi. They accuse him of working for the devil. Even Jesus's immediate family attempted an intervention. Parables provided just the right genre to extend Jesus's teaching ministry. He was able to keep the crowd with him, frustrate his enemies, and invite his disciples to embrace the meaning of the gospel. Parable comes from the Greek word *parabolē*: *para* - "beside" + *ballo* - "to throw." Jesus used simple stories and quick analogies to set up a comparison between life as we know it and the life made possible by the gospel.

Jesus was very good at reading his audience. He kept his cool. His gracious response to this malicious charge was reminiscent of the prophet Isaiah's description of the Lord saying, "*Come, let us reason together, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool*" (Isa 1:18). His reasoned argument was logical and engaging. Instead of meeting slander with anger, he met insult with insight. Instead of being overcome by evil, he overcame evil with good (Rom 12:21). "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined," he reasoned, "and a house divided against itself will fall." He then applied this logical principle to Satan. "If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?"

When Jonathan Edwards, the early American theologian and pastor, assessed the true affections of spiritual renewal he emphasized that there were some things the devil would not do. The devil would never awaken the soul to see the true dreadfulness of sin. "The devil would never attempt to deepen a person's regard for the Word of God." It is in Satan's interests "to lull the conscience to sleep and to keep it quiet." On the contrary the influence of the Spirit of God is abundantly manifest when we are weaned off of objects of worldly lusts and drawn to the excellencies of

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, editor John Nicholas Lenker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), vol. 1.2: 158.

Christ as promised in the gospel.

If Jesus is removing evil how can he be using evil? “So if the devil is fighting the devil, the devil’s kingdom is obviously coming to an end. Thus, even if the scribe’s analysis of the situation is correct, the kingdom of the satan is toppling.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus applies this logic to their good works. “Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Their condemnation of him runs against the grain of righteousness and the testimony of prophecy.

There are only two options: Jesus is either of God or of the devil. There is no third option, no middle way, no neutral alternative. Who is the strong man who guards his own house and protects his possessions? Satan. Who is the someone stronger who attacks and overpowers him? Jesus.

Luther says, “*Notice how he pictures the devil! He calls him a mighty giant who guards his court and home, that is, the devil not only possesses the world as his own domain, but he has garrisoned and fortified it, so that no one can take it from him. He rules it also with undisputed sway, so that it does whatever he commands.*” Luther adds that man’s free will does not stand a chance against the dominion of Satan. “*The house must be conquered by a stronger man and thus wrested from the tyrant, so must men and women also be ransomed through Christ and wrested from Satan. We see again, therefore that our works and righteousness contribute absolutely nothing toward our salvation; it is effected alone by the grace of God.*”<sup>7</sup>

2. Jesus defends the household of faith with a logical analogy and a solemn warning. He raises the ominous reality of the so-called “unpardonable sin.” Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin” (Mark 3:28-29). Edwards writes, “The sin against the Holy Spirit is one of the most disturbing statements of Jesus in the Gospels. . . . Such a sin is called ‘an eternal sin’ (v. 29), that is, a sin with an eternal consequence.” The sin against the Holy Spirit is a definable offense. It is the adamant and persistent refusal to accept the testimony of the Holy Spirit. “Whoever, like the scribes, can look at him [Jesus] and say, ‘This is the devil’; or conversely, whoever can look at the devil and call him God’s Son. . . .that person is hopelessly lost.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus describes a scenario in which everything is turned wrongside up. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isaiah 5:20).

Jesus leveled this warning at religious people. Edwards writes, “Sinners and tax collectors are less likely to commit this sin than are the learned, religious, and moral. In this respect, wickedness poses a lesser problem to the grace of God than do pride and self-righteousness.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus utters this pronouncement as a *warning*, not a condemnation. The apostle Peter wrote, “The

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, *Mark For Everyone* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2004), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Luther, *The Complete Sermons*, vol. 1.2:160.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, *The Gospel of Mark*, 123.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, *The Gospel of Mark*, 123.

Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. . . .Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation. . ." (2 Pet 3:9, 15).

***A House Defined*** – Jesus's Q & A session defines membership in the household of faith. His family is "standing outside." They're expecting Jesus to come out to them, but he stays in the house. The crowd says, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." Then, Jesus asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He lets the rhetorical question hang for a moment as he looks at those seated in a circle around him. He doesn't expect anyone to answer. Then, he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." The relational dynamic is reversed.

My mind goes to John's description in his Gospel, "*He came to his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God*" (John 1:11-13).

Jesus transcends two great institutions, family and religion. Jesus said, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:28). Fourth century theologian Gregory of Nazianzen wrote "that three gathered together in the Name of the Lord count for more than tens of thousands of those who deny the Godhead."<sup>10</sup> Where two or three are gathered in the name of Christ there is no pretense of a public persona, nor isolation of a private self. Relational reality is established in the presence of Jesus.

What counts for true intimacy and spiritual nurture is not the smallness of the *small* group, but the One in whom the relationships depend. John Chrysostom said, "What then? Are there not two or three gathered together in His name? There are indeed, but rarely!" It is not the mere "assembling" of ourselves, but the holding to Christ as "the principal ground" of love between us that counts.<sup>11</sup> This truth is beautifully expressed by Jonathan in a vow, "sworn in the name of the Lord," to David, who apart from the Lord would have been his hated rival, "The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever" (1 Sam. 20:42).

The borders of the Kingdom of God are wide open. The gospel message is all encompassing, "whosoever will may come." No matter how deep the depravity or painful the social alienation, there is room at the table of the Lord in the Household of Faith. There are no walls of hostility keeping anyone out. In a world of evil and hostility, the gospel of Jesus Christ is an inclusive invitation to an exclusive Savior and Lord. We come as we are but we do not remain as we were. We are new creations created in Christ Jesus. We have a new citizenship, a new family and an entirely new indwelling Spirit. Jesus's scandalous repudiation of family bonds is hard to hear, "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;

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<sup>10</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, "The Last Farewell," Oration XLII, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol 7, second series, ed. Philip Schaff & Henry Wace (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publ., 1995), p. 388

<sup>11</sup> John Chrysostom, "Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew: Homily LX," *Nicene And Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10, first series, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publ. 1995), p. 374

anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.  
Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.  
Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:37-39).

But they are necessary in order to clear the way for family to be rooted in Christ. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Mark 10:29-31).

Our first step toward being a household of faith is a deep-seated, inextinguishable longing, a yearning of the soul, to follow Jesus and belong to the Body of Christ. This is not to be confused with a wishful longing to be “one big happy family,” but it is a profound conviction that God makes His presence felt in and through the church. Faith is thicker than blood. Truth is stronger than tradition. We agree with the apostle,

“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith, I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:7-11).

## The Inner Circle

C. S. Lewis gave a speech at King’s College, London, in December 1944, entitled “The Inner Ring” in which he exposed the human longing and quest to be in the inner circle of power and privilege.<sup>12</sup> Lewis warns that the desire to be on the inside, to experience the “secret intimacy” of knowing that you are in the know can be dangerous. It feels good to be an important person among important people, but to be in the in-group tends to be corrupting and dehumanizing. Lewis observed different kinds of hierarchies, the kind pictured on organizational charts, and those informal, unspoken hierarchies that are calling the shots behind-the-scenes. It should not surprise us that Lewis is wary of the worldly inner circle. The passion for the Inner Ring makes a “not very bad person do very bad things.” And once you are in the in-group you’ll try to make it hard for the next person to get in. “Your genuine Inner Ring exists for exclusion. There’d be no fun if there were no outsiders.”

Jesus’s inner circle could not be more different. Hospitality in the name of Christ is inclusive. There is always room in his inner circle for one more. Truth prevails over worldly strategies. Friendship is transformational, not transactional. Mission is sacrificial, not competitive. People

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<sup>12</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Collier Books, 1980), 93-105.

are not consumers, but people for whom Christ died to save. Discussion in this circle revolves around the Sermon on the Mount and what it means to seek first Christ's kingdom and his righteousness. As with the two disciples from Emmaus, Jesus explains "what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).