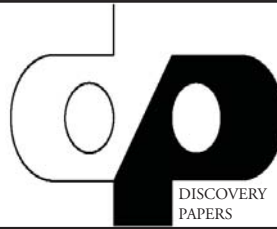


# GOD'S NEW FAMILY

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING  
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



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Mark 3:20-35  
10th Message  
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Jesus summons us that we might be with him and that he might send us out in mission to the world (Mark 3:13-15). Our mission to the world involves declaring that God's healing, loving rule has arrived in the person of Jesus Christ and challenging strongholds of evil that keep people enslaved in our world. These are undoubtedly daunting tasks. Jesus undertook such tasks and faced fierce opposition. In Mark 3:20-35, he faces opposition on two fronts. A delegation from Jerusalem lines up against him and his own family tries to put a stop to him.

Likewise, those of us who entertain notions of following Jesus into the world often face opposition on multiple fronts. Sometimes, opposition forms in our own hearts. On the one hand, we want to follow Jesus into the world. On the other hand, we can't seem to get moving. We have much to learn from our Lord.

Mark 3:20-35:

**And He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal. When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, "He has lost His senses."**

**The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons." And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house. Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"—because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."**

**Then His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You." Answering them, He said, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother."<sup>1</sup>**

## Scribes accuse Jesus

After withdrawing to a mountain to appoint the twelve disciples, Jesus comes home, apparently to Simon and Andrew's house in Capernaum. A crowd once again descends on Jesus. His family members, however, are not impressed; in fact, they think he has lost his mind and want to take custody of him. They have good reason to be concerned. Jesus has articulated a controversially inclusive vision of the kingdom of God that upstages the temple, the center of national life; involves tax-collectors who collaborated with Rome, the occupying power; reinterprets the Sabbath, the holy day; and even redefines Israel (Mark 2:1-3:19). Moreover, he seems to care little for his safety or for his need to eat.

The family's concerns for Jesus are borne out when a hostile delegation from Jerusalem, the nerve center of Israel, makes its way north to Galilee. The scribes, experts in the Jewish law who mostly espoused a traditional and nationalistic view of the kingdom of God, seek to discredit Jesus. They attribute the supernatural power that is undeniably at work in him to an evil source: Beelzebul, an alternative name for Satan.

Jesus illustrates the fallacy of their accusation by demonstrating that Satan would be shooting himself in the foot if he were casting out demons under his charge. If such were the case, Jesus says, Satan would be finished. Paradoxically, if Satan is finished, then the kingdom of God is breaking into the world, just as Jesus said it was (Mark 1:14-15). Satan is finished not because he is rising up against himself, of course, but because Jesus is rising up against him.

Jesus has bound the "strong man" (read: Satan) in order to "plunder his property." Jesus is echoing God, who promised in Isaiah 49:24-25 to rescue Israel from captivity in Babylon just as he rescued it from bondage in Egypt:

"Can the prey be taken from the mighty man,

Or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?"

Surely, thus says the Lord,

"Even the captives of the mighty man will be taken away,

And the prey of the tyrant will be rescued;

For I will contend with the one who contends with you,

And will save your sons."

Indeed, God liberated Israel from Babylonian captivity, and the exiles returned to the Promised Land. Nevertheless, the return from exile never matched prophetic

expectations, so Israel in the first century, suffering under Roman rule, still considered itself an exiled people and was waiting for Isaiah's new exodus. Jesus, by alluding to the prophet, is claiming that he is bringing about the new exodus, the true return from exile.

The opposition this time is not Egypt or Babylon or even Rome but Satan, the ancient foe of humanity. In casting out demons, Jesus has been plundering the property of the strong man; he's been rescuing the captives of the tyrant. In other words, he's been liberating people who have been suffering under demonic oppression. Jesus is able to bind the strong man and rescue men and women from his clutches. Attentive readers of Mark's gospel will remember that John the Baptist predicted the coming of one who is "mightier than I" (Mark 1:7).

If Jesus is not depending on Satan to cast out demons, then God must be working through him. If God is working through him, then Jesus' redefinition of the kingdom is correct.

After defending himself against the scribes' accusation, Jesus turns the tables on them. Blasphemy, or slander, against God, which represented hostility to God, was considered a capital offense. Jesus says that all slander, even slander against God, is forgivable. However, Jesus says, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin."

The Holy Spirit of God descended on Jesus at his baptism and is working through him to usher in the eternal age. The scribes have not only denied the presence of the Holy Spirit in Jesus but have also attributed his power to the presence of Satan. Jesus does not directly accuse the scribes of committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, so we can't be sure whether he believes they've committed it. The scribes "were saying," on an ongoing basis, that Jesus was tangled up with Satan. They have emphatically and repeatedly—perhaps irrevocably—positioned themselves outside the kingdom of God as Jesus defines it. Scholar N.T. Wright explains: "It isn't that God gets specially angry with one sin in particular. It's rather that if you decide firmly that the doctor who is offering to perform a life-saving operation on you is in fact a sadistic murderer, you will never give your consent to the operation."<sup>2</sup> If Jesus' analysis is correct, then the scribes, not Jesus, are in league with the devil.

This passage serves as a warning in our day. Those who persistently dismiss the saving work of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ as the work of evil run the risk of irrevocably placing themselves outside the kingdom of God. However, followers of Jesus who worry that they have committed, or might commit, an unforgivable sin need not be concerned. If you care enough about Jesus to worry whether you've committed an unforgivable sin, you haven't committed one.

## The real thing

Although the scribes of Jesus' day sought to discredit him by attributing the supernatural power at work in him

to a sinister source, the "scribes" of our day—including many scholars, scientists, and philosophers—seek to discredit the Jesus of the New Testament by denying even the possibility of a supernatural power. Our world largely believes that the gospels, along with the rest of the scriptures, can't be trusted. Of course, we as Christians can and should defend the reliability of the biblical portrait of Jesus. The work of apologetics—defending the faith—is critically important in our day. Furthermore, the New Testament declares not only that a supernatural power *was* at work in Jesus but also that a supernatural power *is* at work in his followers. The Father gave the Holy Spirit to his Son. He also gives the Spirit to followers of his Son.

Jesus calls us that we might be with him and that he might send us out in mission to the world. God gives us his Holy Spirit to enable us to answer Jesus' call; the Spirit both nurtures our relationship with Jesus and empowers us for mission (Galatians 4:6, Acts 2). So we pay attention to the Spirit as he nudges us, motivates us, and energizes us to both draw near to Jesus and follow him into the world to preach the gospel and cast out demons—to declare that God's healing, loving rule has broken into this world in the person of Jesus Christ and to challenge evil influences in our world so that we might rescue captives of the tyrant.

Portrayals of Jesus' followers in the media make it easy for many in our day to dismiss our Lord. The depictions of Christians rarely challenge our world with evidence of a supernatural power at work in Jesus' followers. However, what does challenge our world with such evidence is real people doing the work of the kingdom—feeding the poor, healing the sick, including the outcast. The Holy Spirit leads us and empowers us to bring God's love to the world in advance of the return of Christ, when God's restorative justice will fill creation (2 Peter 3:13). Like the scribes of Jesus' day, the "scribes" of today would have to bend over backwards to discredit such work. You look ridiculous if you belittle those who serve the downtrodden.

In 1994, Mother Teresa delivered a pro-life message at the National Prayer Breakfast:

*Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to a married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child. From our children's home in Calcutta alone, we have saved over 3,000 children from abortion. These children have brought such love and joy to their adopting parents and have grown up so full of love and joy.<sup>3</sup>*

How does one oppose her without looking ridiculous? At America's National Prayer Breakfast, Mother Teresa gave the world a vision of the kingdom of God that's difficult to discredit. Let's give our world something other than a caricature to discredit. Let's give it

the real thing. Let's give it real people—Spirit-empowered people—who carry with them the love of Christ. Let's give it every opportunity to believe that evil is finished because of Jesus Christ and to declare that “God is certainly among you” (1 Corinthians 14:25).

A young man in the Dutch army saw the real thing after he was wounded in combat in Indonesia in 1949. At the time, Anne van der Bijl had no interest in following Jesus. He had carried in his duffle bag a Bible that his mother had given him two and a half years earlier but had never cracked it. After he was admitted to the hospital, however, a friend fished it out and placed on his bedside table. Van der Bijl tells the story:

*The hospital to which I had been assigned was run by Franciscan sisters. I soon fell in love with every one of them. From dawn until midnight they were busy in the wards, cleaning bedpans, swabbing wounds, writing letters for us, laughing, singing. I never once heard them complain.*

*One day I asked the nun who came to bathe me how it was that she and the other sisters were always so cheerful.*

*“Why, Andrew, you ought to know the answer to that—a good Dutch boy like you. It's the love of Christ.” When she said it, her eyes sparkled, and I knew without question that for her this was the whole answer: she could have talked all afternoon and said no more.*

*“But you're teasing me, aren't you?” she said, tapping the well-worn little Bible where it still lay on the bedside table. “You've got the answer right here.”*

The wounded soldier opened his Bible to Genesis 1:1 and started reading. Thus began the conversion to Christ of the man we know today as Brother Andrew, who has devoted his life to serving the persecuted church the world over.<sup>4</sup> The real thing—real people, carrying the love of Christ to the world in deed and word—has always been the most powerful apologetic for Christ.

## Jesus redefines family

Jesus' family members can't get to him because of the crowd. They are “standing outside,” indicating that they are, for now, outside the kingdom of God (Mark 4:11). His family members send for Jesus in order to take custody of him. The crowd quite naturally expects Jesus to respond to his family. Loyalty to family was considered sacrosanct in the Israel of Jesus' day. Loyalty to family, in fact, was considered an outworking of loyalty to Israel. To be disloyal to one's family, then, was to invite accusations concerning disloyalty not only to Israel but also to the God of Israel.

Jesus, however, identifies those sitting around him as his family members, even though they are not related to him by blood. They are, in his eyes, doing the will of God, for he says that whoever does the will of God belongs to his family. Doing God's will, in this context, constitutes responding to Jesus and his message concerning the kingdom of God. Jesus has already redefined Israel by calling twelve disciples and evoking the formation of Israel, which consti-

tuted twelve tribes (Mark 3:13-15). Now, he redefines family life. Those who follow Jesus not only constitute Israel, they also constitute his family. Jesus radically restructures both Israel and the families within Israel. Loyalty to Jesus replaces loyalty to nation and family.

Jacob Neusner, a Jewish scholar, agrees that Jesus was redefining both Israel and the family in Israel. In his fascinating book, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Neusner envisions himself in dialogue with Jesus and decides that he would have chosen against following Jesus. Jesus' redefinition of nation and family in relationship to himself troubles Neusner: “This ‘Israel’ is then something other than, different from, that Israel of home and family that I know. And my argument consists in only one ‘but’: ‘But, sir, the Israel of home and family is where I am.’”<sup>5</sup>

## The gift of a new family

Some of us who choose to follow Jesus must deal with the opposition of family members who adhere to other worldviews. Some family members, like those in Jesus' family, may conclude that we've lost our senses and take it upon themselves to rescue us. It will frustrate them if they can't reach us with what to them is sensible advice. They may be concerned that allegiance to Jesus will reflect poorly on the family or cost us the opportunity for a so-called successful life. They may be right, for allegiance to Jesus will cost us. It will cost us our lives, for Jesus isn't asking for part of us; he's asking for all of us.

Some family members, recognizing our choice to follow Jesus, will advise us not to get “carried away” or take it “too far.” But the truth is, we don't know where faith in Jesus will carry us or how far he'll ask us to go. It's frustrating for parents to rear their children with a certain outcome in mind and then watch that outcome being threatened by forces beyond their control. Jesus, quite simply, is beyond anyone's control. In order to stay in control or regain control, families often resort to emotional manipulation. In the face of such tactics, Jesus says to us, “Follow me.” Following Jesus involves honoring your father and mother but not necessarily obeying them once reaching adulthood.

The family we come from and the way we were reared can greatly influence the way we perceive the world, ourselves, and God. Analyzing the influence of one's family of origin can help us understand why we think and act the way we do. But many today fall into the trap of believing that such analysis will liberate them. They think, “If I could just figure myself out, I'd be free.” Knowing why you think and act in a certain way doesn't necessarily enable you to think and act differently. Self-analysis is helpful only insofar as it helps us to hear Jesus call us to follow him. On the other hand, self-analysis that leads only to more self-analysis is a trap.

In following Jesus, we become part of his family. What does it mean to be part of Jesus' family? It means doing the will of God, which in this story constitutes believing the gospel and sitting around Jesus with other brothers



and sisters. It means hanging on every word of Jesus and following him even beyond the borders of this world and into a new and eternal world. The Spirit of Jesus binds us together in a way that transcends flesh and blood. What Jesus gives—a new family, words of eternal life—more than makes up for whatever we lose by following him.

I often arrive to our worship services consumed with my responsibilities as a pastor. After I get here, however, something usually happens to make me aware of my supernatural connection to the members of this church. Sometimes, it's something in the worship service: the sermon, a lyric, a life story. Other times, it's a brief conversation before or after the worship service—or even a smile or a handshake. Such occasions, I am convinced, represent the work of the Holy Spirit, who seems intent on letting me know what an awesome thing it is to belong to the family of God.

It delights me to hear people talking about this church, or at least some part of this church, as “family” or “home.” I am particularly moved when I hear such words coming from people who have moved away from their homes and families to live here. Let's keep our eyes open to be particularly welcoming to people in our midst who have no family in the area.

As parents who follow Jesus, we are charged with nurturing faith in our children. As the family of Jesus, we as the church are charged with nurturing faith in our brothers and sisters. In each case, as parents and as members of Jesus' family, we forsake emotional manipulation and instead employ love, the word of God, and prayer.

When I was twenty-eight years old, I began working as an editor for a newspaper in the East Bay. Immediately I got involved with a church there. I was one of the few single people in the church and started serving in the high school ministry. The church embraced me. Four families consistently invited me into their homes. The church had no “Have a Single Person Over to Dinner” program. Some of the members simply took it upon themselves to include me in their families. The senior pastor detected in me a budding interest in theology and invited me to meet with him weekly for a few months to consider a theological book. A few members of the church began saying things like, “Scott, I see this shepherding gift in you, and I think you should pursue it more vigorously.” One or two of them used the scary phrase “full-time ministry.” I resisted them at first, but they finally got to me. The church did what the family of Jesus does: it nurtured faith. It also birthed a pastor. My faith took wings at that church.

One of our elders, Basil Fthenakis, who has encountered friction in his family as a result of his efforts to follow Jesus, shares these reflections:

*Experiencing Jesus in a new way can create an earthquake in our families, with aftershocks for years to follow, and make permanent changes to the family landscape. It is hard to know how the changes will affect our families. I don't know how my family frictions will resolve, and what consequences they will have in the next generation. All I can say is that we need*

*to gain support from our spiritual family, and live faithfully in the tension of our earthly family, particularly when they do not see life through the same lenses we are wearing. Take courage, God promises that in the end, we will see his hand at work in every step.<sup>6</sup>*

## Sitting around Jesus

If we purpose to follow Jesus into the world, we will face opposition on multiple fronts. In the face of such opposition, Jesus gives us both the Holy Spirit to empower kingdom work and a new family to nurture our faith. Both the Spirit of Jesus and the family of Jesus motivate us to overcome opposition. Furthermore, Mark gives us an image of Jesus that fans the flame of whatever passion we feel for the gospel.

What are we doing here today? We're doing “the will of God.” We're “sitting around” Jesus and hanging on his ever word. What is Jesus doing? The text invites us to envision him looking at us and saying, “Behold, my sisters and brothers.” It's enough to make you want to follow him to the ends of the earth—or at least into the world to declare the presence of God's healing, loving rule and to rescue a few captives from the clutches of the tyrant. It's enough to make you want to give the world a picture of the real thing.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Literary structure:*

A *Problem of the crowd* (20)

B *Accusation of family* (21)

C *Accusation of scribes* (22)

X *Jesus refutes accusation of scribes and warns them* (23-29)

C' *Accusation of scribes* (30)

B' *Family sends for Jesus* (31)

A' *Crowd constitutes new family* (32-35)

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 38.

<sup>3</sup> *Address by Mother Teresa of Calcutta to the National Prayer Breakfast, Washington, D.C., February 3, 1994.*

<sup>4</sup> *Brother Andrew, God's Smuggler* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour and Co., 1967), 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Jacob Neusner, A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (New York: Image Books, 1994), 57.

<sup>6</sup> *Basil Fthenakis shared these reflections during a worship service at Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, Calif., on July 20, 2008.*

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