Rev P Archbald

Family Ties

Psalm 101

Mark 3:22-35

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, we thank You that you have given us such a foundation for living. The foundation, the cornerstone in the Lord Jesus Christ, but the foundation that is from Him based on what He has said and done, that Word that gives all of the basic principles that we need to know what You require of us in every area of life. Father, help us to learn those principles again today and to apply them to ourselves with the aid of Your Holy Spirit. We pray it in Jesus name, AMEN.

Covenant people of God, we saw last time how those who were close to the Lord Jesus, to use the language of the earlier text that we looked at, meaning most likely his family – his mother and brothers, half-brothers we would say, natural sons of Mary and Joseph – how they came to take custody of Jesus on the ground that He had lost His senses, that He had become too obsessed with His Messianic delusions as far as the brothers were concerned, that He was in danger of neglecting His own health and safety. Of course, there is no reason to assume that Mary was an unbeliever at this point, the testimony of scripture would seem to indicate that Mary believed already before the Lord Jesus was conceived and born, but the brothers certainly, as we know from John 7:5, the half-brothers of Jesus at this point did not believe in Him. Now it appears that they came to Jesus with another attempt to rescue Him while He was talking to a large crowd from home. Only, of course, His relatives could not get too close to Him because the crowd was too tightly packed. So they sent the message down the line, something along the lines of ‘Jesus, we need to talk, or son we want you to come home with us’ or something along those lines. The Lord’s reaction to that is very instructive for us because it teaches us not only about the relationship we have with God and our spiritual family, but it also teaches us about how we are to understand our natural earthly family.

Three points as we look at this. Firstly, the old relationship with family. Secondly, the new relationship with God; and thirdly the new relationship with each other.

In the first place the Lord’s response to His family might seem a little bit rude to our ears. Like saying ‘you are not my family any more, I have a new family now’ or something along those lines. But we need to understand this against the background of what we saw earlier in the chapter, that this is not a complete rejection of blood ties. Not at all. Rather it comes against the background of verses 20 and 21, the attempt of those who were close to Jesus to interfere with His Messianic mission or calling. It comes against the background of the unbelief of His half-brothers. And the view that Jesus was not the Messiah but He was deranged. And those are the things that the Lord Jesus in the mission in which His Father had sent Him, He could in no way humour those things. But we know that this is not a total rejection of the natural family, both from the general teaching of the Scripture on family and also from the Lord’s subsequent actions. We know this from the fifth commandment which commands us to honour our father and mother. And that is taken up in the New Testament in various places by the Lord Jesus Himself, including in Mark 7:10 and also the well-known passage written by the apostle Paul in Eph. 6:1 – addressed to children to honour and obey their parents. And this is what Jesus was doing. He was obeying this fifth commandment. He was honouring His Father – His heavenly Father – and He was doing so by refusing to bow to the misplaced notions and concerns of his earthly family. Perhaps even His mother was caught up with that a little bit even if she was believing – she was somehow in tow with the brothers and part of this attempt in some way at least. Moreover, the Lord Jesus is honouring His earthly family by this very refusal because this is correcting their mistaken ideas. And correcting the mistaken ideas of a fellow believer, or of an unbeliever, is to act in their welfare – it is not acting against them, it is acting for them.

That’s our understanding in church discipline as well. When we admonish a brother or a sister, we are not acting hatefully towards them, we are acting lovingly – for their welfare. So the Lord Jesus is not acting against the fifth commandment in any way here. Also later we find in John 19:26,27, we find that even on the cross the Lord Jesus shows the utmost love and care and regard for His earthly mother, Mary, He makes arrangements for her now that He will be leaving – He will come back for a time and then ascend to heaven, of course, and so He makes arrangements for Mary to be looked after by John.

And so all of these actions of the Lord Jesus is very much in line with what we also read in 1 Tim. 5:8, which says that a believer must provide for his own, and if he does not do that he is actually worse than an unbeliever. The Lord Jesus in no way goes against that, but His actions all the way through show that kind of care and provision for Mary, for His earthly family.

I am glad to say we see that same principle of 1 Tim 5:8 we see that and uphold that also as a congregation here. And we see it in so many ways – the families upholding their older members by visiting them and by doing their best to ensure that they don’t have to go into a nursing home, unless it is necessary, and it sometimes is, but doing our best to support them as long as we can in the best way possible for them, instead of passing off responsibilities to other people who are strangers – we don’t do that as God’s people. 1 Tim.5:8 for that reason – fifth commandment for that reason.

And yet, despite that respect for the Lord Jesus’ family, He also had higher priorities, as must we. He asked this question – ‘who are my mother and my brothers?’. And then He quickly gives the answer to that question, and we know from Matt. 12:49 which words it slightly differently, that the Lord Jesus indicated those who were sitting around Him, who were sitting nearest to Him, which would have been His disciples. And He indicated them and He also referred to anyone else outside of that inner circle, who does God’s will and who follows Him. These are the ones who are His mother and His brothers. And this is said because this is the Messianic Mission of the Lord Jesus, this is what He is appointed to do by his Father, he has been appointed to gather this new spiritual family, to gather a new set of spiritual mother, brothers and sisters, and He has been appointed to teach them and eventually to die for them. And absolutely nobody and nothing is going to be allowed to get in the way of this kingdom priority – not even His earthly family.

So what could have been a very difficult situation here – this could have been one of those - ooooooh Mum, situations where family causes a bit of embarrassment in some way – puts you in a bit of a spot, a bit of a dilemma, could have been one of those situations but instead its turned into a teaching opportunity to teach about the messianic mission of the Lord Jesus and the kingdom priorities. And at the same time, answering the family’s mistaken view of Him. And explaining to them why He cannot allow them to interfere. Just as some time before that in Luke 2:48,49, when the Lord Jesus went missing in the temple and the family left, they were on their way home when they discovered that, they went back and they found Him and after a mild admonition from Mary – Jesus replies “did you not know that I had to be in my Father’s House.’ He had to be – it was necessary because that was God’s purpose for Him.

This ties in with the general Biblical teaching that loyalty and obedience to God must come above absolutely everything else. It has to come even above your loyalty and your obedience to your family, and especially if they would try and tell you something contrary to what God says. In the Old Testament, relatives sometimes even had to join in executing a family member. To join in bringing about the stoning to death of that family member if that family member had encouraged idolatry or any other great evil. Ex 32:27 and 29. Duet 21:18-21. In Mark 10:28-30 the Lord explains that there is great blessing for those who leave their earthly family for the sake of the gospel. For the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is blessing in that. And Mark 10:34-37 puts it even more strongly. That we have to accept that sometimes the gospel is going to be the occasion for our family becoming our enemies. Even that can happen. If we love our family members more than we love the Lord Jesus, this explanation in Matt. Verse 10 then we are not worthy of Him- that’s what He says. You are not worthy of Me if you put your family members above Me.

The natural family is not being rejected here. The gospel is also open to them. Opening up with possibility of that most blessed situation where your natural family is also part of your spiritual family and what a great blessing that is which many of us know and enjoy – not all of us have that blessed experience – but most of us have it – that our natural family is also part of our spiritual family.

But the Lord Jesus Christ must come first and at times that will be at the cost of family.

Well, we know how we become members of the earthly family, by being born into it. And we also have some idea of what our family responsibilities are in the earthly family, helping with jobs and chores around the house, helping sometimes with finances, mutual protection, caring for each other’s name or reputation as well as physical welfare and protection – those are some of our responsibilities, but what – in the second place – is the nature of this new relationship with God and of the spiritual family responsibilities.

Well, the Lord shows the character of this new family by explaining that his new spiritual brothers and sisters and mothers are those who do the will of God - verse 35.

What is the will of God? Well we shouldn’t just think of it in terms of obeying the commandments of God and leading a holy life, though it does certainly include that – but it also includes at the most basic level, heeding that call of the gospel. To repent and to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith, this is the way that one enters the kingdom of God. This is the way that one enters this new relationship with the living God – with Him as your Father, with Jesus as your brother, and you as the adopted son and brother respectively. And you see the coming of the Messiah at this time which brought the breaking in of the kingdom of God, it created a new urgency to this call, that’s why John the Baptist was sent to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. A new urgency to this call to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and enter the joy of this new spiritual relationship. And to stress that urgency, Jesus had to put His family off. He had to put His family on hold, we might say. To demonstrate that the doing of the will of God is the number one priority.

Of course, we should not think that the doing of the will of God here in repenting and believing and obeying the commandments that this is intended in some works righteousness way, that if you in your own strength and with your own merits, if you obey God and you repent and you believe, and you follow the commandments that you will earn a place in God’s family – it’s certainly not saying that. The Lord is not here explaining the doing of good as the ground of this relationship, as the ground of salvation – **He** is the ground and the only ground at that. It is not His purpose here to explain how it is possible for sinners to repent and to believe, purely by grace, purely by the gift of God - true as that is. He is simply stating that all who enter this new relationship with God will be seen to be those who are doing the will of God, rather than those who simply claim some blood tie – be it with the Lord Jesus or with Father Abraham.

The blood tie is not the critical factor. The spiritual ties that’s the critical factor. And those spiritual ties create a delight in the will of our God and Heavenly Father – a delight to do that will. The Lord Jesus therefore, looked at His disciples sitting nearest to Him and He said behold my mother and my brothers because they had that new spiritual connection of faith. And what He was saying and putting it in this way was these disciples were closer to Him than many of His blood relatives – especially those who did not believe. Because of that spiritual connection. This is the new spiritual family – this is the household of God – that’s family talk – the household. And this household – this idea of family, that God has a household, and that we are His family – this is something that speaks of an intimacy and depth of relationship. It speaks of familiarity. All who refuse to believe in Him even if they are related by earthly family ties are actually strangers. They are outside of that household at the spiritual level.

Now this is not saying that the earthly relatives were now divorced. I indicated already that the Lord Jesus was upholding the fifth commandment and putting that in another way we could say that the Lord Jesus was not divorcing His earthly family. You know today some children can do that in some places – they are allowed to take out divorce proceedings against their parents – and some do. Utterly ridiculous situation in the society in which we live that has warped itself so far away from the model of the family that God provides.

But the Lord Jesus wasn’t doing that – He wasn’t saying I hereby divorce my earthly brothers and instead I want to indicate that these disciples here are my new brothers, my new earthly family. No, the Lord is speaking very generally about a spiritual reality. About the household of God as a whole. That’s why He doesn’t point to His male disciples and say, you are my new brothers, he says pointing to His disciples, you are brother, sister, mother. In other words you are part of the whole family – he is speaking very very broadly and generally. And that is demonstrated by the fact that this is extended to anyone, be they male or female, whoever does the will of God, can become brother, sister, mother in the household of God.

It is a bit reminiscent of the Lord Jesus ‘whoever’ in John 3:16 ‘whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life’. And that word ‘whoever’ it’s a way of removing barriers, it’s a way of encouraging people not to rule themselves out by definition, as if to say God could never accept me. I am not one of the elect, I could never be one of God’s people – I’m too bad – or something of that kind. Instead, to realise that when God has chosen someone, there is no barrier – He will get His person – when He gets that man and makes them His not only will he not be excluded but he will be part of something that is a more intimate family than any earthly family can provide. Whoever believes, whoever does the will of God – and that includes also the Lord Jesus’ earthly mother, brother, sisters and so on – the Lord is not excluding or divorcing or discouraging the earthly family – He is in effect, inviting them to join the spiritual family and then to have that blessed situation, if they haven’t already repented and believed, to have that blessed connection in addition to the natural one.

It is actually a great way to bring the gospel to unbelieving family members too – to present it in that way – that if they were to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ then they would also be part of God’s family then they would have a double bond to us and what a blessed thing that is.

Obviously the new relationship with the Lord Jesus creates a new relationship with each other and with fellow believers. Our third and final point the new relationship with each other.

If we are all brother, sister, mother of the Lord Jesus, part of the new spiritual household that means that we are all spiritual relatives of each other as well. And that is why the scripture consistently from Old to New Testament speaks of fellow believers as brethren. And the term comes up so often throughout the Bible. Psalm 22:22 talks about sharing what we know of God’s name with our brethren. We read Psalm 101 which used a different term – talked about concentrating on the faithful, those who serve God that they be the ones who dwell with us that they be the ones who minister to us rather than those who practice evil. Psalm 133 extolling the goodness of brothers dwelling together in unity. 1 John 4:20 telling us that if you don’t love your brother, then you really don’t love God. There are so many verses along this line. Showing us just how vital this is for church life and how vital it is also for your own spiritual welfare. That you regard everybody else in your congregation as your brethren – your brothers and your sisters. That you don’t think of other people in the congregation as ‘there’s that member that I don’t like’ or ‘there’s that church member that I don’t get on with’. Or ‘there’s that church member who has never bothered to invite me to their house – who doesn’t show any interest in me or ever talk to me’ or ‘there’s that one I don’t really know’ and so on. But that when you look to your left and to your right this morning, or any time, you look in the pew behind you and the pew in front of you, that everyone you see there is your brother or your sister. And it is important that we do think in those terms and think about what that means. And nearly all of the strife that comes in church life comes when that one point is forgotten and then the result is that we start to look negatively at each other and when we do that we are actually denying the Lord Jesus’ teaching here in this passage about the new relationship of the kingdom.

In carrying out and applying this teaching we also need to keep the priorities of kingdom and church life in view. And yet we need to do that without denying the rest of the word of God, such as the fifth commandment, without denying the blood ties that we have in God’s providence, He is the one that made us part of the families that we are part of in our blood relations. 1 Tim 5:8 made that very clear, you have to look after those close to you. God’s claims, God’s call must always come first as it has here with the Lord Jesus. In other words we must do the will of God, we must obey the commandments of God, even if families says otherwise.

We must follow God’s call. If He calls us to minister in a particular way and by doing that we leave the family behind, that’s clear from Matt. 8:21-22. The man who wanted to bury His father and so on, the Lord Jesus said you have to come with Me. It was a fairly extreme situation, nevertheless it shows the principle – you must put the call of God even above family. And that is why elders and deacons and others of you who are busy in various committees, why you make the sacrifices you do and you take time out from family life, temporarily. Perhaps you leave your spouse to look after your children on many nights because of your busyness in doing those things. Why do you do that, because you have kingdom priorities. Because there is a love of God which has created a love of your brethren. And therefore you expend yourself in God’s name for your brethren.

At the same time, if we neglect our natural family to the extent that there is a serious undermining of that family, most likely spiritual problems are going to develop somewhere or other, whether that is harm to the children or to your spouse, or to yourself, or to everybody, if that happens you will not long be able to continue your work in the church. So these things are tied together and there has to be a balance in them. We have to balance obedience to all of God’s commandments and to all of the callings that God gives us regarding family life, but also the calling to minister to other brethren as part of the church – the body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And a solution to that is not to say ‘I choose family – forget the church’ or to say ‘I choose church – forget the family’. Both of those are wrong conclusions. The solution is to strive with God’s help, to obey both callings in a balanced way because both are part of God’s will and those who are part of the family of Jesus Christ – the new spiritual family – are those who strive to do the will of God – all of it. Pray for wisdom and stamina as you do so because that can be very demanding and call for a lot of wisdom and a lot of stamina. We need to think about these things too, because as many of us are aware in our congregation of late there seems to be a measure of fatigue – so many committees, so much work to do, not enough people willing to do it, so the same old ones end up doing twice as much – we need to give careful thought to these things and seek that wisdom and stamina from the Lord and get things in balance.

We also need to pray for wisdom in dealing with unbelieving relatives. And many of us are in this situation. What has a believer in common with an unbeliever? 2 Cor. 6:15. This again shows there’s a huge difference between the closeness of spiritual family compared to unbelieving members of the natural family. “A perverse heart shall depart from me, he who practises deceit shall not dwell within my house” we read it in Psalm 101. These are very strong words but they are God’s words and we need to obey them. This is also in line with what the Lord Jesus is asking in this question ‘who are My mother and brothers?’ We need to be clear that brethren in our church are our true brothers and sisters, they are our true families spiritually speaking, and those of the earthly family who do believe are not at the spiritual level. And yet we need to do that without denying that there is a blood tie that creates obligations. Towards the end of his altercation with Esau, Jacob shows a measure of respect for his brother, as a brother, even though Esau was a covenant breaker. Concern for the welfare for unbelieving relatives may require us to take more and more distance from them if they persist in evil. If they are becoming more and more hostile to God. And that is especially the case if they have been members of God’s church and have turned away from the faith. But concern for their welfare also requires that we remind them of the gospel even if they have heard it before many times. That we keep saying to them that whoever does the will of God, including them, by repenting and believing in Jesus Christ will be saved. And that if they are, and if they do, then they will doubly be your brother and your sister. AMEN

Let us pray –

Heavenly Father, would you help us to put the Lord Jesus first in all that we do, in every sphere of life including our family life. Father, help us to love you more than anyone else, including family. Help us also to find a healthy balance as we seek to obey you and to carry out our calling in both home and church and also in our weekly work. Would you give us wisdom and grace and courage in dealing with those who are close to us but who do not know you, or have even turned against your ways and from your ways. We pray this in Jesus name, AMEN.