

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 10:34-42, 11:1
“The Cost Of Loyalty, Part 2”

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IVA'2c: MATTHEW 10:34-42, 11:1

"THE COST OF LOYALTY, Part 2"

DD	a')	vv.34-42 REJECTION AND OPPORTUNITY: ON THE OFFENSIVE.	Confession (vv.32-33) Brings Division
		1) vv.34-36 Agency And Mission Of Jesus: Not Peace But Division (Family).	Above Family?
			//Lk. 12:51-53 + M, 4:2 (a-b//b'-c) Surprise At End
34	a	"Do not think that _____ _____ 'I have come to bring peace on earth;' _____ I have not come to bring peace, _____ but a sword.*	Is. 9:5-7. Zech. 9:9-10, Principle + 3 Family Examples Form Of 5:17, 5:9, I Come (3x), Misunderstanding His Mission Jesus Is History's Dividing Point Of Loyalty 26:52, Ps. 7:12, Metaphorical, Jesus Is Controversial/Divisive 5:27-32, 15:4-6, 19:4-9 (Family), Sword Of Decision, Unconverted Family
35	b1	For I have come to set a <u>man</u> against his father,	Radical, Not Come To Split Families But Faith Decisions Matter
	2	and a daughter against her mother,	//vv.21-23, Mic. 7:6, m. Sotah 9.15, 1 Tim. 3:2
36	3	and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a <u>man's</u> foes will be those of his own household.//	Highlights Between Generations, Value Of Family 5:27-32 v.36b = M Summary 12:46-50 New Family v.37 = Culturally Shocking, <i>Against Apion</i> 2.27.206
Supremacy		2) vv.37-38 A Choice: Loyalty To Jesus vs. Family/Life (3+1).	//Lk. 14:26-27 (Q), GT 55, 101 <i>He who</i> (8x: vv.37a, b, 38a, 39a, b, 40a, 41a, d) + <i>Whoever</i> (end of list!)
37		He who loves father or mother more than me	is not worthy of me; Above
		and he who loves son or daughter more than me	is not worthy of me; Below
38		and he who does not take his cross and follow me	is not worthy of me.// Self
Supremacy		2') v.39 A Choice: Loyalty To Jesus Over Strategies Of Self-Preservation.	First Mention Of Cross, 12:46-50, 13:53-58 On Jesus' Family
			Paradox/Proverb, Seek Fulfillment/Lose It, Costly, No Sacrifice Too Great
39	a	He who finds his life (soul)	Lk. 9:23-24, 17:33 + Mk. 8:35 + M, Jn. 12:25, Mt. 16:24-26, Mk. 8:34-35
	b	will lose it,	No One, Nothing Before Him; He Is Worth It, New Center = Life
	b'	and he who loses his life for my sake	Clear Loyalty, Life = Self Abandoned To God's Kingdom
	a''	will find it.//	Find It In His Dominion, Some Of Them Will Walk The Way Of Jesus No Rabbi Would Say This! Claims Deity, Messianic Consciousness, <i>for my sake</i>
		1') vv.40-42 Agency And Mission Of Disciples: Principle, 3+1 Examples.	Agency/Shaliach 10:1, 7; Principle: Receive The One Sent Is To Receive The Sender And The One Who Sent Him
40	a	"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me.//"	Second Member Doubled, 4:2 (a-b//b'-c): 3 Parties Mk. 9:37 (Child) + M (vv.40-41), <i>Shaliach</i> Principle, A Man = His Ambassador Principle + 3 Mission Examples Sent v.5//v.16, 9:38, 1 Thess. 2:14-16 Apostles(1)
41	b1	He who receives a prophet/ because he is a prophet/ shall receive a prophet's reward,	v.41a, b = Pair, One Who Speaks Gods's Words Into A Situation <i>because he is</i> = Semitic idiom = "comes in the name of" (Hear/Speak/Used of God) Prophet (2) Support Persons In Mission
	b2	and he who receives a righteous man/ because he is a righteous man/ shall receive a righteous man's reward.//	5:20 (Enter kingdom), Great To Small, Righteous (3) Right Relationship With God Mk. 9:41 + M (v.42), 18:6, 10, Little Ones/A Follower (4)
42	b3	And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water/ because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."/	Punch Line! //9:38, 10:1. Zech. 13:7, 2 Bar. 48:19 Emphasis, 25:31-46, <i>Reward</i> (vv.41a, b, 42b) Whatever We Do To Aid Missions Matters To God
ND			Jesus Models What He Expects, Their Mission Framed Within His
11:1		And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.//	No Return Reported = Continue, Concludes Discourse 2 They Are Joined To His Task Now, //4:23, 7:28, 9:35-38

Jesus Demands Ultimate Loyalty To Himself As Worth It; A Newer, More Fundamental Tie
Life As Defined By Natural Family Gives Way To Life Defined By Loyalty To Jesus
See *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*
How Apply This In A Culture Of Fractured Families? Takes Wisdom

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 10:34-42 (IVA'2a')

This paragraph is the last of the three (a. vv.17-23, b. vv.24-33, a' vv.34-42) that make up the second half of Jesus' missions speech (10:5-16, 17-42), the second of his five discourses. The formula of 11:1 // 7:28 signals the end of the second discourse. Last week's analysis covers much of the structural insights. The overall surface structure of vv.34-42 is a 4:2 concentric pattern (1. vv.34-36, 2. vv.37-38 // 2' v.39, 1' vv.40-42). In the frames (1//1') the arrangement is first a principle or assertion in climactic parallelism (a-b-b'-c, v.34//v.40) followed by three examples (vv.35-36a give three family examples with the young generation listed first in each, while vv.41-42 give three examples of receiving an emissary of Jesus and thus a reward). In climactic parallelism (a-b-b'-c) the final component c does not return to echo the first (a) as in a 4:2 chiasm (a-b//b'-a') but advances the thought with a climax or surprise (a-b-b'-c!). In the b//b' components an idea is introduced, then repeated with variation: *I have come to bring peace on earth // I have not come to bring peace* (v.34b,c), *receives me //and he who receives me* (v.40b,c). Then the punch line: Jesus brings not *shalom* but a *sword* of division (v.34d); to receive the one Jesus sends is not just to receive him but the One who sent him, i.e. *the Father* (v.40d). The effect of the sword is demonstrated in three examples of family division (v.35-36a) and in a concluding generalized summary (v.36b). The effect of receiving the chain of messengers (missionary, Jesus, Father) is demonstrated in three examples from high status (prophet, righteous) to low (little ones) and a concluding summary (11:1). At the center of the paragraph in 2. vv.37-38 // 2' v.39 the common theme is a choice of loyalties: between Jesus and family honor (vv.37-38a), between Jesus and one's dream of human fulfillment apart from him (v.39). The focus is the supremacy of Jesus in the ordering of one's loyalties and loves so that the threefold *is not worthy of me* (vv.37-38a) is parallel to *for my sake* (v.39). He must be supreme and the ordering principle for all lesser loves. This is— in essence— a claim to deity, to the ultimate loyalty God's people owe only to God (first commandment), thus Jesus comes to us (*I have come*) from inside the divine life.

A second— and overlapping— structural ordering is cued by the series of eight statements of *He who/and he who* in vv.37-41 and a concluding *And whoever* in v.42a. A mission statement in climactic parallelism (v.34) is backed by a reason (*For*) involving family and household (vv.35-36) to which are then appended eight examples related to following (vv.37-39) and receiving (vv.40-41) and a concluding ninth as a reminder that even the *little ones* are Jesus' and his Father's representatives and must not be dismissed. Such overlapping and complementary patterns are common in the New Testament and reflect the rhetorical patterning of oral discourse in the ancient world where repetition and echo was important for the sake of persuasion and memorability. The genre is a missions speech; the rhetoric makes it interesting.

A source analysis demonstrates that 10:34-42 is drawn from Q (common material scattered in Luke) and from several verses in Mark (8:35, 9:37) with heavy editing by Matthew to shape the whole into the forms noted above. The threefold *I have come/not come* in vv.34-35a is from Matthew, as is the concluding generalization of v.36b, "and a man's foes will be those of his own household." The threefold pattern of *he who... loves (x) more... is not worthy* in vv.37-38 is Matthew's recasting of the earlier Q form (Lk. 14:26-27). Mark's *save/lose* contrast (8:35) has become *find/lose* in Matthew (v.39). The reception of a child in Mk. 9:37 is generalized to *you* in v.40 with the pair of *receives a prophet // receives a righteous man* (v.41) attributed to Matthew's desire to create a pattern of three climaxing in the insight that even *the little ones* who are so easily despised bear the divine message and its intrinsic rewards. Verse 42 is Matthew's rewrite of Mk. 9:41 with *little ones* replacing *you* and *cold* added as an adjective. Matthew's *because he is a disciple* is his equivalent of Mark's *because you bear the name of Christ*. We are living extensions of the person and mission of Jesus Christ, and what he commands, he models (11:1).

THE COST OF LOYALTY (Part 2)

"I have not come to bring peace but a sword."

The Prince of Peace is first a divider.

M A T T H E W 1 0 : 3 4 c

The 1995 movie *Behind The Sun* is the story of Samir Majan, a young man born and raised Muslim in the Middle East. After attending college in the U.S. he did the unthinkable: he became a Jesus follower. Few things are more offensive to a traditional Muslim family than Christian conversion. In the film Samir has come back home, and one of his siblings finds a New Testament under his mattress.

"Samir!" his father calls.

"Yes?"

"What is this?" his father asks, holding up the New Testament. His father throws it across the room, screaming, "You act like a snake behind my back! The years of works— and you repay me with this? For what? A Bible corrupted by mad men, a superstition that mocks Allah by worshiping the Prophet Jesus as a God?"

He slaps Samir, shouting, "Look at me! These are delusions of Satan! Stupid, ignorant people are brainwashed into believing these lies, but not my son!"

By this time, a group of male family members have arrived. Samir's father laments: "This is a nightmare!"

Samir's uncle enters and encourages Samir's father to go be with his guests. The uncle then grabs Samir, "My brother may not have the stomach to do what is necessary, but do not underestimate me. You must beg Allah for forgiveness. If not, we will send you *behind the sun.*" Death or banishment? And while the movie is fictional, such stories are not.¹

¹ For a similar story see "Christ called me off a minaret," *Christianity Today*, 1/30/14, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/january-february. For a collection of stories confirming such encounters with family, see Tom Doyle, *Killing Christians* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2015); also, "When Christians Say the *Shahada*: African and Arab theologians assess the choice between martyrdom and survival," *Christianity Today*, July/August 2015, 20-21. For a positive spin, John Casper, "Why Christianity Is Surging in the Heart of Islam," *Christianity Today*, Sept. 2015, 19-20.

We do not live in the Middle East but in *the West*, meaning Europe and North America which are heavily influenced by the modern values of free speech and association, individualism, human rights and the rights of women, religious choice, free market values and a history of Christianity— a least culturally. And when we speak of family we typically mean the modern nuclear family, meaning husband and wife plus kids. They may or may not have grandparents, siblings, or kin nearby, but housing and life are largely independent, you choose your own spouse, and at reunions and marriages and funerals they get together and try to remember the names of cousins. But if they’ve lived in the same community for several generations, there’s a stronger sense of roots, place, and belonging and even stories about *how our family settled these parts* or *how this was my great-grandfather’s church*. But if the family has been mobile and moved often for schooling or jobs or after divorces, the link with place and kin and shared history and family memory is more tenuous, and for many non-existent. So when I ask— as we still do as Southerners, “Tell me about where you’re from?” I get a long list, and I wonder, “Does this person know what it means to *belong*?” For them to sing *Blest Be the Tie That Binds* is a new idea because they are nomads, and to have a church that treats them as family is a great gift.

But not so in the Middle East which is a wide band of geography that stretches from Iran in the East to Morocco in the West. For some it includes Turkey and Afghanistan, and for these cultures tribe and place and history are everything. They have very long memories, because some trace family lines in the same place for a thousand or more years. And if you meet a practicing Muslim man who is *Qureshis*, meaning a member of the *Quresh* tribe- the tribe of the Prophet Muhammed himself, then you’ve met a family member who stands as a sentinel an over an Islamic tradition that began fourteen hundred years ago. When people from that world read the Old and New Testaments they recognize many of the marks of their own culture because it’s the same swath of land and the same old issues of water and tribe against tribe. With ninety percent desert, water matters; it’s life around the oasis or river with our herds. What also matters is genealogy and tradition and *our faith*, whether Jewish or Christian or Muslim or Druze or Zoroastrian. Western individualism and other modern ideas are slowly eating away at the old solidarities, but in that world *we* still trumps *me*, loyalty is valued above liberty, fathers choose husbands for their daughters, and our tribe serves *this god* and not *that god*. You are one of us because you do not invent your own identity in our world; we tell you who you are, and the ancestors still get a vote! In Jesus’ world the unity of family and tribe and land and monotheistic faith for Jews— diverse as they were— was an issue, and so when

someone quipped, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”² it was not just a slap at Jesus but with generations of Nazarenes and jokes about those Galilean red necks cousins of ours up north with the funny accents.

I’ve recently watched some YouTube videos by Dr. Mordecai Kedar, Jewish professor of Arabic literature at Bar Elan University in Israel, and he’s opened my eyes with his lectures on the conflicts of the Middle East.³ In one illustration, he has a map which ignores the boundaries of the modern nation states and instead shows the tribal lands of the Kurds and the Yazidis, the Sunni and the Shia regions and all the rest in different colors. It was an eye-opener to see how many there were— names I’d never heard of— and how their traditional territories overlap current national boundaries.⁴ It helped me understand why our naive political ideas of exporting modern democratic nation states to that part of the world is at best tenuous, and probably unworkable, except perhaps in our support of Israel with its long importation of modern European Jews as a liberal, democratic foundation. The only working democracy in that part of the world was imported from Europe and authorized by the United Nations! If for no other reason, they need our support.

The promise of an Arab Spring was brief, but the national boundaries drawn just after World War I by the Germans and French and British after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire are coming apart after a hundred years of enforcement with failed states already in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Somalia.⁵ The tribes are overwhelming the nations and going at one another, and a new form of tribalism has recently arisen that scares us all: ISIS! A sense of loyalty to a modern nation as an abstract reality— say the United States— is a learned habit, and it helps if you’re a small island like Britain or a large island like the U.S. But most of the world is tribal, and loyalty to my people and my tribe is much more compelling than an idea of Syria

² John 1:46.

³ Start with Dr. Mordecai Kedar, “What Went Wrong in the Middle East Part 1,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=wngES1woo0A.

⁴ For a tribal map of Iraq, go to www.refworld.org/pdfid/4693430d0; on the Sunni/Shia divide, see Map 13, www.vox.com/a/maps-explain-the-middle-east.

⁵ For a recent example of the complexity of diplomatic and military arrangements in a still-tribal world, see Eric C. Edelman, “America’s Dangerous Bargain With Turkey,” *The New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2015/08/27/opinion.

or Lebanon. It endures beneath the artificial boundaries of nations, so if you don't see the tribes, you don't understand the fights. This I gained from Dr. Kedar.

I was embarrassed— as a supposedly educated man— to learn that the Palestinians who are vying for a state of their own are at least seven tribes and often do not get along among themselves. West Bank Palestinians of one tribe look down on Gaza Palestinians of another.⁶ Dr. Kedar says we perhaps should do for them what was done for the tribes along the Persian Gulf— the Emirates— which, as Britain did in the 1960's, is to give each their own government where today they no longer fight one another and enjoy prosperity and relative stability. To us Dubai and Qatar are countries, but behind each flag is a dominant tribe that runs the show. All this to say that when we read the Bible, and when we hear Jesus speak about family ties that are so controlling they prevent people from escaping their gravitational pull to become his followers, we're not speaking about the modern, small, nuclear family of the West with our comparatively slender ties of familial and religious loyalty. We're speaking about something much stronger, a tribal culture and group identity where assumptions about life and the rule of life is more like an engulfing spider web than a single strand of silk. It's my tribe and my clan within the tribe and our honor as a family. And if you bring shame on us, *we kill you*— even if you are our sister or brother— or so says my favorite puppet: Jeff Dunham's *Achmed the Dead Terrorist*.

Now to to cut people free from that dense web of tribal loyalties to a radical new loyalty to Jesus and to a Judaism redefined by him takes not just a pocket knife but a very large, very sharp blade wielded with great skill, *a sword*. It's part of Jesus' mission, which is why he keeps saying *I have come...* to free people from the idolatry of family as a false god. As he says, "Do not think that 'I have come to bring peace on earth;' I have not come to bring peace but a sword." He then immediately applies his mission to the ties that sometimes bind too closely— especially in that part of the world, "For I have come to set a man against his father, daughter against mother, a son's new wife against her mother in law," and then a summary of how disruptive a new loyalty to Jesus can be, "... and a man's foes will be those of is own household." One for Jesus, and now everyone else against them both.

⁶ For a fascinating analysis, see Glen Robinson, "Palestinian Tribes, Clans, and Noble Families," The Center for Contemporary Conflicts, <http://dspace.africaportal.org/jspui/bitstream/123456789/25658/1/Palestinian%20tribes.pdf?1>; also Dror Ze'evi, "Clans and Militias in Palestinian Politics," *Middle East Brief*, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Feb. 2008, No. 26, www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB26a.

To become a follower of Jesus is disruptive to traditional tribal families. It means *one of ours* has independently chosen an unapproved, new loyalty to one who is not our god, and what threatens our faith threatens us as a people. The best example of this in our day is the Muslim convert who may lose everything and risk everything in order to follow *Isa*, the Koran's name for Jesus.⁷ The tighter the tribal and religious identity, the harder to leave and the higher the cost. But Jesus says he's worth it because he's our doorway back into the fellowship of the one, true, and Living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a single communion of lively divine love, for which we were made and from which we have long wandered. Jesus is an invitation to come home to God because the Father of Jesus is the God of all peoples.

It's perfectly OK with Jesus if you love baseball and Clemson or Carolina football, or your dog or your parents, your wife and children and the nearly at times unbearable sweetness of this life, even your state or country or town or anything else in this world that is good and innocent. No problem. It's just that these lesser loyalties—when there is no clear center—have a way of consuming more and more of who we are; they go from lesser loyalties to central loyalties, each with its own little kingdom of demands, thus an idol: a false god. And what Jesus says is that

“If you follow me, I have to be supreme in your mind and in your affections and in your commitments. I am Lord; it's the only way I can save you. I will reorder lesser loyalties around a new center that will hold, and that's me because of who I am: God the Son come to illumine you and call you and offer you glimpses of healing and freedom and suffer for you and rise for you and ascend for you and send my Spirit as a living link between us until my Father finally says *That's it!* and his kingdom engulfs and purges and heals this tormented world forever. And if you have greater commitments than what you have with me, it simply won't work. Not your parents, not your kids, not your stuff, not even your own safety, but me ruling you from within.”

Did he not say? “He who loves mom or dad or son or daughter *more than me* is not worthy of me; and if you do not face the lies and resistance of this world and follow me to the end— even if it means suffering, then you are simply not worthy of me.”

⁷ For an excellent introductory text on witness to Muslims, see Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany, 2008).

And if Jesus is not divine, if he is not the human face of God the Son come to save us, then for him to say such about himself is blasphemy since only God can make such a claim on a human life: *no other gods before me*. No rabbi would dare make such a demand, but Jesus did without blinking an eye because he has the right to do so. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis states clearly what Jesus is after:

"Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours."⁸

If a young person from a modern Western nuclear family decides to convert and become a Jesus follower and his parents are secular or only nominally faithful, there may be some tension and mockery about him taking an ancient prophet so seriously, but no one will try to kill them because our culture has a deep tradition of freedom of religion and of individual personal determination. He can survive without them if he has to, but to survive apart from your tribe and family in Jesus' world or even the Middle East today is much more difficult, like cutting a life line.

Jesus was not against families, even tribes. He was of the tribe and lineage of King David that went back to the patriarch Judah, and both Matthew and Luke feature a genealogy to show his heritage and credentials. He defended marriage against cavalier divorce practices in which women were highly vulnerable;⁹ he blessed children and used them as examples of the trust it takes to enter the new reality of God's kingdom;¹⁰ he upheld the command to honor father and mother,¹¹ and spoke

⁸ (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2001: 96)

⁹ 19:3-9.

¹⁰ 19:13-15.

¹¹ 19:16-30, 15:1-9

against the treachery of adultery.¹² He defended God’s design for cross-generational loyalty to pass on the faith and its practices. But he was also aware of the temptation to wink at God and then make *my* family and *my* tribe and *my* people and *our* welfare and honor the central commitment of one’s life, and so the question is, What will we follow? The family script or the Jesus’ script? Who has our loyalty? Who’s central? And if your family is largely Christian, and if both parents are active disciples, then you are blessed indeed, though there still may be challenges and stresses.

Now the challenge of biblical preaching is not just to understand the challenges of long ago and far away but for the stories to illumine the here and now, and our problem— with perhaps a few exceptions— is not the overly-tight loyalties of an extended religious tribe but its opposite. Of too many who come from fractured nuclear families, of too many without a father or any sense of deep belonging or kinship, of little or no Christian tradition on which to build. For them to look at a healthy Christian family is like a trip to Disney World; they can’t imagine that level of cohesion and love. As I listen to their stories and find contact points for the message of Jesus, I find myself speaking as an uncle, or as an older brother, or even as a Father. Our job as pastors is to speak into the hearts of people, and so I sometimes say, “You can belong to Jesus, and you can belong to his people as a new family. Come hang out with us and see what happens.” Then you watch as our good God begins with great wisdom to fill in the missing puzzle pieces.

You simply have no idea what it means for the disconnected to receive an invitation, something so simple as to sit with you on a Wednesday night or come to your group or Sunday School class. What many of us assume, they never enjoyed. Jesus did not just rupture the old loyalties of family and tribe; he offers a new family with him and his followers.¹³ Church is not just a place *to believe* but a place *to belong*, a place to be taken seriously and loved, a place to get some of the essential nutrients you missed out on, a place to grow up as a new follower.

Because to follow Jesus is such a disruptive decision that reorders the whole of life around a new center, it’s important to focus on both parts of the equation, what he saves us *from* and what he saves us *for*. In this particular case the *from* is an over-

¹² 5:27-32.

¹³ Made explicit in 12:50, “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” Jesus followers are a new fictive kinship group.

controlling family network of village and tribe in which your life script is written out in detail ahead of time and gets in the way of knowing God because it sucks up all your loyalty reserves, and the *for* is something so big and deep it can only be called *life*. People are hungry for life, for people and events and experiences that make them feel alive and connected and loved and part of something bigger than themselves. It's why we seem to have an insatiable appetite for shallow Facebook contacts and all sorts of sports and entertainment, and when it's all over we go back looking for more, and that's because we were all built for more.

We were designed by God so that nothing in this world satisfies the heart but God; anything less is stopgap and temporary in its effects. When you see people pursuing this and that, looking for life in serial marriages and uncommitted sex and in drugs and in money and in travel and in power and learning and all sorts of soul-numbing diversions, you are watching is people on the hunt for something they will never find in the places they're looking. Jesus knew this because he knows us, and he said that if you seek to fill the empty self with all the world has to offer, it will leave you empty and depleted and jaded and bored and in bondage, "But if you follow me and lose yourself in me, if I become your central love and loyalty, you will find *life* and satisfaction as a happy byproduct."¹⁴ Jesus comes to save us *from* and also save us *for*, *from* death in all its forms, *for* life with God and one another, in this life and in the life to come. Underneath all our distorted appetites and desires and defeating habits is a primal hunger to know and be known by the One who made us and from whom we've wandered. To make this truth memorable Jesus framed it as a paradox— as an apparent contradiction to tease our curiosity— and cast it in the form of an inverted parallel to stick in the memory: find-lose//lose-find. Verse 39:

- a "He who finds his life
- b will lose it,
- b' and he who loses his life *for my sake*,
- a' will find it."

Every single human being is on a quest, and people lose themselves in all sorts of dead ends that do not bring life. But if we *lose our life for his sake*— and for some that literally means martyrdom, though for most of us it means a daily offering of life

¹⁴ On happiness, Jesus style, see J.P. Moreland, Klauss Issler, *The Lost Virtue of Happiness: Discovering the Disciplines of the Good Life* (Colorado Spring, CA: NavPress, 2006).

in partnership with Jesus— we will find something bigger and better than we expected. Jesus is not boring; he’s not dull; he’s not a killjoy; he is true and he is holy and he is the deepest grain of reality, which is love with skin on. In him is more life, more high-voltage love and wisdom and adventure than your body and mind can currently stand, which is why we will one day require industrial strength resurrection bodies to live in his unveiled presence and do the work he has to share with us.

The risen Jesus— I believe— has to constantly hold himself back when dealing with us lest he overwhelm our frailty, and if he ever turned up our awareness of his presence three or four notches we would all melt inwardly and be unable to function. This sometimes happens even now when people are prayed for and the Holy Spirit invoked; they grow weak and wobbly under the influence of his presence.¹⁵ I liken it to a spiritual Valium which gives them enough peace for him to do some important inward work. The mystics call it *divine ecstasy* or *divine transport*, and they come back with things they can’t talk about because they are beyond description, so to hold Jesus at a safe distance is to deny ourselves the very life with seek in all our piddly little pursuits. And this is not just a pleasant, religious idea. It’s empirically verifiable. Malcolm Muggeridge— the famous British pundit— came to faith in Jesus later in life after pursuing the good life with gusto. Of his discovery he wrote:

“I can say that I never knew what joy was like until I gave up pursuing happiness, or cared to live until I chose to die. For these two discoveries I am beholden to Jesus.”¹⁶

There are several deep joys in my life to which I can always return. One of them is the discipline of paying attention to the writers of the four gospels, how they arranged their materials and why.¹⁷ It’s my way of doing detective work. In the fall of 1972 I was infected with an idea from a certain Professor Talbert from which I

¹⁵ On this phenomenon, see Frances McNutt, *Overcome By The Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 1990). On John Wesley’s experience as recorded in his Journals, see Daniel R. Jennings, *The Supernatural Occurrences of John Wesley* (Sean Multimedia, 2012), Chapter 5, “John Wesley’s Experience With Slain In The Spirit,” 60-71.

¹⁶ PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 10:34-42.

¹⁷ For a history of the discipline, see David L. Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1989), and for the method, E.P. Sanders, Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity International, 1996).

have never recovered. I was a recently reconverted backslidden Methodist, and I did not know this day's lecture would set me on a now forty-three year intellectual and spiritual quest. Jesus already had my heart, but this day he captured my mind and curiosity. The idea is simple: if you map the patterns and follow the cues, you can follow the flow of the author's thoughts and gain insight; in other words, if you draw a map, you can go on a journey with the authors, and— by my reading— Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are pretty substantial traveling companions for a misguided kid from a good home in Cheraw. Since the gospels were the best sources for the one I wanted to follow, it seemed like a promising clue. I was hooked. That God could use such a simple idea to redirect a life is to me the genius of divine providence.

When we say Yes to Jesus— as I had done three months earlier in July- it opens us to divine input if we pay attention. An idea, a book, an invitation, a dream, a new friend or teacher will appear as a clue from God. And if we say Yes, life changes; we move another layer deeper into the activity of God's kingdom at ground level. And so I dig in the study, and this week I came to a fresh appreciation for something I already knew— which is a powerful form of learning. Jesus comes from the Father and accompanied by the Holy Spirit to do warfare with a sword; he comes to cut us free from the dead ends and control of lesser loyalties to be deeply imprinted by him in order that he can work through us because that is where joy and life are found.

What would it mean for the risen Jesus, the Lord of the universe, to use *little ole you* in all your weakness and limitation as an outlet of access to him? Would that not make life a daily adventure? Not that we are him, but he works through us for his goals; he loves to love the world through us. Now follow the flow of the thought with me. In verse 34 he states his mission and flashes his sabre like some calvary officer, and it's not about making everything peaceful, at least not yet. Jesus is at war with this world's current management and all its attractive lies, and the peace he offers is on the far side of conflict, not the near side. In verses 35-38 he shows us what it means to separate people from the over-control of family culture and lays out the cost if we follow him against the grain of our world. For some it means an actual cross— as we have recently seen in Iraq, but for most of us a less dramatic, daily offering of our lives. In verse 39 he serves notice that the life we crave can indeed be found, but only in his company, and then in verses 40-42 shows us what the mission looks like at ground level. He cuts us free and liberates us for himself that he may use us as ambassadors, as loyal friends through which to extend his influence.

Two things I know about God: 1) he loves to hide in the ordinary in order to

be found there, and 2) that Jesus is the premier example of how God hides. Our classic Christian faith is that God the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity, assumes the flesh of Jesus in a singular incarnation through an untouched village teenager named Miriam who said simply, “Let it be to me according to your Word.”¹⁸ This is God the Son hiding out in nowhere Nazareth for three decades before going public when the call came and the bell rang for round one of history’s greatest fight. And now the risen Jesus– the very same guy– hides himself and continues his work through the likes of us. How amazing and promising is that? Every follower an outlet for the new reality? Can we believe verse 40? “He who receives you, receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me.”

When we represent Jesus– when we go where he sends and do as he says, and when people give us a welcome and space to witness, we’re not alone. The Jesus who sent us shows up, and the One who sent him shows up– the Father– and the One who accompanied him shows up– the Holy Spirit, who is always the overlooked Triune person because his work is to shine light on Jesus, not hog the stage. That’s the general principle: wherever we go and find an opening, there God shows up to help because it was God who enabled the opening in the first place. Sometimes– if needed– he sends a prophet, one with keen insight into how God’s word intersects human need in a specific way. And if you receive them and their gift, guess what? You get a prophet’s reward which is nothing other than a new sensitivity to what God wants to say through you to others under divine inspiration, and there simply is no more important gift if you want to rank them.¹⁹ Meeting someone who has a customized word for you is like receiving a divine telegram, and when they speak of details they could only know only through divine revelation, it’s an attention getter!

When God wants to jolt me in a new direction, he sometimes sends a prophet, and the net result is that I now hear God with greater clarity and so can speak to others with greater insight because a customized word from God changes everything. And if I need a new example to imitate, he sends me a righteous man or woman, one who models what I need. And if I receive them and their gift, guess what? I receive a righteous man’s reward, and what is that? A new and better alignment with Jesus. Prophets are signposts that speak, and the righteous are plumb lines that correct.

¹⁸ Luke 1:38.

¹⁹ 1 Cor. 14:1.

And then sometimes, just to see if I'm paying attention— and its almost become a game— God sends a great gift in an unlikely package. One of his *little ones*, an insignificant person by all the world's standards, someone easy to ignore. Prophets and the righteous can be very impressive, not because they self-promote but because God's wisdom is so much with them. But the *little ones* are not impressive; hanging out with them improves no ones resume of *Important People I Have Met*. But if you take time for even a conversation over a cup of cold lemonade on a hot day, something happens. You soon sense they are accompanied by the covering of the divine presence, just as Jesus promised. The hidden God shows up with them. And the reward they bring is not something tacked on or added as a bonus; it's intrinsic to them; it's the gift of humility, of being *a nobody for Jesus*, of not having to impress anyone. Bob Bennet is one; Joy Pinckney is another.²⁰ And to think there are so few of them left because these days only perfect children are acceptable. Do you really want to be part of a culture that has no place for *the little ones*?

I am a learned preacher— and you need one! but the likes of Bob and Joy embody love and joy— which we need even more because it is so viral and infectious in a jaded world of sophisticated people. So if you don't pray with Bob whenever he asks, or if you are not in Joy's Sunday hug line, you're missing out on some of God's best stuff right here at Main Street. Prophets deliver terse telegrams; saints shape us up and lift our vision; and the little ones call us to be Jesus' uncluttered followers because that's just who they are: simple, transparent, grateful for a bit of time and a cold drink from someone who looks more important and capable than them. Prophets minister from above, saints from beside us, and little one from below. For those with open ears and hearts, the messengers and avenues of God's approach are many.

Jesus is the sword that cuts us free; he has power to reorder our loves and loyalties around himself; he has authority to usher us into the conflicts that matter to God and give us all the life and adventure we can handle, and he has the most wonderful habit of sending us just what we need just when we need it: a prophet with a word, a saint as an example, a little one with a surprising gift. And you can be one of these for someone else when you come to understand the meaning and dignity of your life and calling. As we follow Jesus, he uses us, and we are drawn deeper and deeper into his splendid company. There are lots of things in my life that cause me embarrassment and shame, but Jesus is not one of them. He's the best deal I've found so far, and if I find anything better, I'll let you know so we can both trade up.

²⁰ Two Down's Syndrome adults at Main Street UMC.

CONCLUSION

The week after Easter Lori and I toured the new Smithsonian Air and Space Museum outside Washington, and there I pointed out to her with great exactitude the Grumman F6 Hellcat and F9F Panther, the North American A5 Vigilante and the McDonnell Douglas F4 Phantom, all of which my Uncle Glenn flew off carriers; then came the P-47 Thunderbolt my Uncle Bill flew and the B-24 tail gunner’s position Uncle Jim Hord occupied as he trained his twin 50’s on attacking ME 109’s and Focke-Wulf 190’s. She gazed at me in amazement– as she often does! and asked, “How do you know all that?” I answered, “From family reunions, from listening to my heroes tell stories, and from reading coffee table books on fighter planes.”

But it was when we stood before the mammoth Shuttle Discovery that she came alive with stories and memories of things I’d long forgotten. If you go to YouTube and watch the launches there preserved, you will hear near the end of each video the phrase *negative return*. According to NASA, *negative return* occurs when the space shuttle "is flying too far downrange and too high to return to the launch site in the event of engine failure." It means that– for the astronaut– they are to the point where they are assured of making it into orbit– which is the whole point of the launch.

Jesus knows a lot about *negative return*, of going so far with him there is no option to go back where you came from. It’s a tipping point; it’s what he’s after from all his followers. Whatever your landing site was– family identity, sense of purpose, career– before you came to him, you need to be willing to leave all possibility of returning behind.²¹ No nostalgia for the old life. No hand to the plow and a longing look backwards. Peter left nets and a boat, Matthew a lucrative tax franchise. *Follow me* was a costly command to obey.

I can’t tell you what that means exactly in your life, but whatever and however, it’s all about him changing what you love most. It’s the only way he can reclaim us and make us useful. I have it on good authority he will soon be pressing you for more love and loyalty, and that what he asks he will give. Don’t say you weren’t warned! We’re not talking about a dead hero to be admired as a distant idea; Jesus is a fully alive person, more fully alive than any of us; he’s here today, just beyond sight, and what he wants is our full attention. So if you are hungry for life, he’s the guy!

²¹ Adapted from PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 10:34-42.
