

“The High Cost of Discipleship”

Matthew 10:34-37 (pt. 1)

It won't be long until you start getting Christmas cards in the mail, and it's likely that at least one of them will feature a familiar quote that is presumed to be straight out of Scripture. However, it is actually a misquote. It is the KJV rendition of the angelic announcement in Luke 2:14 which says, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”*

This statement makes it sound like the birth of Jesus the Messiah will bring peace to the earth—that His arrival will bring about the cessation of conflict, the termination of turmoil, and the end of enmity.

But that is not what the angel actually said to the terrified shepherds that night. The most reliable manuscripts of the New Testament reveal that what he really said was, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.”*

That's a very different meaning. That is *not* a promise that there will be peace on earth because of Messiah's advent, but that there will be peace for those who have God's favor, a reference to those who embrace Jesus as their Savior and Messiah.

Let's be clear: Jesus did not come to bring peace on earth in the first century, or even peace on earth in this present age. By all accounts He came to bring just the opposite. Look at what He says in Matthew 10, **verse 34**. ³⁴*“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”*

That's about as simple and straightforward a statement as you can get. Jesus did *not* come to bring peace to the earth, unlike what His disciples initially thought, and unlike what was most certainly the expectation of the Jews in their day. They were under the impression, based on their interpretations of numerous Old Testament prophecies, that the Messiah would usher in a state of peace the likes of which the world had never seen. After all, one of the names Isaiah gave to this Messiah was “Prince of Peace” (9:6). It stands to reason that the Prince of peace would have a kingdom of peace. It stands to reason that God's emissary to this contentious earth would have a calming, soothing, settling influence—that hatred and hostility and conflict and combat would be eradicated, once and for all.

So what does Jesus mean in Matthew 10? And if in fact Jesus is the Messiah, how do you reconcile what He says in verse 34 with His prophetic role as the Prince of Peace?

Remember, Jesus made this statement in the context of a lengthy conversation with His disciples before He sent them out to preach on His behalf. And a significant part of that conversation had to do with preparing them for the way they would be treated by the people to whom they were sent. He warned them that because of their association with Him they would encounter stiff opposition. They would get into trouble with all kinds of authorities who would use the legal process to inflict terrible pain and even capital punishment.

In other words, because of their association with Jesus, Christ-followers could expect to be treated badly. And it's not merely that people would dislike them or avoid them; it's that they would be the objects of intense hatred and hostility.

But what does Jesus mean, *“I have come to bring a sword?”* Is He saying that He has come to start a militant movement and that His followers are going to be jihadists? Is He issuing a call to arms, here, and urging His disciples to be the aggressors in a religious and

cultural conflict?

Don't forget that in Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that some of the predominate character traits of His followers are meekness, mercy, and peace. Those qualities are not compatible with aggression.

No, Jesus is saying in verse 34 that His presence in the world and His message and ministry in the world will cause others to be hostile toward Him and those who identify with Him. In other words, His followers will be *victims*, not militants.

By the way, Jesus implies that He came into this world knowing this would happen, and the language He uses here is evidence of His pre-existence and His foreknowledge. He came knowing that He would be the *cause* of division between people who would otherwise get along just fine. He came knowing He would divide communities, synagogues, neighborhoods and families. And He knew that this division would get ugly and nasty, which is why He uses the metaphor "sword" in verse 34. A sword is an instrument of violence and destruction. A sword is a tool that is used to cut something in two—to divide.

And Jesus predicts that this division will be so profound and so pronounced that it will affect even the most intimate relationships. Look what He says in **verses 35-36**. ***³⁵ 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. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.***

A person's household would include spouses, children, or some other close relative living in one's home. In other words, those who are nearest and dearest to us. The term translated, "set...against," is actually too mild a translation for the verb $\delta\iota\chi\alpha\zeta\omega$, which has at its root the idea of "rebellious against authority" or "inciting a revolt." *Hostility* is implicit in the meaning of $\delta\iota\chi\alpha\zeta\omega$. So Jesus is not talking about family members who politely agree to disagree about Him. He is talking about an unbelieving family member being so offended and enraged by Jesus that he/she considers their Christ-following family member their enemy.

As you know, enmity with one's nearest and dearest loved ones is the most traumatic, painful thing there is. I cannot imagine anything more heartbreaking than being at enmity with one of my sons or my daughter. I cannot imagine anything more distressing than one of my kids saying to me, "I hate your Jesus, therefore I hate you, and I never want to see you or talk to you again."

But this is what Jesus says will happen to some, and this has happened with a startling degree of frequency throughout the history of the Church.

It's possible some of us may hear this and wonder if it really *has* to get to that point. Isn't there a way to prevent such a drastic reaction, perhaps through better communication skills or conflict resolution techniques? How about being more winsome, more humble, more loving, so that we, through our good behavior, can endear our unbelieving loved ones to us and make them not want to turn against us?

If that's what you are thinking or wondering then you haven't yet grasped the fundamental nature of this division and the reason why this kind of hatred and hostility may be inevitable and unavoidable, despite our best efforts to prevent it. You see, it's not about us. It's about Jesus! There is something about *Him* that is offensive to an unbeliever. And as disciples of Jesus we are inseparable from Jesus because He lives in us and expresses His life and character through us. And if we are living the way He intended us to live those who are hostile to Jesus cannot help but notice our connection to Him.

You say, "But what is it about Jesus that is so offensive? What's there *not* to like about

Him? He's so loving, and kind, and compassionate! There is no deceit or guile or hypocrisy in Him! He speaks truth! What's so upsetting about that?

Jesus explained in another passage why He is an irritant to people, and, by implication, why His followers are irritants as well. He said in John 3, ***19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed*** (John 3:19-20).

Why is Jesus the object of hatred and hostility? Why do His followers get treated the same? It's not because they do bad things. It's because they do *good* things. But that good exposes the bad in unbelievers, and that exposure feels awful. It makes them feel ashamed, inadequate, and guilty. It makes them feel condemned, even though Jesus said that He did not come into the world to condemn the world. But if they don't believe in Him they *feel* that condemnation, and they blame Him for it, which is why they are so antagonistic.

The fact is, Jesus makes people squirm, and so do His followers, because they are light, and darkness cannot stand the light. So, we cannot expect even our closest family members who are living in the darkness to be endeared to us and *not* react negatively to us, because there is something offensive about Jesus, and it's in us as well.

I don't know about you, but I've seen this happen in families. I know a woman—a Christ follower who radiates with the light of Christ and exudes the love of Christ—who has an unbelieving sister who lives in darkness. Several years ago I witnessed this unbelieving sister, for no apparent reason, explode in rage toward her Christian sister—cursing, screaming, telling her she wished she had never been born, telling her she never wanted to see her or talk to her again (and she didn't for eight years). And when I observed this I was shocked. Because I had seen this Christian sister be nothing but loving, kind, generous, and respectful to her. She had never done anything to her that would be considered a *real* offense.

So why the intense hostility? It was Jesus in this Christian woman. It was His light shining through her, and that light was unbearable for her sister living in the darkness. That's what Jesus meant when He said, ***"I did 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..."*** Not because His followers are behaving badly, but because they are doing good, and that good exposes the bad in unbelievers and makes them feel ashamed and condemned.

This is probably a good time to insert a comment and correct some notions about perceptions of modern day persecution in the American church. You might be sitting here thinking, "You know, this explains why members of my family don't want to be around me," or "why people at work or at school seem to avoid me," or "why evangelical Christians get such a bad rap in the media." It might explain it...but it might not. I need to tell you that I've heard lots of people talk about why they don't like Christians, and it has it has nothing to do with the Christians' good behavior. It's because those Christians are obnoxious, or annoying, or hypocritical, or foolish. My daughter worked at a restaurant in which Christian customers were the most demanding, had the most gripes, and tipped the least. The reputation of Christians was so bad that her fellow workers used to say, "Oh no, those people are Christians. I don't want to serve their table—you take it!" You say, "Well how did they know they were Christians?" They saw them pray before a meal. Or they knew they went to such and such a church.

And while we're at it, don't be one of those people who says that evangelical Christians

are being unfairly treated by the media in our culture. Some of it may be unfair, but a lot of the bad P.R. directed toward evangelicals in our day is deserved. It's because we're making foolish comments or promoting foolish causes or making political alliances with foolish people. It's because we're combative and defensive, not because we're meek and merciful and peaceful.

Much of the anger and hostility that is directed toward Christians in America today has nothing to do with what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 10. He's talking about being treated with hostility because we are so good that we make people who aren't good feel bad. He's talking about light shining in the darkness.

And when light shines in the darkness the darkness will try to extinguish the light, because the light exposes the darkness and makes the darkness feel ashamed and condemned. And that can, and does, happen in families that were once close knit.

Let's be honest. Verses 35-36 are troubling for many of us. Because we love our families. We love our parents and our kids and our siblings and our spouses whether they follow Jesus or not. And we want to get along with them. We don't want there to be hatred and hostility in those relationships.

Which brings me to the title of this message—"The High Cost of Discipleship." The cost is high because the possibility of a relationship with a loved one blowing up and disintegrating is incredibly traumatic and painful. So much so that we are compelled to evaluate which relationships are *most* important and *most* precious to us, because we may be forced to choose one or the other. Will we choose Jesus over a parent, who brought us into this world? Will we choose Jesus over a child that we brought into this world? Over a spouse with whom we have become one flesh? Or a sibling with whom we grew up? This teaching forces us to evaluate our priorities.

Jesus knew that when He said this, and so He says in **verse 37**, ***37** 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.*

Please note that when Jesus says, "...is not worthy of me," he's saying that a person who loves another more than Him is not *allowed* to be His disciple. In a parallel passage Jesus said, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).* Let me repeat that: *"He cannot be my disciple."* In other words, if Jesus doesn't come first in your life, you don't really belong to Him.

Let's not fool ourselves. Being a follower of Jesus comes at a very high cost, and every follower of Jesus must be willing to pay that price. Which is to say that a true follower of Jesus is first and foremost a follower of Jesus. Jesus is his/her first priority. And so, a person cannot say, "I'm a follower of Jesus, but I'm first and foremost a family person, so when push comes to shove I'm going to choose my kids over Jesus." Or, "I'm first and foremost a business person, so I'm going to choose money over Jesus." Or, "I'm first and foremost a supporter of 'me, myself, and I', so I'm going to choose my personal safety and comfort over Jesus."

No, Jesus never presented options to people so they could choose their level of commitment to Him. He never devised a continuum where you've got the super-committed, fanatical Christ-followers on one end of the spectrum (like the Apostle Paul), and half-hearted, wishy-washy Christ-followers on the other end, and you can choose where you want to be on that continuum.

Jesus said that in order to be a disciple you're either all in or you're not in at all. And when He said that *if* you love father or mother or son or daughter more than Him you're not worthy of Him, what He meant was that you're not a disciple. Not being worthy of Him means that you can't have Him. Because Jesus won't settle for being second place. Loyalty to Jesus trumps loyalty to all others, including our nearest and dearest loved ones.

That's what it means to be a disciple. And while the call to discipleship begins with an invitation from Him, disciples must exercise their free wills to choose Him. And Jesus wants His disciples to make an *informed* decision. He wants them to consider carefully what they are getting into and how much it will cost. And *the cost is extremely high*, because discipleship impacts every single part of life, including our most intimate relationships.

This is a hard saying, but I want to suggest a reason *why* someone who loves father and mother and child and sibling more than Jesus is not worthy of Him. It's very simple, and it's very logical. It is not merely because He demands it; it is because He deserves it, and anything less than Him having first place in one's life is an indication that someone doesn't really know Him.

Jesus is our Creator; Jesus is our Sustainer; Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus is the Messiah; Jesus is the King of kings; Jesus is Lord of lords; Jesus is the Bread of life and the Living Water. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus is the Victor over sin, Satan and death. Jesus is the Object of the unceasing worship of countless beings in heaven. Jesus is our Redeemer, our Savior, our Substitute, our High Priest, our Advocate, our elder Brother. Jesus is the Giver of eternal life. Jesus is the One around whom the whole universe revolves.

And because of these things, Jesus is worthy of the total allegiance and the unrivaled commitment and the wholehearted devotion of every living creature in this universe. There is no one who's worth or worthiness comes close to His. So it's unreasonable, it's unthinkable, given who He is, that He would be okay with disciples who consider others as more important or more worthy than Him—even family members.

I cannot close this message without asking you the question: Is Jesus your first love? Or is there someone that you love more? Your spouse? Your child? Your grandchild? Your parent?

It's an important question, so I want to spend a moment clarifying how you can know the answer. Please don't confuse the love Jesus is talking about in verse 37 with feelings or passion or affection. Let me assure you that it's not so much about feelings and passion as it is about allegiance and loyalty.

When I read my Bible—even when I read about Jesus—I don't often feel the kind of affection I feel for Mindy, or the same kind of exhilaration I feel when my grandchildren are sitting on my lap. And I don't feel guilty about that—nor does it make me question my salvation. Because I know that when push comes to shove I will choose Jesus over them. I will choose to follow Him, and obey His word, and do His will over theirs.

I have a friend—a Christian woman—who was very close to her grandson. She was heartbroken when he revealed that he was gay. But she kept loving him and praying for him. One day she found herself in a dilemma when she received an invitation to his wedding. After wrestling with what to do about it, she decided not to go because of what her Lord and Savior had written in his Word about marriage—that it is between a man and a woman. And she felt that if she went she would be approving or endorsing gay marriage. And when she

politely explained her reason for not attending, her grandson's mother—her daughter—told her that she was never going to speak to her again.

That hurts. It hurts terribly. But that's what it means to love Jesus more than daughter or grandson. Loyalty to Jesus trumps loyalty to all others, including our nearest and dearest loved ones.

I've known people who have been called by God to be missionaries in remote, dangerous, faraway places, whose anxious parents have pleaded with them not to go. I also have known parents who have tried to bribe their adult children to do something different than follow God's leading in their lives. It is in such cases that loyalty to Jesus trumps loyalty to all others, including one's nearest and dearest.

The same is true in marriages. If a husband or wife is convinced from Scripture that Jesus is leading him/her to do something, or to refrain from doing something, he/she must choose to obey the Lord Jesus, even if it means disappointing one's spouse. Because loyalty to Jesus trumps loyalty to all others, including one's nearest and dearest loved ones.

That's the cost of discipleship. But don't forget that the reward of discipleship is worth the cost. Paul said in Romans 8, "*For I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*" (v.18). And then he expanded on it in 2 Corinthians 4 when he was describing his own hardships. He said, "*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*"

We live for a very short time on this little planet called earth. And some of what we experience here may be painful and unpleasant and downright difficult. But our real life is in heaven, around the throne of our Lord, King Jesus. This world is not our home; we're just passing through. We are *citizens of heaven*, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, who will bring peace, permanent peace, when He comes again.

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Main Idea: *Our association with Jesus may cause family division, partly because loyalty to Jesus trumps loyalty to all others, including our nearest and dearest loved ones*

Jesus the Messiah “brings” Division (34-36)

What about “Peace on Earth” (Luke 2:14)?

What about the promised “Prince of Peace”?

Are Christ-followers militants or victims?

Why does Jesus divide families? (35-36)

More than a communication breakdown

The fundamental cause

Light versus darkness

The feeling of condemnation

Forced to Choose (37)

Jesus must come first

Worthy of Him or not

Application