

“The Costs (and Rewards) of a Real Relationship with Jesus”

Mark 3:20-35

February 26, 2023

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return again to Mark chapter three. Last Sunday we talked about the format of this passage in Mark 3:20-35, as one of nine cases in Mark’s Gospel where Mark starts one story, pauses it to tell another story, and then returns to conclude the first story – what is sometimes called a “Markan Sandwich.” [Edwards, 11]

Two weeks ago we discussed the middle portion of this sandwich – verses twenty-two through thirty. Both last Sunday and this Sunday we are looking at the outer portion – verses twenty and twenty-one, and then verses thirty-one through thirty-five. Last Sunday the theme we focused on was about the basis for a true relationship with Jesus Christ. Today we will focus on a second important theme we find in this passage: the cost of a true relationship with Jesus Christ.

With that in mind, we come to our text this morning: Mark chapter three, verses twenty and twenty-one and then verses thirty-one through thirty-five.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning:

²⁰ Then he [that is, Jesus] went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ 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]

³¹ And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. ³² And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” ³³ And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers!” ³⁵ 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

Righteous are you, O Lord,
and righteous are your rules.
You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness
and in all faithfulness.
Your promises are well tried,

and we, your servants, love them.
Though we may be small and despised,
yet we do not forget your precepts.
Your righteousness is righteous forever,
and your word is true.
Even when we face trials,
your commandments are our delight.
Give us now understanding as we come to your word,
that we might here find life.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:137-138, 140-144]

Introduction

As I said, last Lord's Day we considered this text and focused on what it has to say about the basis for our relationship to Jesus.

This morning I want us to see that Mark also has something to say to us about the cost of our relationship with Jesus ... as well as the rewards of that relationship.

The Costs of a Real Relationship with Jesus

Let's start with the costs of our relationship with Jesus.

What does this text teach us about the costs of being Jesus's disciples?

And what we see here is that there are relational losses that come from following Jesus. And I think we can discern here something of both the pattern of thinking that often accompanies those losses as well as the losses themselves.

The Pattern

And we get a sense of the pattern of thinking behind these losses when we consider how Jesus's family would have viewed Jesus's disciples.

We know how they viewed Jesus. They thought he was out of his mind.

When you think someone's out of their mind, you probably have a lot of different feelings towards them ... but typically, mixed in with all those feelings will be concern and pity and sympathy for them. You recognize that they are not fully responsible for what they're doing. And I'd imagine that Jesus's mother and brothers felt some measure of that towards Jesus.

But how do you think they felt about Jesus's followers?

We're not told. But we can very well imagine them looking at Jesus's disciples, and thinking "I know that Jesus is out of his mind ... but what's your excuse?"

We can imagine Mary thinking “My boy is not well ... but what are you doing? Why are you egging him on? What’s wrong with you?”

It's not hard to imagine them feeling some level of frustration ... or disgust ... or condemnation towards those who were gathered around Jesus.

And whether they felt that not, it is a pattern of thinking that many followers of Jesus will experience from unbelievers today.

It might go something like this: A non-Christian in your life finds out some element of what you believe. Maybe it's that you believe that the Bible is the actual Word of God without error. Maybe it's that you believe that Jesus was God incarnate. Maybe it's that you believe that Christ literally rose from the dead. Maybe it's that you believe hell is a real place that many people will go to for eternity. Maybe it's that you believe that being united to Christ by faith is the only way a person can be saved from eternal judgment. Maybe it's the Christian sexual ethic that you believe in. Maybe it's the central role of the Christian faith in your personal and family life. Maybe it's that you're only willing to marry another firm Christian. Or maybe it's something else.

In any case – they learn about this aspect of your life and faith. And they respond with shock. And then they say something like this – they say: “Of course people believed that sort of thing in the past. But today we know better. You’re a smart person, living in the 21st century. How can you believe such obviously foolish and backwards things?”

In other words, there’s some sympathy for those in the past. Jesus, the Apostles, the centuries of Christians back then – they couldn’t have known better. We can have some sympathy for them.

But you ... you *should* know better. You live today. You should have broader horizons. You are literate and educated and modern. You should know better. We understand what’s wrong with the ignorant people of the past. But what’s your excuse? What’s wrong with you? After all you’ve been given, how can you believe such outdated and frankly harmful things?

Has anyone ever said something like that to you?

That’s often the pattern of thinking that is a prelude to the sort of relational costs we see here in our text.

The Personal Loss

That said, it’s not so much the pattern that is really in focus here in Mark 3. Instead, what’s especially in focus, I think, is the concrete personal relational losses that can be incurred when we follow Jesus.

Now, to see this, we need to especially focus on verse twenty-one, and I think we need to ask who this is talking about, what the relational implication is, what it meant for Jesus, and then what it means for us.

So, first: Who is in view here in verse twenty-one?

The ESV says “his family.” But actually, as commentator James Edwards points out, the Greek is not as clear as that. The NASB translates it as “His own people” and Edwards notes that even that is more specific than the Greek actually is. He explains, writing: “Exactly who is threatening Jesus is not entirely clear. English translations normally read ‘family,’ but the Greek is a simple and ambiguous prepositional phrase, [which means] ‘those of him,’ [and] which could mean associates, kin, or followers as well as friends or family.” [Edwards, 118]

So, what are we to make of this?

Well, as we noted, this is a Markan Sandwich – and so verse twenty-one and thirty-one are linked. And so it would seem that the takeaway is not that those described in verse twenty-one are separate from the family of Jesus who appear in verse thirty-one ... but it may mean that those described in verse twenty-one include more than Jesus’s family. By using the ambiguous phrase that he does, Mark may be saying that there were others close to Jesus, in addition to his family, who believed he had lost his mind.

Which would mean that Jesus had both family and friends – people close to him in different ways – who thought he’d lost his mind and needed to be taken and restrained.

That answers our first question of who is likely in view here.

Next, we need to ask: What’s the relational impact being described here?

And the impact is that it represents a deep break-down in those relationships.

We see something like this play out in lesser ways in our culture today. When two people disagree, and neither actually has mental health problems, but one (or both) decide that the other person has lost their mind – is mentally ill – because of their beliefs ... then at that point, you have a pretty thorough breakdown in that relationship. One person is essentially saying to the other: “I have no faith in your perception or perspective on things.” You can’t build trust from there. And so what is said in verse twenty-one represents deep break-downs in Jesus’s relationships to his family members and, likely, his friends back home.

Our next question is: What did this mean for Jesus personally?

We’re not told how Jesus processed this emotionally ... but I would imagine that this meant a real loss for him. These were people he knew and trusted. And they no longer trusted him. Jesus was human. And I would expect that that loss hurt.

Finally: What does this picture of Jesus’s loss mean for us?

And here we need to remember that Jesus himself tells us that what we see here is a picture of what we too should expect if we follow Jesus.

In Matthew 10, Jesus says to his followers: “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.” [Matthew 10:24-25]

Jesus makes it clear that the same rejection and difficulties he faced from other people, his followers would face as well. All disciples of Jesus who have a real relationship with him should expect to have similar experiences. And Jesus doesn't just say that in general. He applies it specifically to the same kind of relational losses we see play out in his life here in Mark 3.

Elsewhere, Jesus explains what will happen in the lives of those who follow him in the first century. He says: "Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake." [Matthew 10:21-22a]

Jesus gives extreme cases there. But we can rightly assume that other, lesser forms of relational loss will be experienced by Jesus followers as well. And, in fact, in another place Jesus speaks about his followers who will lose brothers or sisters or mother or father or children for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel. [Mark 10:29]¹

And Jesus is clear that such losses are a direct result of our relationship to him. He says to his followers: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household." [Matthew 10:34-36]

Maybe you've experienced that in some way.

Maybe you've experienced it in the form of a close relationship actually being severed by the other person – where someone in your life who had been close to you (maybe even family) has cut you off completely because of your Christian faith.

Or maybe it's not that the relationship has been completely lost ... but the truth is that much of the goodness or the depth of the relationship has been lost.

In some cases the relationship may be significantly strained. There is tension. There are arguments. The relationship hasn't been severed, but it often feels more like a source of pain and conflict than real blessing. This too is a relational loss.

Or maybe one of your relationships is not so much severed or strained as it is shallowed out. The "solution" your friend or family member comes up with for dealing with your faith – without ever really saying it out loud – is to stick to the shallows with you. They make sure to keep conversation topics limited to trivialities. The depths of life are roped off as off-limits. And so the relationship is not severed or overtly strained ... but it now feels hollow ... and shallow. That too is a loss. There is a sadness that comes when you realize that someone who had been close to you now only wants to engage with you about the surface realities of your life – they don't really want to engage with your heart or mind.

¹ While Jesus speaks of what the disciples have "left" here, Ched Myers points out that the insertion "of the persecution phrase 'For my sake and the gospel's' (cf. 8:35 and 13:9) [...] suggests that 'giving up' referred not only to voluntary status renunciation but forced privation as well." [Myers, 276]

And whether it's a relationship severed, strained, or made shallow, these kinds of relational losses are not limited to family members. They can apply to anyone close to us.

And so maybe your faith has not negatively affected your family relationships. But what about your friendships ... or your relationships at work ... or your connections in civil society? Have you seen those relationships in your life be made more shallow by other people, as they avoid meaningful topics or interactions with you because of your faith? Have you seen those relationships strained by your faith? Have you had such relationships even severed by others because of your allegiance to Christ?

Or if you haven't experienced it, maybe it's something that hovers out there as a constant threat. Maybe there's a relationship or a community in your life that means a lot to you. And while you're not denying or violating your faith ... you feel like you're always walking on eggshells with them for fear that if they know more about your faith, they might respond by shallowing-out, or straining, or even severing your relationship with you. Relational loss feels like it's always just one awkward conversation away.

Our text reminds us that in all these ways, the close relationships in our lives to non-Christians – relationships that mean a lot to us – may be lost, or diminished, or even betrayed in response to our faith.

And as we acknowledge that, we need to be clear how that actually works out in these texts. It is not through the aggression of Jesus's followers or by Christians rejecting relationships with non-Christians or even well-known sinners. After all, we saw back in Mark 2, when Jesus called Levi, such relational separation is not what Jesus calls us to. Far from that, the Apostle Paul commands us, saying: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all," [Romans 12:18] and elsewhere Paul seems to take it as an obvious given that he is not calling Christians to sever their relationships with non-Christians. [1 Corinthians 5:9-10]

Instead, the pattern our text and Jesus's related words lays out for us is one where followers of Jesus simply hold to the truth of his gospel and his Word, live them out humbly, speak them with love, and then non-Christians close to them respond by severing, or staining, or shallow-out their relationships to them in response. That's what we see happening in Mark 3:21. It's Jesus's mother and brothers who introduce that strain into the relationship. Jesus is responding to that. And so one implication we see here is that even when such relational loss looms, we are not permitted to launch a preemptive strike against our relationships to non-Christians. We are to seek to love them and be at peace with them, so far as is possible. But we are not to be surprised when they strike us.

Have you been struck by someone in that way?

When we experience that, we need to acknowledge, and grieve that loss. Now, here in Mark 3 we are not told how Jesus emotionally processed this relational loss. But we do know that Jesus was someone who both acknowledged and mourned losses in life.

Think about Jesus weeping outside the tomb of Lazarus. That was a temporary loss. But it was a loss. And Jesus mourned it alongside his friends. And his grief involved real tears. And so, often, should ours. As John Calvin put it, when he commented on the tears of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, he wrote: "The example of Christ ought to be sufficient of itself for setting aside the

unbending sternness which the Stoics demand; for [where] ought we to look for the rule of supreme perfection but from Christ?" [Calvin, 441]

And Christ, Calvin points out, was willing not just to acknowledge loss abstractly, but to acknowledge it with "strong feelings of grief" and with "tears." [Calvin, 439]

As C.S. Lewis has pointed out, "There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God." [Lewis, 64] And so, for Christians, there is no good trying to be more spiritual than Jesus!

When we face losses in this life, grief is an appropriate response.

And the loss of depth and trust in close relationships because of the gospel – whether relationships with family or with friends – these are real losses.

And my guess is that for many of us, these kinds of losses are far more painful than the open scorn of strangers, or even the hate of our cultural enemies.

David laments such grief in Psalm 55 saying:

it is not an enemy who taunts me—
then I could bear it;
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—
then I could hide from him.
But it is you, a man, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend.

Jesus himself, in Matthew 10, describes such relational losses as a way of bearing our cross and experiencing a kind of death. [Matthew 10:38-39]

And when we are threatened with that kind of relational death ... it's then that we can be tempted to walk away from Jesus ... or at least to lower his role in our lives.

And we need to recognize that temptation. When those closest to us threaten to sever, or strain, or make shallow our relationship to them, then we may be tempted to yield to them. And yielding to them means letting go of some element of our relationship to Jesus in order to protect our relationship to someone else.

But Jesus makes it clear that though that temptation is real, we must not give in to it. He says to his followers: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." [Matthew 10:37]

Now, Jesus is not saying that our relationships to family and close friends are bad – not at all. What he's saying is that we need to rightly order our relationships. Our priorities need to be right. Jesus Christ is our Maker. He is our Redeemer. He is our Lord. Our relationship to him must be the most important thing in our lives. And so every other relationship must come after that – as a real but still lesser priority than our relationship to Jesus. That includes our relationship to our parents, to our children, to our siblings, and even to our spouse. Jesus says he must be the highest priority in our lives.

And if we disregard his word to us in order to heed the word of a friend or family member ... if we introduce strain or shallowness in our relationship with Jesus in order to avoid strain or shallowness in our relationship to someone else ... then we are making that other relationship a higher priority in our hearts and lives than our relationship to Jesus.

And the temptation to do that is real. As one commentator notes, though God can and often does “use families to advance His kingdom,” families are also often “one of the biggest obstacles to the advance of the faith” and “the loyalties of family life often present tremendous obstacles to discipleship.” [Leithart, *Matthew*, 220] And in our modern context, that dynamic can go beyond family lines, and also be true of our relationships with friends or colleagues, with our political community or our cultural tribe. These relationships – good in themselves – can be a serious threat as we are tempted to prioritize our peace in those relationships over peace in our relationship with Christ.

But Jesus calls us to continue to place him first. Jesus calls us to acknowledge the costs of discipleship ... and to endure them anyway ... clinging to him and placing him first in our lives.

In all those ways, he calls us to bear the costs of a real relationship with him. That’s the first thing we see here in our text.

The Rewards of a Real Relationship with Jesus

But thankfully, Jesus doesn’t stop there. Because we also see, in this text, the rewards of a real relationship with Jesus.

And at least three rewards are identified here in this text: Here we are pointed to a new brother, a new family, and a new possibility.

A New Brother

The first and foundational reward for following Jesus is the promise of a new brother.

Jesus says in verse thirty-five: “whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

When we trust in Jesus – when we follow him and seek him by faith – the shocking reality that we see here is that Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. [Hebrews 2:10]

Instead, if we trust in him, then he will embrace us, and he will call us his family, and he will dwell with us not just now, but for all eternity. That is the promise of the gospel: eternal life, in the presence of Christ, knowing him intimately forever. He will be our brother in the new heavens and the new earth.

But he’s also our brother right now. He’s with us, as family, even here. He draws close to us. He loves us. He has compassion for us. He is our powerful and loving Elder Brother – who is with us as we walk through the difficulties of this life.

And as he walks with us, he understands what we are going through. As the author of Hebrews reminds us, he too was tempted as we are tempted. He too suffered loss, just as we suffer loss. [Hebrews 2:10-11, 2:18, 4:14-16]

And one of the losses that Jesus knows of and experienced personally is the loss of relationships with those close to him because of the gospel. That's what we see in Mark 3.

And so, when we suffer similar relational problems, Jesus truly understands how we feel. He's been through it himself. And so it's especially in those moments that we should draw close to him as our Elder Brother. [Hebrews 4:16]

As we endure the costs of discipleship here in this life, while we wait for the full reward of discipleship in the life to come, we can turn to our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ – who knows exactly what we are going through.

A New Family

The second reward we see here is the provision of a new family.

And this is implied in verse thirty-four and thirty-five. Looking at his disciples, Jesus says “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus's primary point is about our relationship to him. But a secondary implication of that is that if all followers of Jesus are related to him ... then all followers of Jesus are also related to one another.

And Jesus makes this point even more clearly elsewhere.

In Mark 10, Jesus says to his disciples: “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.” [Mark 10:28-30]

Here Jesus promises “eternal life” “in the age to come.” And indeed that is our great hope – without that, we are of all people most to be pitied. [1 Corinthians 15:19]

But what I find especially striking here is that Jesus not only promises rewards in the life that is to come. But he also promises rewards, “now in this time.”

And what do those promises in this time include? They include the promise that we will receive “a hundredfold now in this time [...] brothers and sisters and mothers and children.”

How is that possible?

Well ... look around you.

The Church, which is the family of God, extends far beyond this congregation. But even just in this congregation, look at the provision the Lord has given you.

Our congregation has over 450 members. And Jesus says they are your family.

Have you lost your father or mother as a result of your faith? Here in this congregation alone there are spiritual fathers and mothers provided, a hundredfold. Have you lost relationships with brothers or sisters because of your faith? Brothers and sisters abound a hundredfold here. Have you lost relationships with children because of Christ? Here spiritual children abound a hundredfold. Have you lost friendships over the gospel? Here the Lord provides a friend with whom you will spend not just a few decades, but all eternity.

In the Church – the household of God the Father – we are given a provision and a reward for all those losses we may suffer in this life.

Now, the rewards do not eliminate the reality of the losses. After all, even as Jesus reminds us of these rewards in Matthew 10, he reiterates that persecutions and suffering will remain in this life. And so, the losses we have discussed are still real, they still hurt, they still need to be mourned and grieved. But alongside those losses, there are also real blessings and rewards – which we're told will be distributed a hundredfold. [Edwards, 316-317]

Now some of you have experienced those blessings through the Church in real, and deep, and meaningful ways. You have been blessed by the spiritual family that is the Church. And so you know, on a personal level, that this promise of Christ is true.

Others of you have felt more disappointment than blessing. Maybe the people in *this* congregation have let you down. Maybe other Christians or other churches have let you down. That's not an uncommon experience. And it reminds us of two things.

First, it reminds us that we are all called to actively live this reality out. Brothers and sisters, we are the family of God. And we need to act like it. It can be far too easy to treat the Church like a club or a spiritual service provider. But we are to be a family – the family of God. And we must relate to each other accordingly. And that's not just a calling for the pastors and elders – that's a calling to each one of us. And so, how do you need to reach out to and love others here more like their brother or sister or father or mother in the faith than you have been? That's the first thing we need to consider when it comes to the disappointments we can feel when it comes to the church as Christ has provided it to us.

But the second thing we need to ask ourselves when we struggle with others in the church is: What did you really expect? In this fallen world, family is always messy. Family members – even when they are wonderful – always fall short. They disappoint us. They let us down. They fail us. They sin against us. But when they do, in a healthy family, we don't abandon them. We stick with them. We confront. We forgive. We try to grow those relationships where they are weak and damaged. That is how family is supposed to work. And so I exhort you, if you have withdrawn your heart from the church community, to recommit yourself to pursuing these kinds of relationships. It won't always be easy. But the Church is God's loving provision to you. Don't miss out on that provision just because the Church acts more like a real-life family than a family in a Norman-Rockwell painting.

The Church is a gift. It's messy. It can be challenging. It can be frustrating and even infuriating. But it is, in the end, a wonderful provision from Christ. It is the household of the living God – the hundredfold provision of fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and children – of friends and family – for whatever losses we may incur as we follow Jesus in this life.

And in that way, it is the second reward for following Jesus that we see here in our text.

A New Possibility

Third and finally, we are also given a new possibility as we follow Jesus.

For Jesus here, we see a deep strain on his relationship to his mother and brothers.

But that strain doesn't last forever.

Mary would turn from her error and return to Jesus as a disciple. Jesus's brothers, after Jesus's resurrection, would come to place their faith in him – they would become believers.

Think for a minute of what that meant for Jesus as a human being. Jesus gained back his mother and his brothers. And he gained them back not just for a rewarding relationship in this life. He gained them back for a rich, and rewarding relationship for all eternity.

Jesus lost years of close fellowship to his brothers. But because they came to faith through his persistent witness to them, Jesus received the blessing of spending eternity with them.

That is the new possibility that our relationship with Jesus opens up: the possibility that while our relationships to those we love may be strained, or shallow, or even severed right now ... so long as they are still alive, the possibility of their being won back for eternity remains.

Now, we need to be clear: God does not promise to save all of our spiritually lost friends or family members. Jesus himself spent years in close fellowship and even friendship with Judas Iscariot ... but Judas was lost forever. Some of you have had people you deeply care about pass from this life to the next without them ever confessing faith in Christ. Many of us will have people we love enter into death without saving faith in Jesus. In those cases there is real mourning and grief for us now. In those cases we find our comfort in having Christ as our Elder Brother, and the community of saints as our spiritual family.

But even as that is true, in other cases the possibility of lost friends or family members being recovered for eternity still remains. And we should not despair of that possibility until the door is truly closed at death. Remember that we serve a God who brought Jesus's brothers to faith even after all the years that they knew him and rejected him. Remember that we serve a God who turned a leading persecutor of his Church into a leading apostle of his Church. Our God delights in doing such things.

And so we should not give up hope – we should not limit what God might do. For nothing is impossible with God. [Luke 1:37]

Instead, we should pray. We should persistently, incessantly [Luke 11:8], lift up our unbelieving loved ones in prayer.

And as we do, we should seek to remain faithfully present in their lives, pointing them to Christ in both word and deed, as we seek to love them as his representative, and to humbly bear witness to the reason for the hope that we have.

Where is the Lord calling you to such things?

Conclusion

Our text this morning and the Bible as a whole does not shy away from telling us of the relational costs of following Jesus. But it also doesn't shy away from telling us of the rewards of following him.

By following Christ, we have the possibility of pointing those we love to our Lord, so that we might not have just this life with them, but we might get to spend all eternity with them.

By following Christ we have the provision of a new family: the Church of Jesus Christ, to walk with us in both the joys and the sorrows of this life.

And most importantly, by following Christ, we have the promise that he is with us – he is our Elder Brother. He loves us. And he understands us. He is close to us. And we will know him not just now, but for all eternity.

And that is a reward that far surpasses whatever costs we may face in this life.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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