

## **Introduction**

It sounds so shocking. It completely contradicts what is politically correct. You would never hear anything like it said by a contestant vying for a pageant crown. It rocks the mainline religious idea of what Jesus was all about. It stands in complete contrast to myriads of blue shaded Christmas cards that come out every December. But Jesus is the one who said it. And he said it about his purpose in coming to the earth from heaven. We read it in our text for the morning.

[Read Text; Pray]

The finger-pointing, politically-correct speech police of today would have been gasping for breath had they been standing in the presence of Jesus when he boldly declared that his purpose in coming was NOT to bring peace to the earth but a sword. Facebook would be reverberating. Horrified tweets would be echoing through the stream of twitter. Jesus would have been accused of spreading hate, of wreaking havoc. No doubt news outlets would dispatch reporters to give him the opportunity to explain or to further incriminate himself in order to keep the buzz going. Calls would abound for an apology or a take-back statement to clear the air. But no apology would have been forthcoming. And there would be no taking back what he said. Jesus speaks truth in a way to be clear. And he does not speak simply to provoke a stir or manipulate an outcome or to increase somebody's tv ratings. In this case he speaks to give direction to his disciples as they are going out into the harvest.

In a world that worships at the altar of tolerance and peace, of acceptance and affirmation, Jesus' declaration is stunning. And it could not be more clear. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Peace on earth is not a goal for Christ. He is not seeking to produce a calm across the whole globe where everybody just gets along. If Jesus were driving a car around today, you can be sure that he would not have a bumper sticker advocating coexistence by the use of multiple religious symbols. There cannot be a

true calm for people without their being at peace with God, the One True God. And the fact is that this world is at war with God. So Jesus has not come to bring peace to a world that remains at enmity with God.

But, you say, Jesus is the Prince of Peace. Indeed he is. He appeared in order to bring peace. Yet the peace he represents and accomplishes and establishes is NOT a peace on earth where everybody accepts and affirms one another as they are. Jesus came to bring peace between human beings and the One True God who is holy and righteous. Those human beings who repent of sin and trust in Christ Jesus are reconciled; they come to a relationship of peace with God as they renounce their sins and trust in Jesus. They belong to him and they represent him in the world. And so long as the world is at war with God, it will be at war with those who belong to him. So world peace is not a goal for Christ's people.

But please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that followers of Christ should be against peace or that Christians should seek to destroy the peace. As much as it depends upon followers of Christ, we SHOULD be at peace. We are to be about the same thing Jesus was about, namely, peacefully seeking to bring peace between God and human beings. And yet at the same time, we must know that there remains a sword. Corrupt hearts love sin and sin is enmity with God. A world at war with God will not welcome his agents of peace. That world will not stop fighting until it is coerced to do so. That world is an adversary of God and will be at enmity toward the ones who proclaim peace with Him. We can expect the world to be against us, and therefore, we can expect the world at various points to force us to choose between it and Christ.

We cannot hold on to a world that is hostile to Christ and hold on to Christ at the same time. Those who embrace God and his peace through Jesus must not be friends with the world—not with its system and not with its pursuits. Christ's followers must not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the father is not in him.

So now Jesus has told his disciples who are going out into the harvest that the harvest is a dangerous place where persecution will come, where they will call his disciples by the same derogatory name that they have called

him. For this reason, He has given them assurances to give them calm in the place of fear. But now he also tells the disciples to not be mistaken in their thinking. They must understand that the sword which Jesus has brought into the world divides them from the world. Their values and pursuits are completely at odds with the world's values and pursuits. Because it is at war with God, the world will seek to attract the disciples of Christ to attempt to draw them away from faithfully following Jesus. Jesus is completely at odds with that enticement. Consequently, his disciples will see that following Christ necessitates the denial of self in terms of the world. Disciples will have to make difficult choices that will demonstrate they love Jesus more than anything. They will have to deny self if they truly love him. In this text Jesus points to three specific areas in which this is true. The first is . . .

### **I. Family Relationships.**

Some of the greatest hostilities the world will perpetrate against Christ's followers are carried out toward believers from their own family members. According to Jesus this hostility is a key indicator of how intense is the enmity between Christ and his world. And it is at this very point that his followers may have to make some of their most difficult choices. Jesus explains, "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."

A. My family—represented as the Layne family tree—has pretty strong ties. There are still Layne reunions every summer in either Texas or Oklahoma. When I was a child, my father, mother, sister, and brother, and I on several occasions made the cross-country trek from South Carolina to Oklahoma to attend the Layne reunion. All four of my grandparents attended almost every major event in my life though they had to travel across the country to do so. Their effort and their presence meant a lot. When Melissa and I were married in Memphis Tennessee, I had all my grandparents and several aunts and uncles come hundreds of miles to celebrate our joy.

Not every family is that tight, but generally families make sacrifices to help, support, and strengthen family members that they simply do not do for others. And certainly in the inner circle there is a closeness there. We may

not live right together but when something big happens, we are there. Parents celebrate with their children life's major events. As they get older children are there for their parents. This is family. The Apostle Paul makes the statement that "if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). So the sense of family union and togetherness and responsibility is woven together by God into the human DNA. Even non-believers recognize the importance of family.

And yet, as strong as familial ties may be, Jesus alerts his disciples that family ties must never rival him. There will be times when, as strong as family ties are, because of the offense of the gospel and the righteousness of the gospel, because of the division made by the sword of Christ, that the most intimate of family members will set themselves against one another so as to become enemies.

Last week I mentioned how R.C. Sproul had become a Christian during his freshman year in college. He had come home expecting his friends to jump right in to follow Christ with him, but instead they rejected him. That was not the only place, however, in which Sproul experienced rejection. His parents had taken him to church every Sunday. It was a liberal church, however, where he was taught that the miracles of Jesus did not really happen and Jesus did not really rise from the dead. And when RC shared with his mother that he was a born-again believer in Jesus, she became furious. She saw him as rejecting everything she and his dad and their church had taught him. She said, "What do you mean you became a Christian? You've always been a Christian. You grew up a Christian. We're all Christians in our household. What do you mean that you've just now become a Christian?" She was fit to be tied.

People throughout the world experience much worse. I met a Muslim student at Clemson University during my college days. He was from Malaysia and had become a Christian while there. He was dreading finishing college because his parents had told him that if he became a Christian not to return home; they would disown him. These kinds of realities abound.

B. But many of you know exactly what I am talking about. You have experienced division. You have had to make the choice. Follow Christ according to the gospel and be ostracized or give it all up to be accepted. The point of division may have been your separation from a denomination and its heretical doctrine and practices. It may simply be your clear assertion of the gospel. It may be standing with Christ's standard of righteousness and thus standing against abortion, homosexuality, sex outside the bounds of marriage, or drunken partying, dishonesty, and thievery.

Jesus is abundantly clear. "Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me." Compromise of truth, compromise of the gospel, compromise of righteousness for the sake of keeping family relationships intact is loving family more than Jesus. And if family is your priority, Jesus is not.

C. It was at this point that God put Abraham to the test. The Lord had promised Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. He would give the land of Canaan to Abraham's offspring who would be as numerous as dust. The offspring would be from his own body. But Sarah and Abraham were childless and advanced in years. At long last though, the Lord opened Sarah's womb and gave the couple a son, Isaac.

But the Lord put Abraham to the test telling him to take this only son, whom he loved and offer him as a burnt offering. Abraham did exactly as the Lord had said. He went so far as to journey to the place, go up the mountain, place the wood, and bind Isaac on the altar. He raised his knife to slay his son. It was at that point that the Lord called out to him, "Abraham, Abraham, do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me."

Loving the Lord, truly loving the Lord, having no other gods before him, means loving him more than family. If a division arises and you must choose, you must always take Christ or you are not His.

D. At this point I feel we need to pause and consider the grace and mercy of God and the sacrifice of Jesus in light of what he is saying here.

Against this backdrop when we turn to Romans 8:31-32, we read what become absolutely breathtaking words from the Apostle Paul, "God . . . did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all."

God supplied a substitute sacrifice for Isaac there on the mountain. But there is no substitute for Jesus. Jesus is the substitute. For human beings to be reconciled with God, there must be satisfaction of his holy wrath. And without the shedding of blood there can be no remission of sin. He made him to be sin who knew no sin so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. It is the blood of Jesus which cleanses us from sin. He appeared to take away sin. None else could. For him to do so the Father had to yield up family. At the baptism of Jesus and again at the transfiguration of Jesus when his glory was revealed, the Father declared, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Yet he was willing not to spare this son so that those who believe might become the righteousness of God in him.

For mercy and grace to be dispensed, it was necessary that he spare not his own son. And he did not spare his own. Will you not spare your own family, if necessary, to become a child of the Father who spared not his son for you?

And by the way, the sacrifice was not only on the part of the Father. Here is Jesus, the beloved and only begotten Son of the Father. He loves the Father. His delight is to do the will of the Father. He does only what he sees the Father doing. He patterns himself after the Father. He willingly does the Father's bidding even it ultimately requires that he be separated from the Father whom he loves. Picture with me Jesus on the cross in torment. Hear him cry out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." This is the savior, being the savior, loving the father, obeying the father even when that means separation from the Father. And he says to you and me, he who loves father or mother or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Rightly would we respond, "Oh yes. Oh yes. The Father who spared not his son and the son who considered equality with God a

thing not to be grasped but emptied himself and became obedient to the point of death and separation from his father on the cross, how would I ever value my family over you? How would I value anything over you?"

A true disciple of Christ will part with family if called upon for the sake of Christ because Christ is the greater treasure. Following him means self-denial even of blood relations if required in order to follow him.

E. And yet, I can't leave this point without a little encouragement. Jesus was ostracized by his own family. He apparently embarrassed his blood kin. But he was willing to experience that to accomplish the father's purpose. And yet he was not without family. No, he redefined his family. In Matthew 12 Jesus declares that his family is whoever does the will of his father who is in heaven.

Godly followers of Christ should be all about strong families grounded in the love of Christ, built on the gospel of Christ, taught together to follow Christ, serving one another according to the example of Christ. Our love for Christ will make our families units of peace and joy and will glorify him. But there will be times when his followers must make a choice—Christ or family. The gospel will require it. The choice must be clear. And we who are part of Christ's overall family should be sensitive to those who have had to forsake family or who are forsaken by family. We are each other's family in Christ. Let them know it by our love and care and faithfulness.

Let's look next to a second area for self denial. If necessary we must deny ourselves in terms of earthly family. But we should also deny ourselves in terms of . . .

## **II. Reputation.**

Look down to verse 38. "And whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

A. Proverbs 22:1 speaks of the importance of reputation. It says, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches." A good name is your reputation. It is how others see you. Do they see you as honest, hard-working, caring? It is love of reputation in the world that makes people think twice about what they say, who they appear with, and what they are

seen doing. Most people have a natural bent to want people to think good of them. Our consciences often whisper to us what we believe or at least hope others are thinking of us. We want to believe it is good.

B. When Jesus says he came not to bring peace but a sword, he is speaking of a clear division that will emerge between his gospel and those who believe it and the world at large. One of those areas of division is going to be the care we give to what people think of us. We have to be willing to sacrifice looking good in the eyes of the world in order to be faithful in following Jesus.

C. The cross is certainly an instrument of death. And when Jesus says those who follow him must take up their cross and follow him, he is speaking of self-denial in general. In fact this is what he says. "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Yet there is something about the cross itself which stresses a certain aspect of self-denial. The cross was such a horrific form of execution, it was reserved for only the worst. It was particularly associated with disgrace as those who were crucified were completely disrobed. All dignity was removed from them so as to magnify shame. Hebrews 12 says that Jesus endured the cross despising the shame.

When Jesus says, "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me," he is pointing not only to self-denial in general but in particular to the shame of the cross. If you will follow Christ, the world will not merely not love you; it will hate you. It will call you Lord of filth like it did Jesus. A world at war with God will threaten to bring to shame those who represent him. Those who would follow Christ must be willing to relinquish their good name in the world to be numbered with Christ if necessary. Are you willing to be scoffed at and made fun of? You must be. You must not modify your words and your behavior and the gospel itself to keep the world from giving you one of its derogatory labels. To follow Christ you must be willing to own the shame.

That brings us to the third aspect of self-denial listed here by Jesus. His followers must be willing to deny themselves in terms of family and reputation. And finally in terms of . . .



### **III. Pursuit.**

This section concludes with the statement: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

A. Jesus pits against each other the ideas of finding and losing. In this context both terms carry with them the idea of intention. There is an intentionality to the finding as well as to the losing. What I mean is that neither one is intended to be taken as accidental. You can find something accidentally. You weren't looking for it, you just happen upon it. Whoa, look what I found! And most things we lose, we lose accidentally. We do not intend to, we just do. A month ago I was flying down to Louisville to drive back with Philip and Ellie. Because of a delayed flight into Milwaukee, I wound up on a bus to catch a plane out of Chicago. With all the commotion at the airport, I started getting a grip on all the items I would need to check in and board at O'Hare. I found my boarding pass, but I could not find my drivers' license. What did I do with it? I checked every pocket in my pants and coat and backpack but no drivers license. I checked again. Still didn't find it. Did I lay it on the counter back in Milwaukee? And now what would I do? I began to get this tidal wave of anxiety. . .all the effort for all this and now I can't find my drivers' license. I won't even be able to get past TSA. I won't be able to go to Louisville and here I am on this bus to Chicago. I just prayed. God, you are in charge. I started looking for something else and reached in the pocket of my hoodie which was underneath my coat. . . "Oh yeah, my hoodie has a pocket! Yes!!! my driver's license!" I pulled it out and breathed a great sigh of relief. Thank you Lord!!!

B. Jesus says he and this world are at odds. He came not to bring peace but a sword. And so if you seek to find your life in this world, you will lose it. Your truest life is not in any pocket this world has to offer. If you would follow Christ you must deny yourself in terms of seeking meaning and accomplishment and success in and of this world. You must rather lose yourself in Christ. This is intentional not accidental. It is not a misplaced life but an intentional placement of your life in Christ. Then you intentionally deny yourself worldly fame and success and reward. And you will find true life, eternal life, true success, and true reward. But you must be willing to deny yourself in terms of this world.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus is a realist. Living in a world at war against God means each of us has to make a choice. Follow the world or follow Christ. Following him is not easy. It is hard. It is costly. It requires denying yourself. It means flying in the face of a world that is dead set against him. And if you join up with him you must not only expect the hostility of the world, you must determine in advance that you would rather have that hostility and deny yourself to have Jesus than have ease, pleasure, and success in the world without him.

Think about this. Jesus thought it not robbery to let go of heaven to come to earth for a little while. We should certainly not think it robbery to let go of earth for a little while, to deny ourselves in terms of this world, to eventually go to heaven eternally. Rightly did missionary Jim Elliott say, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

So I want to conclude this morning by urging you if you are not a disciple of Jesus Christ, to come and follow him. Well it sounds pretty challenging, you say. You bet it is. But following Christ, losing your life for his sake, is the only way to find it. And I want to encourage and exhort you fellow members of the family of faith by the power of the Spirit to look beyond the divisions of family and shame and pursuit in this world to the goal of finding real life. There is a battle. You will fight it this week. But hold on because our time here is just a vapor. The way to truly find life is not by looking for it in this world. Let this world think of you as a loser if it dares. The world is the real loser. Those who lose their lives for the sake of Christ will find it forever.