

# Jesus, the Family, and the Summons of the Kingdom

Matthew 10.34-39

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This passage from the Gospel according to Matthew must surely strike us as strange and shocking. At the very least it must challenge some of the loose and careless assumptions that seem to be rife in the life of the church today.

One of those assumptions is that the Bible is easy to read and accessible in its meaning to any earnest individual. To be sure, much of our Holy Scripture is quite transparent in its meaning, but so too there are many passages that remain obscure to any facile interpretation.

For those who think the whole Bible must be interpreted ‘literally,’ this passage is a stumbling block. Are we to believe that Jesus—who is represented elsewhere in Matthew and all the other gospels as blessing peacemakers and bringing peace to his followers—has now changed his mind and is literally saying he “has not come to bring peace to the earth;” rather he has come to bring “a sword”? Are we to believe that Jesus is literally advocating the sword and the dismemberment of the family, as a condition for being his followers?

We will explore these questions in this sermon today. We will worry about the practice, often performed by Christian interpreters, of taking Bible passages out of context and as sentences that can stand alone with clear meanings.

Another of those easy assumptions in the life of the church is that the care and nurture of family is first and foremost for the disciple of Jesus. There is a whole movement today that seems to emphasize what it calls “family values” as being at the heart of Christian faith. But this passage in Matthew does seem to raise the question of just what is the relation between following Jesus and being a member of a family.

If this passage is supposed to be literally transparent in meaning, then where does it leave us in our understanding of discipleship to Jesus and our assumed responsibilities to our families? In our time many church folk do talk as though they believe that family obligations are front and center in Christian faith and practice.

In light of these consternations arising from this passage, I propose that we aim to work our way through them and thereby hopefully discern what divine Word there might be for us amidst the complexities of this scriptural passage.

First, let us say something about the Gospel of Matthew as a whole. It is generally agreed among scholars of the church that Matthew’s Jesus is wrestling with God’s summons to prepare for the coming of God’s Kingdom in the midst of a Judaism that was itself under continual assault from its surrounding and dominating Gentile world. Jews were striving to be faithful to their God, who had covenanted with them and given the commandments by which they were to live.

In this gospel, Jesus stands before us as a Jew in the prophetic tradition of Israel, who is bringing the life of Israel under prophetic critique. Something is profoundly amiss in Israel’s life as God’s elected people.

Jesus is himself summoning the people of Israel to respond to what God is doing in bringing a new Kingdom to birth in Jesus' own time and in his own work and preaching in the midst of Israel. **While the coming of God's Kingdom is a blessing for the people, it also demands new commitments to the Kingdom's radical character. The whole of this gospel is about discipleship to Jesus as the One who is bringing God's kingdom.**

There are, therefore, repeated occasions in Matthew in which Jesus the Jew is in conflict with other Jews over what it means to be the people of God. It is clear that Jesus is not attacking the Jewish belief that God has elected Israel and has given special commandments to Israel. But sometimes Jesus is challenging the way those commandments have been interpreted in Israel, and sometimes he makes the commandments even more strict and severe than many other rabbis would make them.

With these general remarks in our minds, let us look closely at our passage for today. Matthew represents Jesus as saying:

***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 daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law***

It might appear, then, that Jesus is setting himself over against the fifth commandment in the Ten Commandments, namely, "Honor your father and mother." [Ex 20.12] In the life of Israel, honoring father and mother was part of a social system in which fathers and mothers and children had kinfolk who made up an extended family, who then also made up a clan and then a tribe and then a nation bound together by family loyalties. These familial relationships were crucial to Israel's sense of solidarity and identity. When this familial system is undermined, the very life and identity of Israel is distorted and damaged.

We should also note that Israel's family system was decidedly **patriarchal** in character in which the male was the dominant authority and decision-maker in and for the family.

So we must ask, "Is Jesus really demanding that this familial system be dismantled?" Most of us want to rush in and say, "Of course not; families are important to Jesus." And indeed in Matthew 15.4, Jesus explicitly affirms the commandment to honor father and mother.

But we must also look at another passage in Matthew 12.46-50 in which Jesus himself raises the question of who really is his "mother" and "brothers." Then Jesus points to his disciples and says, "**Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.**"

It should be evident to us that something **extraordinary** is being conveyed by Jesus about the **ordinary** ways in which Jews—and we might add, most cultural family systems—have talked about the priority of ethnic family and kinship. So, why is Jesus deliberately **distancing** himself from this priority of family obligations and systems?

Is it too much to suggest that Jesus, in all four gospels, is consistently drawing attention to those given assumptions and practices in human societies that often are the sources of rivalry, enmity, violence, and armed conflict? Is it not true **that Jesus knows that much violence is perpetrated in the name of protecting one's family and nation from an alien enemy that is outside the family?** Does Jesus correctly discern that family pride and honor are repeatedly at the root of the revenge and retaliation that literally populate the whole of human history?

Perhaps Jesus is aware of a **dark side** to family relationships that might thwart and stand in the way of a family member becoming a disciple of Jesus?

As a good Jew, Jesus would have been acquainted with the fragility and volatility of family life as seen in the Hebrew Scriptures: in the primordial family of Adam and Eve, Cain slays brother Abel; Jacob deceives

brother Esau out of his inheritance; in a jealous rage, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery and lie to their father, Jacob; King David and Absalom his son become rivals with fatal consequences. In Jesus' own parable of the prodigal son, the elder brother is consumed with jealous rivalry about the father's extravagant welcome home to the prodigal brother.

Even in our own time it is empirically evident that an overwhelming percentage of murders in America occur in domestic situations fraught with rivalry, anger, and conflict. Family intimacies and estrangements can be a terrible breeding ground for violence and the disfigurement of human life.

Now with regard to Jesus' apparent bringing of a sword, we must proceed with caution and care. Consider this: we simply cannot read Matthew's account in chapters 5,6, and 7 of what we call the "Sermon on the Mount" and still believe that Jesus is intent on finding ways to justify violence of the sword within the family, or against folk who offend family honor and pride or find ways to justify violence against those who would harm family and tribe! While we—the people of the church down through the centuries—have continually tried to find ways to justify violence against some people whom we think deserve to die, **there is nothing in Matthew's Jesus or the rest of the NT to suggest that the Kingdom of God that Jesus is proclaiming and enacting is one that initiates, inspires, and justifies violence against folk who resist the Kingdom.**

Surely it is too much to suggest, however, that Jesus is out to dismantle the natural family and bring it to an end. But surely it is also too much to suggest that Jesus gives absolute priority to familial loyalties, relationships, and traditions.

The issue for Jesus is that following him in response to the impinging of God's Kingdom is the **first priority** in the life of the disciple. No other loyalty should **intervene, delay, or undermine** one's loyalty to God's Kingdom. Hence, there is an incessant urgency in how we are to respond to Jesus and his proclamation of the Kingdom. All other urgencies and loyalties are to be ordered to the priority of God's Kingdom summons.

This same urgency and priority is expressed by Jesus in Matthew 8.21-22 in which Jesus responds to the request by a would-be-disciple to delay following Jesus in order to go bury his father. To that request, Jesus says, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." This is a tough saying for those of us who could not think of a more pressing priority than burying a dead parent.

Let us pause here, as I can feel a **chill wind** settling over us as we grapple with Jesus' words about family relationships and the Kingdom of God. Maybe we are afraid that Jesus is calling us to a **policy** of forgetting about family, of abandoning the family, of refusing to bury the dead, of refusing to honor mother and father.

Certainly we should not conclude that Jesus is advocating an anti-family policy, but we must understand—as folk who think of ourselves as being disciples of Jesus—that such discipleship is not simply a reinforcement of society's mores and relationships. **Jesus is bringing in something new, something that will turn the world upside down, that will reorient who we call brother and sister and who we are called to love.** This new Kingdom will bring great tension and suffering into the world's ordinary arrangements of powers and loyalties.

To follow Jesus is to travel soberly down a **narrow path** that is not gladly endorsed by the powers of the world. **The Kingdom of God is like a new household, a new family, a family of reconciliation and peace that is not under the control of the given and ordinary familial authorities and rulers of the world.**

So, has Jesus undermined the family? It depends on the family system about which you are talking. Jesus certainly does subordinate the family, with its systems of obligations, to the priorities of discipleship and the Kingdom of God. **It is within the priorities of the Kingdom of God that the disciple is to discover and enact what it means to be a good father or a good mother or a good son or a good daughter.**

Listen again to Jesus' further words in our passage for today:

*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 up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

Remember, this **taking-up-the-cross** is not a symbol for bravely bearing the various and miscellaneous miseries and sufferings of ordinary and everyday human life. Rather, the cross is the brutal symbol of the Roman world's power and dominance. Jesus was strung upon a cross as a sign that Rome is in charge and that this Jesus is a **political offense** against the authority and sensibilities of the Roman world and of some Jewish leaders.

In this passage in Matthew, **Jesus is warning the would-be-disciple** that following him might well bring one into conflict with the established political and religious orders that intend to control human life and dictate what is the good and acceptable order. The disciple must expect a **collision** with the world—and possibly with one's family—that will bring suffering for the disciple. That collision might well set a son against his father to the extent the father expects the son to order his life to the father's authority and control. To take up the cross of discipleship to Jesus is to be willing to bear the **costs of the suffering** that may well befall the disciple as he encounters the ruling powers in the world and in the family.

Even so, discipleship to Jesus and its consequent cross-bearing is not to be understood as a **punishing burden**. Rather, **cross-bearing is a blessing** to the disciple insofar as it is teaching the disciple **how to truly live before God and with family, with neighbors, with strangers, and with enemies and therewith to receive and gain her life**. The world—and often the world of the family—would have the family member believe that a true and meaningful life is only accessible through those social networks that reward familial status and inheritance and achievement and honor.

Listen carefully to Jesus: **the logic of losing and gaining life is different for the disciple from the logic of the world.**

Perhaps we can put the priority of discipleship and the Kingdom in this way:

**Follow Jesus, and, in so following, love your parents and your children and your family.**

**Follow Jesus, and, in so following, bury the dead.**

**Follow Jesus, and, in so following, refuse the instruments of violence and do not return evil for evil.**

**Follow Jesus, and, in so following, love the enemy and be a peacemaker.**

**Follow Jesus, and, in so following, you will learn how to live boldly under the grace of God's impinging Kingdom.**

**Follow Jesus, and, in so following, you may well experience the suffering that will come upon you when the world—with its familial and political loyalties—realizes that your following Jesus undermines your loyalty to the world's priorities, politics, and loyalties.**

The **peace** Jesus is bringing is not a peace that will preserve the disciple from harm or suffering or death; it is not a peace that will leave the disciple and her world undisturbed; it is not a peace that encourages passivity and complacency.

The **sword** Jesus is bringing is not a sword for violently slaying the evildoer; it is the metaphorical sword that reminds the disciple that her discipleship will displace and reorient the previous loyalties of her life.

**Narrow is the way of the Kingdom but glorious is the blessing that it bestows.**

May those who have ears to hear and eyes to see be blessed by these words.

All this I have dared to preach in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all. Amen.

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