

Mathew 10:34-43
Don't Sugar Coat It

“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. 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. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”

Jesus says that anyone who loves their family more than Him, whether it be father, mother, son or daughter, is not worthy of Him. He also says that anyone who does not take up their cross and follow Him is not worthy of Him.

Which raises the question of “Who is worthy of Jesus?” Are we worthy of Jesus? We might take a hint from John the Baptist in answering this question. He publicly professed that he was not even worthy to untie Jesus' sandals! And Jesus had said of John the Baptist, “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” So when the question is asked this way, “Who is worthy of Jesus?” we know the answer: not us.

But in the very next thing Jesus said after calling John the Baptist the greatest among men was, “Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” So John's great status on earth did not equal great status in heaven. Which leads me to ask the question a different way: “Can one

BECOME worthy of Jesus?” After all, St. Paul speaks of us walking “worthy of the calling” (Eph. 4:1), having a manner of life “worthy of the Gospel” (Phil. 1:27), and to walk in a manner “worthy of the Lord” (Col. 1:10). So if we, like John the Baptist, weren't worthy of Jesus—can we BECOME worthy? And how?

Jesus' answer was “whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” So we must take up our cross and follow Jesus. But how does that make us worthy of Jesus? Is it that Jesus needs us to add some of our own suffering to what He already suffered, in order to prove our worth to Him? No. The answer lies in the words, “and FOLLOW ME.” This was Jesus' way of saying, “Believe in me; Trust in me; Walk after me as I lead you.”

And where was Jesus going? What was He teaching that He wanted us to believe? He calls us to believe that He is the true Son of God, sent by the Father from heaven, and that He is going to the cross to suffer the ultimate price for our sins. In other words, to follow Jesus is not only to know that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, but also to trust and believe that this is in fact for me! We stake everything on the fact that He is our Savior and we will follow Him. We became worthy of Jesus, not by our self-worth or by our own sufferings, but by Jesus' worth and His sufferings! His precious blood and innocent sufferings and death bought us and gave us worth. We are worthy of eternal life because we have been given His worthiness as a gift, by faith in Jesus.

But then comes the nagging question, “What about that take up your cross part? What is our cross?” After all, isn't the message of much of popular Christianity that if you just believe in Jesus, that everything in life is going to be wonderful and positive for you? We hear televangelists and authors say that if you just have enough faith then God will bless you with wealth, success, and great health? Don't you wonder about the poor, the failures, and the sickly—who Jesus chose to spend most of His ministry with?

Does Jesus promise glory, health, wealth, and success here and now if we just have enough faith and follow the right steps? Well, let's listen again to what Jesus actually said in today's text, and consider that. “Do not suppose that I have come to

bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’ Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Come on, Jesus, don’t sugar coat it. We can take the naked truth, can’t we?

According to Jesus, our Christian life is not going to be free from trouble. We should in fact expect suffering! Not peace but a sword. This is what Jesus means when He says, “Take up your cross and follow me.” He means that there will be sufferings, persecutions, trials, and difficulties that come as a result of believing in Him. He means that it should come as no surprise that believing in Jesus can cause your very own family members to turn against you. “A man’s enemies will be the members of his own household,” Jesus says. The world hates us and before us it hated Jesus. And the world hates the offense of the cross, which proclaims Christ’s death and resurrection as the solution for humankind’s lost state. So the preaching and the believing of the Gospel presents a stumbling block and division to the world, and even as close as within our families.

And that is perhaps where it hurts the most. Many of you know firsthand just what this means—you have seen the division within your own family over faith in Christ. Perhaps the relationship where this division is most sharply felt is that between a husband and a wife. For some of you who are married to an unbelieving spouse, you know that cross of suffering that you bear because of their unbelief. The burden may come differently for each person. For one person, they may suffer the constant ridicule of their spouse whenever it comes to matters of faith. “Do you really believe that nonsense? That Jesus-stuff is for the weak-minded.” Yet the believing spouse bears this ridicule for the sake of Christ, and patiently endures this cross, silently praying for God to break their heart of stone and bring them to faith. For the believer knows that we must love Jesus even more than our family or friends, and that to surrender our faith for the sake of peace on earth, or in the family, is to judge

ourselves unworthy of eternal life. For the believer knows that a few years of earthly peace is absolutely nothing in comparison with the eternity of peace and rest that awaits us in heaven.

But we remain with the painful divisions in family. Some have become Christians while their parents or children remained unbelievers, and have experienced rejection or being disowned from the family as a result. There’s no way around it. Jesus promised this kind of suffering would accompany the Christian life. And this is the kind of suffering that we will endure—suffering that God places upon us. This is suffering that comes as a result of the message of the Gospel—not suffering that we choose for ourselves or inflict on ourselves. When Jesus said to take up our cross and follow Him, He wasn’t asking for self-torture and mutilation. It’s said that some men in Mexico and the Philippines will actually have themselves crucified, and suffer until they’ve lapsed into a coma before they are taken down. That is not what Jesus is asking for. Nor is it pleasing to God when we create our own sufferings, as if our cross could be self-chosen. No, the sufferings of the Christian are chosen by God, and they come as a result of faith in Christ.

But what the Old Adam can’t realize and know, is that in giving everything here on earth up for loss, and clinging to Christ alone as our true and only possession, we have in fact gained everything. For Christ is all in all, and as He says in today’s lesson, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Because to find our life here on earth, among possessions or family and friends, instead of in Christ, is ultimately to lose it all. For it’s of no profit to gain the whole world while losing our soul. Instead, Jesus tells us that whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For when we count everything in this life as nothing—losing our life for Jesus’ sake—then we will truly find our life in Christ.

In Christ Jesus, there is a far better life in store for us. You won’t find your best life here. Instead, beyond the temporary suffering Jesus calls us to endure in this life, there awaits in heaven “Your Best Life Forever!” Because when God’s final judgment comes at Jesus’ return, He will fashion a new heavens and earth that far surpasses the glory of this world, and He will bring us at last to eternal rest with Him. Joys await us that know no

ending. And for this, we know it's nothing to give up what we have here on earth, and count it as nothing.

So while we are still in this world, left with suffering, is it our burden to carry alone, as if Jesus had left us or forsaken us? No way! Christ promised never to leave us or forsake us, and He has given us the means to bear up under such sufferings. Our sins are forgiven so we can follow after Him and be counted worthy for His sake. Through His Word He strengthens us on the journey home, with constant promises of His forgiveness and ever-present love. Through our Baptism He crucifies our old sinful flesh that resists God's grace and promises. Through the Lord's Supper He gives His body and blood for our forgiveness while uniting us with fellow believers in His body. And as fellow believers in one body, we strengthen each other and bear one another's burdens as we move through this life toward our heavenly home – a heavenly home where we will find out just how true it always was that whoever loses his life for Christ's sake will find it. For in Christ, we have found everything. Amen.

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