A Matter of Priority


25 Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 26 “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. 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him. 30 And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 31 Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 33 So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. 34 Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? 35 It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

It’s a bit shocking, isn’t it, to hear Jesus say that you can’t be His disciple unless you hate your father and mother, especially when it’s taken out of context. But, even when it’s kept in its context, it’s hard to accept, because it seems to go against the rest of Jesus’ teachings, particularly the radical teaching of love that He’d been preaching all along. I mean, if we’re supposed to love our neighbor, why not our closest and most beloved family members?

Well, clearly Jesus, the Author of love, whose great love compelled Him to go to the cross to suffer and die for the sins of all mankind, is not suggesting that we suddenly leave behind His command to love one another. What He means to say is that, just as possessions can come between us and the kingdom of God, so can family ties. There’s always the danger that family itself can become an idol, pushing God into the back seat of our life. We can see that in something as simple as the weekly worship service. How many times is our attendance in public worship forced to fit around family schedules – children’s sports activities, and so on – rather than making our family schedules conform to that of Christ and His church?

And, as frustrating as that expectation might be, I think what’s most bothersome to us about this passage is the use of that word "hate." A big part of the problem is the translation, which really misses the meaning of the original Greek. The Greek word used here for "hate" literally means “to love less.” Deuteronomy 21:15 refers to a man who has two wives, "the one beloved and the other hated." That doesn't mean that he had ill-will toward one, but that he loved her less. This
follows the same thought in the parallel passage to our text in Matthew (10:37): "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

Of all the English translations I have in my library – and I have about a dozen – it’s actually – and you won’t hear me say this very often – [it’s actually] The Living Bible and The Living Translation that come the closest to getting it right. The Living Bible reads: “Anyone who wants to be my follower must love me far more than he does his own father,” and The Living Translation has: “If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else.” Jesus is making a sharp point of comparison by using this word.

And then He goes on to say: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." Part of the cross we bear is losing this world and everything in it for Him. He becomes THE number one priority. Now, I’m not saying that’s easy; it’s not. It’s certainly not easy for me.

What about you? You know, self-sacrifice is part of what made Jesus more than just a great teacher, more than just a religious leader; it’s through self-sacrifice that Jesus became the Redeemer of all people. Of course, He also had the benefit of being God.

But countless Christians over the course of the centuries have followed His example. It wasn’t easy for them either. For Paul, getting up out of the dust on the Damascus road meant giving up prestige, honor, career, and even his life. For Luther, it meant giving up safety and the quiet life of a monk and teacher in the Church. For William Carey, a cobbler in London, it meant more of the scorching sun of India instead of a chair at Oxford University. For Livingstone it meant leaving his bones in some forgotten grave in Africa. For Chalmers it meant a bloody end on the coast of New Guinea. What are you willing to give up for Christ?

But maybe you’re wondering about the Christian duty you have toward your family as well. Don’t we have a responsibility to love and care for them?

Some of the Apostles forsook family completely and devoted themselves to the work of the Church – like Paul, who never took a wife and never had children of his own. Later on the Church became more family-oriented. Paul writes to Timothy: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (1 Tim. 5:8)
“But, Pastor, doesn’t that conflict with what Jesus is saying in our text?” No, because Paul is talking about care-giving and Jesus is talking about the dedication of the heart.

According to Jesus, the interests of God’s kingdom must be of utmost priority for His followers, and everything else must take second place, even family ties.

But, in this case, second is not a bad place to be. It’s like being given a Ferrari instead of a Lamborghini. It’s like getting a Rolex instead of a Patek Phillipe. Or like winning the heart of Miss America’s first runner-up. I mean, you’re hardly slumming it.

And, besides all that, if you really want to love your family in the best way possible, you have to start with loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. That’s where the ability to love comes from anyhow. After all, the love you have for Him and the love you have for them comes from the love He has for you!

When you love God first, when you love Jesus above all else, then, and only then, can you have true and real love to give to your family. If you really want to love your family, love God, because I’ll tell you this: As much as you love them, there’s no way that you love them more than He does.

Is this text saying that you absolutely have to give up your family, friends, and everything else for the sake of Christ? No. But you have to be willing to give up your family, friends, and everything else if Jesus is going to be the King of your heart. The thing is, you gain far more than anything you lose. The more you give and give up, the more God gives back to you. You simply cannot out-give God. (I dare you to try!) As Jesus Himself said: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33).

God grant you such faith and trust in your Lord Jesus Christ, beloved, that you may be willing to give all for His sake. And may He help you to understand that first of all, there’s nothing you can give Him that He didn’t give you in the first place, and secondly, there’s nothing you can give away that He won’t replace many times over. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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Rev. Steven S. Billings
Senior Pastor
Trinity Lutheran Church and School
Menasha, Wisconsin
mailto:sbillings@trinitymenasha.com