

**“The Basis of a True Relationship with Jesus”**  
**Mark 3:20-35**  
**February 19, 2023**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

We have been going through the Gospel of Mark. And one literary trait of Mark’s Gospel is his tendency to tell stories in sandwiches. They are sometimes referred to as “Markan Sandwiches.” A “Markan Sandwich” is when Mark begins to tell one story ... then he pauses that story to tell another story ... and then he returns to the first story and concludes it. So one story is split between the beginning and the end, like two pieces of bread, and the other story is in the middle, like the meat of the sandwich. And in this format, the middle story is often meant to help us interpret the outer story that has been split. [Edwards, 11]

There are nine “sandwiches” in the Gospel of Mark, and we have come to the first one here in Mark chapter three. We actually kind of breezed past the first piece of bread two sermons ago. Then last Sunday we focused on the meat – the middle story. And now we’re actually going to take two weeks – this Lord’s Day and next – to look more closely at the outer story – at the bread – of the sandwich here in Mark 3.

So printed for you in the bulletin is Mark 3:20-35. That’s the whole sandwich. This morning I’m only going to read the outer portion – the bread: verses twenty and twenty-one, and then verses thirty-one through thirty-five.

With that said, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning:

<sup>20</sup> Then he [that is, Jesus] went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. <sup>21</sup> And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”

[And now, jumping down to verse thirty-one]

<sup>31</sup> And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. <sup>32</sup> And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” <sup>33</sup> And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” <sup>34</sup> And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

## **Prayer of Illumination**

Lord, your testimonies are wonderful;  
therefore our souls cling to them.  
The unfolding of your word gives light;  
it imparts understanding to the simple.  
Therefore we long for your word  
and your commandments.  
Turn to us now and be gracious to us,  
as is your way with those who love your name.  
Keep our steps steady according to your promise,  
and let no iniquity have dominion over us.  
Redeem us from the oppression of the world,  
that we may keep your precepts.  
Make your face to shine upon us, your servants,  
and teach us your statutes.  
Grant all of this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:129-135]

## **Introduction**

So, this morning, as we back-up and return to verse twenty-one, and connect it to verse thirty-one, you can see something of what Mark is doing here. In verse twenty-one the family goes out to seize Jesus. In verse thirty-one they arrive outside the house where Jesus is teaching.

As I mentioned a moment ago, we're going to spend two Sundays on this passage. Today our focus will be on the basis of our relationship to Jesus. Next week the focus will be on what we learn here about the cost of our relationship to Jesus.

So this morning we'll focus on what we learn here about a true and a false basis for relating to Jesus, and then what pattern and what result each basis leads to.

## **A False Relationship to Jesus**

So first, let's consider what the basis, the pattern, and the result of a false relationship with Jesus looks like.

### ***A False Basis***

We'll start with the false basis. And the people we see in this text who are operating out of a false basis for their relationship with Jesus, are Jesus's mother and brothers.

Now, both Jesus's mother and his brother, we'll see, are relating to Jesus in a problematic way. But if we read Mark in the context of the rest of the Bible we also realize that there is some nuance and complexity to this.

Let's start by considering Mary, Jesus's mother. It's clear from the first couple chapters of Luke's Gospel that Mary was a believer – a very faithful believer – even an exemplar among believers. I don't think there's any plausible case to be made that Mary was a non-believer.

Which makes it all the more striking that here, in Mark 3, she is portrayed as trying to relate to Jesus in a flawed way. And so, in Mary we see that the problem of relating to Jesus on a false basis is not limited to non-believers – believers can fall into it too. In fact, even believers who in the past have done great things for the Lord and been truly faithful, can make the error Mark is drawing our attention to here.

And Mark, I think, wants us to see that it is actually a serious error. Jesus does not disown his mother here. But he *almost* sounds as if he does. [Leithart, *Matthew*, 265] And so each of us who is a Christian should consider whether we see Mary's error in ourselves.

Jesus's father, Joseph, is not mentioned here, and it's often assumed that at this point Joseph had died.

Which leaves us then with Jesus's brothers.

We're not told about the spiritual status of Jesus's brothers while they were growing up. But the first clear thing we are told about their relationship to Jesus comes in John 7:5 when John tells us plainly that Jesus's brothers did not believe in him. We don't know the details. But it seems reasonable to think that in this story, Jesus's brothers may give us a picture of unbelievers – of non-Christians relating to Jesus in this false way.

And so, with all that said: What is the false basis of relating to Jesus that Mark is warning us about here – what is the error that both Christians and non-Christians can be at risk of falling into?

And what we see is that Mark is warning us against relating to Jesus on the basis of presumption based on external things. Both Mary and Jesus's brothers presume that they have a good relationship with Jesus, on the basis of some external factor which Jesus, in the end, does not value as they expect him to.

It's that presumption, and Jesus's disregard for it, that sets up the tension of verses thirty-one through thirty-five. Jesus's mother and brothers show up at the house Jesus is teaching in. And they call for him to come out to them. In doing that, they presume that they have a solid basis for their relationship to Jesus that will outrank the basis of the disciples who are in the house sitting at his feet. They expect, in other words, that Jesus will leave those disciples and come instead to attend to his mother and brothers. But with his response in those verses, Jesus makes it clear that his mother and brothers do not have the solid and superior basis for their relationship to him that they think they do.

What then might be the external reasons for the presumption that they have?

Well, the most obvious factor in that false basis is proximity: biological and social proximity.

Jesus was part of their family – part of their flesh and blood. Not only that, they had been around Jesus and resided in the same home as him for years – for decades even. Jesus’s mother and brothers showed up with a claim to biological and social proximity to Jesus as the basis for their relationship to him, and they expected Jesus to honor that ... and he doesn’t.

And we can be tempted to similar things. It’s a blessing to grow up in a faithful, believing, Christian home. It’s a blessing to be a covenant child. But that biological proximity to other believers is not itself a sufficient basis to assume that we have a good relationship with Jesus. That biological proximity to believers often leads to a true relationship with Jesus – but it is no guarantee of it. And to act as if or to assume that you have a solid relationship to Jesus because your parents, or your siblings, or your children, or others you are biologically linked to have a good relationship to Jesus – that’s the sort of external presumption we see in Jesus’s mother and brothers here. Is it a presumption that you might be guilty of as well?

We can do something similar with social proximity to Jesus too. We can assume that because we are always around other Christians, and familiar with Christian things, then we ourselves must be Christians too – we must also have a good relationship with Jesus. But that is not necessarily the case. If we assume that it is, then we may be guilty of the same error as Jesus’s mother and brothers here. Do you find yourself tending to make a similar mistake?

Both social and biological proximity to Jesus or his people can become a false basis for assuming that we have a right relationship with Jesus.

But I can imagine other false bases that might be at work in this story as well. Now, to be clear, I don’t know if they were at work in Mary or Jesus’s brothers – I don’t know that at all. It’s more that they’re the sort of false bases that I imagine I would be tempted towards if I were in their position.

Think of Mary. Mary was put in an almost perfect position to presume that she’d earned a right to a high-ranking relationship to Jesus based on her past deeds.

If it was me, I know what I’d be tempted to think and even say in her position. When I got to that house, and Jesus didn’t immediately come out to me, I’d be tempted to say: “Are you serious? Jesus, have you forgotten all I’ve done for you? When God sent an angel and asked me to give birth to you, even though it might mean losing the man I was betrothed to and facing rejection from my community, I consented and I carried you. When God timed it so that I’d give birth to you before we even had a proper place to stay, I gave birth to you in the stable. When Herod threatened your life, I fled to Egypt to keep you safe. When Archelaus rose to power and posed a threat to you, we adjusted our plans for life again. I cared for you and sacrificed for you for years. And now, when I call you, you don’t come? Are you serious? After all I’ve done, you owe me, Jesus.”

At least that’s what I would have been tempted to say. If I were Mary, I’d have been tempted to base my relationship to Jesus on what I’d done for him in the past – my past good deeds.

Is that a pattern that you fall into? Do you expect Jesus to respond to you and honor your relationship to him because of what you've done for him in the past? Because Jesus here doesn't respond to that as you might hope. And Mary probably did a lot more for him than you have.

Another possibility we may think of in the case of Jesus's brothers is the temptation to expect Jesus to respond based on the difficulties you've endured because of him.

When Jesus's brothers heard of the claims Jesus was making, it was most likely by word of mouth. Which meant others knew too. Others who maybe derided them for it. In verse twenty-one they seem to respond with shock and embarrassment.

We could imagine them saying: "Look Jesus, you've embarrassed us, you've led others to think less of us, the world has laughed at us, all because of you. We've endured this as your brothers. And now you owe us – get out here now."

If it were me, I imagine that frustration would have been compounded by the frustrations I may have felt growing up as Jesus's little brother.

Don't get me wrong – Jesus would have literally been the perfect big brother. But as his sinful little brother, I imagine I'd have had some frustrations with that.

It was a Christian comedian who I first heard point this out. Can you imagine how much pressure you'd feel being Jesus's little brother? I mean ... how often do you think they heard a grown-up sincerely ask them, with exasperation "Why can't you be more like Jesus?" [Michael Jr.] I don't know when Mary and Joseph told their other children about who Jesus was ... but what do you think it was like for them when they were told that their older brother literally was the Son of God, and that they should worship him?

It's speculation ... but I imagine that Jesus's brothers, if they were ordinary sinners like me, had some frustrations towards Jesus – they felt they had suffered because of him, and so now he owed them.

And we can fall into that way of thinking too. Maybe people in the Church have wounded us ... or maybe people outside the Church have wounded us because we are associated with Jesus ... but either way, we can assume, as a result, that Jesus now owes us something.

Whether based on biological proximity or social proximity ... whether based on past good deeds or past difficulties we've suffered, we can presume that we have a solid relationship to Jesus based on some external factor. But Jesus tells us here that that is a false basis for a relationship with him. It's a basis he rejects.

And that's the first thing we see here: a false basis for a relationship to Jesus.

### *A False Pattern*

The second thing we see is the false pattern for relating to Jesus that that leads to.

And the pattern that emerges is that Jesus's mother and brothers act as if they have a claim on him. They place themselves over Jesus in the relationship. [Edwards, 118, 124, 125]

And this is made especially clear in verse twenty-one. There we see that Jesus's family plans to assert their authority over him.

It says: "And when [Jesus's] family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind.'"

First, they assume that they have a better sense of what is true, and good, and right than Jesus does – which is one way this passage is linked to the middle story that we looked at last Sunday.

But next they seek to assert authority over Jesus – the right to restrain him. As one commentator notes, "the word for 'seize'" which we see in verse twenty-one, "is regularly used by Mark in the sense of attempting to bind Jesus and deprive him of freedom." [Edwards, 118]

And then, when they get there, they call him to come out – essentially issuing orders to him. [Edwards, 124]

In all these ways, Jesus's mother and brothers are asserting their authority over him.

And this false pattern of asserting authority over Jesus is really rooted in the false basis of presumption with which they are relating to Jesus. Because such presumption does not end with thinking that we deserve to be on good terms with Jesus – it extends to assume that he answers to us.

And so while Jesus's disciples are seated at his feet, listening to his commandments for them, Jesus's mother and brothers are standing outside, issuing commands to Jesus.

Do you find yourself doing that to Jesus? Do you tend to assume that he is there to do your will? Do you tend to relate to him like he is your subordinate – your personal assistant?

Here we are reminded that that is a false pattern for relating to Jesus. Because he does not respond to it, and he will not submit to it. He doesn't allow them to restrain or redirect him – and he won't allow us to either. He doesn't give them authority over him, and he won't give us authority over him either.

That's the second element of a false relationship to Jesus.

### *The Result of a False Relationship*

The third element of a false way of relating to Jesus that we see here is the result.

And the result we see here is that Jesus's family is on the outside, rather than the inside. It's something that Mark states twice – both in verse thirty-one and in verse thirty-two, which may

indicate that Mark wants us to take note of it. And as we do, it should strike us as odd. Normally it's one's family that's on the inside, and the crowd that is on the outside – it's the family that is in the house with us, while the crowd is outside our house's walls. But Mark emphasizes that right now, as things stand, it's the reverse. And that should be jarring – especially in the ancient world where biological family connections were valued far more than they are in our culture today. Mark wants us to see it: that the result of how Jesus's family is acting is that they are on the outside. [Edwards, 124]

And the same will be true of us if we embrace a false basis for our relationship with Jesus.

If we do that as believers, then even though we may still be believers, we distance ourselves from the Lord, and may cause him to need to rebuke us.

If we do that as non-believers, then we are setting ourselves more decisively outside of Jesus's presence. And Jesus's presence is where there is life. Jesus's presence is where there is hope, and joy, and peace, and healing. We should want to be with him.

But we won't be if we ultimately seek to relate to him on the false basis of presumption.

That, we see here, is what a false relationship to Jesus looks like in the end.

### **A True Relationship to Jesus**

But thankfully, Mark doesn't stop there. Mark doesn't just give us a flawed picture of relating to Jesus in this story, but he gives us a good and positive picture as well. And we see that in the disciples who are with Jesus in the house, in verses thirty-three through thirty-five.

There we read: "And [Jesus] 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.'"

And in that we see the basis, the pattern, and the result of a true relationship to Jesus.

#### *A True Basis*

First, we see the basis of a true relationship to Jesus.

And the basis of a true relationship with Jesus is that we humbly sit at Jesus's feet to receive his word and instruction for us.

We see that in verse thirty-four. What identifies those whom Jesus affirms as his true family is that they are those who are seated around him. They are those who are sitting at his feet, humbly receiving his word and instruction, and (as Jesus points out in verse thirty-five) who are committing themselves to do what he has told them to do.

The basis for a true relationship with Jesus is that humility and receptivity before the Lord.

Those seated around Jesus brought nothing meritorious to commend themselves. Jesus didn't start with a log of their good deeds, or a record of what they'd already endured for him. He didn't sort the room by biological or social proximity to him.

Instead, they came with a willingness to humble themselves before Jesus, a willingness to receive his word, and a willingness to seek to do as he commanded them. They would place themselves at his feet. And Jesus says that *they* are his true family.

So as you come before the Lord, put aside your presumption ... Jesus is not interested in the reasons you think you deserve his attention. For that matter, put aside your insecurities as well – Jesus does not measure worthiness or value as the world does.

If you will come to Jesus ... if you will sit at his feet ... if you will receive his gospel and his commands ... if you will seek to follow and obey him ... then you are part of his family. You have a right relationship to him.

Humble receptivity, and faithfully seeking to follow him – this is the basis of a true relationship with Jesus. That's the first thing we see in Jesus's disciples.

### *A True Pattern*

Second, we see the pattern of a true relationship with Jesus.

And what we see is that where Jesus's mother and brothers seek to make a claim on Jesus, Jesus's disciples acknowledge that it's Jesus who has a claim on them. [Edwards, 118, 124]

Where true disciples allow their lives to be redirected by Jesus, false disciples seek to redirect Jesus and apply his work to something else. [Edwards, 125] That is, in many ways, what makes Jesus's disciples in this passage so different from Jesus's mother and brothers.

And yet, the temptation they fall into is not unusual. Many of us have experienced and even given into it.

While we may start our Christian walk sitting at Jesus's feet, acknowledging his claim on us ... as the years go on ... there can be a gradual shift ... where we begin, more and more, to treat Jesus and his Word as something we master, rather than something that masters us.

And one way this shows up is that when we come to Christ through the Scriptures, we are tempted not to sit under the Scriptures and have them applied to us ... but instead we redirect the Scriptures away from our hearts, and towards some other purpose.

As one example, theologian Helmut Thielicke discusses what this might look like for pastors and theologians. A pastor can see this transition is taking place, he explains, when the first question that comes to their mind as they read the Scriptures is always "How could I use this in a sermon?" It's the shift, he explains, where "I no longer can read the word of Holy Scripture as a word to me"

but only as material for my work. This pattern, he writes, is the “worst and most widespread” spiritual disease among ministers. [Thielicke, 33]

In other words, the pastor is tempted to skip the first and most important step, of submitting himself to the Scriptures, and allowing the Bible to address his heart, and instead he jumps to treating the Scriptures as an object for him to apply to others as part of his job.

That’s one way to slip out of the pattern of disciples in relating to Jesus, and into the pattern of Jesus’s mother and brothers. But it’s not the only way to fall into that error.

Some Christians follow the same pattern by treating the Scriptures first and foremost as ammunition in theological polemics – as material for us to use to win debates.

Other Christians fall into this pattern by engaging the Bible first and foremost as a club to critique the lives of others. We read the Bible, or we hear a sermon, and our first thoughts are how it applies to other people, rather than how it applies to ourselves. It’s an easy thing to do. Maybe you’re even doing that right now, with this sermon.

Other times Christians use the Bible first and foremost as ammunition in the culture war. Rather than letting the Word of God interrogate and rebuke our hearts, we use it primarily as evidence that we are the good guys and others are the bad guys in our cultural disputes and divisions.

We could go on and on with different examples.

To put it simply, it’s not enough to engage with the Word of God. We need to submit ourselves to it. We need to sit at Jesus’s feet.

And the best way to do that, Thieleke urges us, is to approach the Word of God with prayer.

Thieleke puts it like this – he says, “A theological thought” – that is, a thought about God – “can breathe only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God.”

That means first taking seriously the fact that what God has spoken, he has spoken, in some real sense, to me. His word is directed at me. And I must receive it that way. And then, I must respond. I must reply. Because that’s how a dialogue works.

To put it a little differently, as we interact with the Bible, Thielike argues our first response should be talking *to* God about what he has said, rather than talking *about* God. After all, the first time recorded in Scripture when someone spoke about God rather than to God was when the serpent asked: “Did God really say?” [Thielike, 34]

And so, if we want to be disciples – if we want to be those close to Jesus, those he identifies as his brothers and sisters, then the first thing we need to do is to humbly receive his word as being directed to us. That means both that we attend to God’s Word (both as it’s written and as it’s preached) and then that we respond to God by praying about what we have just heard and how it applies to us.

That is how we reinforce that right pattern – how we live out the truth that it’s not we who have authority over Jesus – it’s he who has authority over us. It’s not we who have a claim on his life, but he who has a claim on our lives. And so, when he speaks to us, we humbly submit ourselves to his word. We let it examine us. We let it rebuke us. We let it comfort us. We let it rule over us.

That is the right pattern of relating to Jesus that we see in the disciples gathered at Jesus’s feet.

### *The Result of a True Relationship*

Third and finally, we see the result of a true relationship with Jesus.

The result is that those who come before the Lord humbly ... those who receive his claim on their lives ... they are on the inside. They are with Jesus. They are counted as Jesus’s true family.

That’s what Jesus says in verses thirty-four and thirty-five.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is the one who made us. He is God the Son, come in the flesh. He is the one who rules over the universe – holding all things together by the word of his power.

And the shocking statement that Jesus makes is that if we will come to him in humble submission ... if we will sit at his feet in faith and give ourselves to him ... then he will be our big brother. He will be our truest family.

To know our Maker ... to have that kind of intimate relationship with him ... what more could we want than that? What could be more incredible than having the Maker of Heaven and earth as our good, loving, strong, and faithful older brother – not only in this life, but for all eternity?

That, Jesus tells us, is the result of a right relationship with him.

### **Conclusion**

And if you don’t have that kind of relationship with him now – whether you’re a Christian who has drifted from him, or a non-Christian who has never really known him – then this story is also a reminder that whatever has happened in the past, and even whatever may be true right now, if you will turn to Jesus, and sit at his feet, then you can still have a relationship of joy and security with him beyond what you could imagine.

Because that is eventually what happened with Jesus’s mother and brothers.

Mary seems to have drifted into doubt here. And that’s a serious thing. She had been given much. She had been visited by angels. She had seen miracles. And even so, here she is questioning Jesus’s sanity, trying to restrain him, and seeking to make demands of him. She seems to have wandered from the humble faith she had years earlier, and into some form of doubt. But she doesn’t stay in that doubt.

She turned from her error, and she began, once again, to approach Jesus as a disciple. She stood at his feet, as he hung on the cross. And there Jesus declared that she was his mother, just as the Apostle John was his spiritual brother. [John 19:26-27]. She gathered with the other disciples after Jesus's ascension [Acts 1:14], and she rose to place of honor in the early church because of her renewed faithfulness as a disciple of Jesus.

And so, if you are a Christian who has drifted – who has begun to relate to Jesus on a false basis and in flawed ways – then turn, like Mary, and return to him as a humble disciple. And just as he received her, so he will receive you.

And if you're not a believer – if you have heard the good news about Jesus but not come to him in faith, then the story of Jesus's brothers is a call for you too to come close to him in humility and faith.

We don't know the full spiritual history of Jesus's brothers. But we do know that the Apostle John tells us that Jesus's brothers did not believe in him during his earthly ministry. [John 7:5] They had so much reason to believe. They grew up with Jesus. Sure, as I mentioned, in their sin, this may have posed unique challenges for them. But nonetheless, they had the Messiah as their older brother. They saw him every day, and they knew he was sinless. They talked with him growing up. They literally had God incarnate in their home, available to them whenever they wanted him. And yet, they did not believe. They persisted in relating to him wrongly.

But despite the greatness of their sin, Jesus did not turn his back on them, but he actively pursued them. In 1 Corinthians 15 we're told that after his resurrection, Jesus appeared specifically to James – his brother. [1 Corinthians 15:7]

Think about that. After all their doubts, after all their failure, after accusing him of being out of his mind, still Jesus sought them. Still, he pursued them. Because he loved them. And so he went after them and called them once again out of their stubborn arrogance. He called them to relate rightly to him – to approach him as disciples. And in the end, they did.

As a result, we read in Acts chapter one that after Jesus's ascension, not only was Mary gathered with the other disciples, but so were Jesus's brothers. And as we read on, we learn that Jesus's brother James became a leader in the Church of Jerusalem, and two of Jesus's brothers – James and Jude – would go on to write portions of the New Testament itself. They went from being outsiders, to being close and beloved insiders in God's kingdom, all because Jesus pursued them, and they responded with humble faith.

And maybe the Lord is pursuing you in a similar way this morning. Jesus may not appear to you in bodily form, but he still pursues those who have resisted him in the past. And maybe today, by the Holy Spirit, he is drawing close to you – he is revealing himself to you through his Word.

You need to respond. As Jesus's brothers did, you need to own the ways you have fallen short. As Jesus's brothers did, you need to ask his forgiveness. But then, when you do, as he did with his believing brothers, Jesus will welcome you in close to him. He will call you his true brother or sister. And you will be gathered into his people – a part of his true spiritual family.

Because that is the result – that is the fruit – of coming to Jesus with humble faith. We become his. We become close to him, our Maker. And there is no greater blessing than that – either in this life or the life that is to come.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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