

THREE HOUSEHOLD RULES FOR THE FAMILY OF GOD

9 ³⁰They left that place and passed through Galilee; but [Jesus] did not want any man to know [where they were], ³¹because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, The Son of man will be betrayed into the hands of men, and they shall kill him. But after he has been killed, he will rise again three days later. ³²But they did not understand his teaching, and were afraid to ask him.

³³When they came to Capernaum and he was in the house, he asked them, What were you arguing about along the way? ³⁴But they kept quiet, because they had been arguing with one another along the way [about who was] the greatest. ³⁵He sat down and called the Twelve; then he said to them, If anyone desires be first, he must be last of all, and servant of all. ³⁶Then he took a little child and had him stand among them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷Whoever shall receive one of these little children in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, does not receive me, but [receives] the one who sent me. ³⁸John said to him, Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name; and we stopped him, because he did not follow us. ³⁹But Jesus said, Do not stop him; because no one will be able to do a mighty work in my name and [then] be able to quickly curse me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us.

⁴¹Whoever shall give you a cup of water to drink, because you belong to Christ—I tell you the truth—he shall by no means lose his reward. ⁴²But whoever shall cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for that man if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life maimed, than to have two hands but go to hell with its unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life crippled, than to have two feet but be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than to have two eyes but be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. ⁴⁹Every one shall be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, with what can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. (Mk. 9:30-50)

Introduction

I have a friend who, together with his wife, would open their home to people in need. God blessed them with a large home on the north side of Philadelphia—and with a large heart to minister to people in need.

Over the course of the years a variety of people have been the recipients of their hospitality and became members of their “family:” a missionary returning from overseas and in need of temporary lodging; a gym teacher with an injured back who could not afford to rent an apartment on her meager disability check; a young girl who was seeking refuge from an abusive boyfriend; a young family with two small children who had no place to live when the father lost his job. At one time or another, each of these people—together with numerous dogs and cats—became members of the “family.”

My friend was willing to receive these various people, welcoming them into his home, considering them a part of his family—on the condition that they would abide by the rules of the household. Upon accepting his hospitality, they had to realize that they were no longer a private, independent entity, they were now a part of a family, and they had to appreciate their commitment to the family.

As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and as members of the household of God, the same holds true for us: we must appreciate our spiritual responsibility to the family of God. In the passage of Mark presently before us, our Lord Jesus provides us with Three Household Rules for the members of the family of God.

I. Household Rule #1: Exhibit the Mind of a Servant (Mk. 9:30-37)

Knowing that Jesus was now on His way to Jerusalem, and still convinced that He would immediately assume the royal throne in that city, the disciples dispute who among them is the greatest. They were convinced that he who held the highest rank among them would surely occupy the highest position in the kingdom about to be inaugurated.

Upon arriving in Capernaum, in the privacy of the home where they were staying, Jesus addresses their dispute and defines true greatness in the kingdom and family of God. Turning to His disciples, the Lord Jesus declares, *“If any one desires to be first, he must be (literally, “he will be”) last of all, and servant of all”* (vs. 35.) Here is first a warning: Your ambition and effort to gain first place will earn you last place in the sight of God. Self-seeking ambition is antithetical to the self-giving character of God, thus Jesus warns His disciples, *“everyone who exalts himself will be humbled”* (Lk. 14:11a.) Positions occupied in the church are never to be used for personal prominence, but for service, as the Apostle Peter strongly admonishes the elders of the churches to whom he writes:

... shepherd the flock of God that is among you. Do not exercise oversight [merely] because you must do so, but do so willingly for God. Do not do so for material gain, but with a willingness [to serve]. ³Do not lord yourselves over those who are under your care; on the contrary, be examples for the flock. ⁴Then, when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never tarnish. (1 Pet. 5:2-4)

Outlined in Jesus' words is also the way to true greatness: If you would be great in God's kingdom, you must be servant of all: *“he who humbles himself will be exalted”* (Lk. 14:11b.) True greatness in the sight of God consists in service, self-giving service. As a member of the family of God you must cultivate an attitude of service; we must view ourselves as the servant and our brethren as the rightful recipients of our service, as the Apostle Paul instructs the church at Philippi: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others higher than yourselves”* (Phil. 2:3.) We must see our service to our brethren as

service to Christ Himself: *“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’”* (Matt. 25:40.)

As members of the family of God we must engage in acts of service. We must not only attend to our own legitimate needs (food, shelter, friendship, encouragement, love, etc.), but must also be mindful of our brother’s needs and seek to meet them: *“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others”* (Phil. 2:4.) Our acts of service need to be practical, even radical—performed even at the cost of our own personal comfort and security:

... I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matt. 25:35-36); “in prison” here refers to suffering persecution for the sake of Christ

As members of the family of God, we must extend Christian service to all, even those considered to be the least of Christ’s brethren (Mk. 9:36-37.) The little child was considered insignificant, but the spiritual union between Christ and His people extends to each and every one of us who believe in His name and belong to Him. We must take seriously the admonition of the Apostle James,

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, do not show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. ³If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, Here is a good seat for you, but say to the poor man, You stand there or Sit on the floor by my feet, ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ... ⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. (Jas. 2:1-4,8-9)

The way to true greatness in the kingdom of God is open to all, because it does not depend upon spiritual gifts, but consists in the practice of Christian love exhibited in acts of service. As a member of the family of God, we must exhibit the mind of a servant.

II. Household Rule #2: Respect the Unity of Christ’s Body (Mk. 9:38-41)

In verses 33-37 Jesus addressed the question of how His disciples (including ourselves) are to relate to one another within the context of their own immediate circle. Now John raises the question, “How are we to relate to those who are not a part of our immediate circle?” (vs. 38.) He is speaking of a man who possessed the saving power of Christ (he was casting out demons in Christ’s name; but because he was not a member of the disciples’ intimate circle, they

refused to sanction his ministry: *“we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”*

In responding to John, our Lord gives us the following guidelines for relating to fellow Christians who are not a part of our immediate fellowship. We are to recognize that those who **work** for Christ are not going to readily **speak** against Him (vs. 39b.) A man whose life and ministry reveal a devotion to Christ should be considered a brother in Christ rather than an unbeliever who will denounce the cause of Christ at a moment's notice.

We must resist the temptation to view the body of Christ in very narrow and exclusive terms (vs. 40.) The disciples' evaluation of those outside their immediate circle could be summed up with the word, “If they are not with us, they are against us.” Jesus corrects their evaluation: “If they are not against us, they are for us.”

But we must also recognize the parameters of Christian confession. One such parameter being Peter's confession as recorded in Matthew 16:16, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* Another parameter is provided by the Apostle Paul: *“what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures”* (1 Cor. 15:3-4.) To be considered a Christian brother, there must be an acknowledgement and acceptance of the person and work of Christ as defined by the Word of God. But we must also guard against the attitude exhibited by one of the cliques within the church of Corinth; to the exclusion of all other believers, they maintained, *“we are of Christ”* (1 Cor. 1:12.)

As members of the family of God, we must respect the unity of Christ's body. There is a spiritual unity that transcends all denominational, cultural, racial boundaries: *“all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Gal. 3:27-28.) This spiritual unity must be recognized and respected: *“Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit by the bond of peace”* (Eph. 4:3.)

III. Household Rule #3: Protect the Spiritual Welfare of Your Brother and Yourself (Mk. 9:42-50)

We must be very careful that we do not cause a fellow Christian to stumble into sin, or even to deny the faith (vs. 42.) The imagery our Lord uses is that of putting an obstacle in our brother's path, which causes him to trip and fall in his Christian life. The Greek verb translated *“to sin,”* or, *“to give up his faith,”* has the primary meaning, *“to stumble.”*

The meaning of our Lord's parable is that we must not do that which would cause a fellow Christian to be tempted and consequently fall into sin. One way would be by an arrogant, selfish, inconsiderate use of Christian liberty. The Apostle Paul addresses this matter in 1 Corinthians 8:13, "*if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.*" Paul had informed the Corinthians that the Christian has the freedom to eat meat offered to idols and to do so without sinning. But if a Christian brother who had formerly eaten such meat as a part of his pagan ritual would be tempted to revert back to his pagan worship by partaking of such food, the Apostle Paul would refrain from eating so as not to cause that brother to be tempted into sin. Paul intends that his course of conduct should serve as a loving example to be followed by the church for the sake of the weaker brothers who might be tempted to revert back to idolatry when they witness their brethren exercising their Christian liberty by eating such meat.

Another way in which we might sinfully endanger the spiritual welfare of our brethren in Christ is by the devilish practice of intentionally enticing a brother to sin (or to violate his conscience.) Such behavior is characteristic of the unconverted; having enumerated a list of the sins commonly practiced by the unconverted, the Apostle Paul concludes by writing of them, "*Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them*" (Rom. 1:32.) Such behavior, that of willfully enticing fellow believers into sin, should never be practiced by members of the body of Christ. On the contrary, let us take to heart and put into practice the counsel of Romans 14:19, "*Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.*"

With regard to our own sins, on the other hand, we must be very careful that we are not complacent. (vs. 43-50a.) We must perform "radical spiritual surgery" (vs. 43a,45,47a.) In these verses the Lord is not instructing us to literally and physically maim ourselves—if you cut off one hand you could still sin with the other, and would not be able to cut that one off! On the contrary, in emphatic terms He is instructing us to sever our connection with sinful practices: don't take hold of sin, don't walk into sin, don't look at sin. Consider the testimony of the Psalmist:

Direct me in the path of your commandments, for there I find delight. ³⁶Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. ³⁷Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word. (Psl. 119:35-37)

Such "surgery" must be motivated by the recognition of the seriousness and destructiveness of sin: (vs. 43,45,47-48.) Let us take to heart the warning presented in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10,

Do you not realize that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor those who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10)

Jesus sums up His teaching with these words: *“Have salt in yourselves.”* That is to say, we are to be preserved from the moral decay and corruption of the world by ruthlessly cultivating personal holiness before God: *“let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God”* (2 Cor. 7:1.)

The Lord Jesus then goes on to add, *“and be at peace with one another.”* We are to preserve the unity of the church by graciously cultivating a spirit of service to fellow Christians and a spirit of acceptance of fellow Christians.

As members of the family of God, we must protect the spiritual well-being of our brethren and ourselves.

Conclusion

Upon receiving new members into his “family,” my friend would inform them of their obligation to abide by the rules of the household. They were no longer private, independent entities; they were now a part of the family and must fulfill their responsibilities to the family.

As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and members of the household of God, the same holds true for us: we must fulfill our responsibilities within the family of God. Here in the ninth chapter of Mark we are reminded of Three Household Rules for members of God’s family: 1) Exhibit the mind of a servant; 2) Respect the unity of Christ’s body; and 3) Protect the spiritual well-being of your brother and yourself.