

# ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

## NEW YORK CITY

### **IT WILL NOT BE EASY**

**Matthew 10:34-42**

**Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, June 29, 2008**

Christ is often portrayed as “the gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” and the angels announced Him as bringing peace on earth: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14). The Gospel lesson for today is a continuation of instruction of what our Lord gave to the twelve whom He had chosen as apostles. He was preparing them to carry on the mission and ministry the heavenly Father had given Him. He made a shocking observation: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” This hardly sounds appropriate coming from the one who was to fulfill the messianic hope as the Prince of Peace.

The Prince of Peace can bring peace and make peace only if He can cut people off from the world that stands between Himself and those whom He calls. Jesus is not denying the personal peace which comes to those who have received Christ. “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Romans 8:6). The history of Christianity has verified the claim of Jesus that men would be divided harshly, even within family units, over the gospel of Christ. No division is any more clearly drawn than that between holiness and sinfulness. In his remarks concerning the Lord Jesus sends a sword among men, C.H. Spurgeon states: “He wars against war, and contends against contention. In the act of producing the peace of heaven He arouses the rage of hell. Truth provokes opposition, purity excites enmity, and righteousness arouses all the forces of wrong.” Jesus knew that what He offered and what He called people to do was divisive. Peace most often comes when people have been willing to pay a very high price.

In spite of Jesus’ claim that He had come to fulfill the law, which He explained was summarized in love, He knew He would put people at odds with one another, even within families. Jesus said, “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 one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” How does this happen? The reference to divisions among

one's family members is a fairly close quotation of Micah 7:6, but it is not saying that what will happen because of Christian testimony is a fulfillment of that text. Micah describes an unfortunate situation that existed because of wickedness in Israel during the reign of King Ahaz. The tragic culmination of dishonest commercialism, false prophecy, and judicial bribery is the demise of the basic unit of all society; the family. When family ties no longer guarantee love, concern, and devotion, then a social order has been so distorted by sin that it cannot survive. One's mate cannot be trusted and one's most vicious enemies become the members of his own house. Jesus is only saying that a similar situation will exist in future days because of the preaching of the gospel.

Jesus represents and is the fullest expression of God's love and concern for the world. Therefore nothing and no one should jeopardize the relationship between the person and the Christ. Jesus explains: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whosoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Father and mother, son and daughter, we would do everything to please them; but, as opposed to Jesus, they cannot be allowed to come in the way of our supreme loyalty to our Lord. A parent or a child can be just as much a false idol as one made of gold if that person derails, falsifies, spoils, or hinders one's faith in Christ. This may sound harsh, but much of the divisiveness in families would not occur if our Lord Jesus Christ were the permanent, unseen guest of the family.

**Taking Up Christ's Cross:** No man can remain indifferent or neutral in His presence, and the main emphasis here is that Christ requires the absolute loyalty of His followers. No one can follow Him unless he is willing to take up the cross of complete submission to His will. Jesus does not intrude in the lives of people to make things difficult for them. Jesus does not stand among people to see how many families he can make miserable, break up, or destroy. Jesus does, however, bring a cross. He encourages people to "take up the cross and follow" Him if they are to be worthy of Him. It may be that the cross will not take us up, but we must take it up, by being willing to endure anything or everything for Christ's sake. The cross means going the second mile, expressing love in its fullest dimension, being ready to die for the sake of humanity. Jesus did this as He taught and lived the genuine love of the creator God for God's creatures. Strangely enough, people did not like what they saw. They preferred to save their own skins, so they nailed Jesus to the cross.

Jesus knew, however, that to trust God's love in spite of the suffering that the cross entailed was to have life in the resurrection. Thus Jesus extended the invitation to others to take up the cross and follow him. In doing so, they would discover the true meaning of love, forgiveness, and grace. They would experience for themselves the blessings of Christ's love for them. They would also be empowered to express the same kind of love for others. *"Lord, thou hast laid a cross upon me, do not permit me to shirk it, or shrink from it."*

**Losing a Life: Finding a Life:** Jesus further explained that this commitment and cross bearing is fundamental to understanding and living life. He said, "He who find their life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." If people believe that life is to be found in what they can make of it and what they can do to protect, insulate, and prolong it, they will lose it. Eventually they will have to sing, "Is that all there is?" The answer to that is yes, and you will have to give it up. There is a clear meaning of this often repeated saying of Jesus in verse 39: "He that finds the life of external comfort and pleasure shall lose the eternal life of spiritual joy; and conversely, he who loses his earthly life for my sake shall find the truer and more blessed life in heaven." The one who makes the wisest choice is the one who lays down his life for Jesus and finds life in Jesus.

The point of all these verses is the necessity of deciding for Christ and remaining faithful to Christ until the end. We cannot drift along and expect that everything will turn out all right. To fail to decide for Christ and live for Christ is to be against Him. It is to perish.

What extraordinary teachings these are! They show Jesus' amazing self-understanding, for who but a man who knew himself to be God could make such statements? If Jesus is not God come in the flesh, this is either an example of an incredible insanity or else a hideous attempt to deceive other persons. Which is it? If Jesus was insane, ignore Him. It is the only rational thing to do. If He was attempting to deceive other people, expose Him. Fight His lies for the sake of those who might be taken in and harmed by them. On the other hand, if Jesus is who he claimed to be; if He is the true Son of God, then Jesus speaks the words of God and must be both believed and obeyed. If Jesus is the Son of God, these are the most important words you will ever hear since your eternal destiny hangs on your acceptance or rejection of them.

**The Great Task Before Us:** The verses that close this chapter, Matthew 10:40-42, contain one of the sweetest messages in the whole Gospel. If the disciple is identified with Christ, then what is done for the disciple is done for the Lord. To receive a disciple would be receiving Christ, and the minister to a disciple would be ministering to Christ. The close relation of Christ and His church is already anticipated in verse 40. Later Jesus said to Saul, “Why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). The Head was feeling the hurt inflicted on the body. This is both a consoling and a sobering thought. Not only were the disciples intimately bound up in His life as worthy companions who lose their lives for His sake, but they were also identified with our Lord. The followers of our Lord will readily be recognized as those who are receptive to God’s grace and providence. This is not worldly recognition or acclaim. The very smallest kindness to the very humblest Christian cause is to do for our Lord a service that bears with it an eternal reward.

Jesus added, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of the prophet will receive a prophet’s reward.” All too often the reward of the prophet was pain and martyrdom. Jesus added, “Whoever welcomes a righteous person will receive the reward of a righteous person.” This righteousness was not the self-righteous behavior of those who dared to think they could pawn themselves off as holy and innocent before God. This righteousness was like Abraham’s, who was righteous before God because they believe that God has made them the vessels of God’s grace and that they are the very ones through whom God can act in and on the world.

This means every Christian’s testimony is important; the testimony of the least of Christ’s disciples as well as the testimony of one of the twelve apostles, and the critical matter is every case, now as then, is a person’s relationship to Jesus Christ. To receive Christ as He is presented by the messengers of Christ is to experience God and salvation. No matter how people get involved in the promotion of this work of God’s grace, they can be certain of God’s blessing. “The little ones,” the disciples, welcome the help they receive. But even more, our Father in heaven welcomes that help with blessing. That’s how we all fit in. In Christ we not only discover our own life, but we have the assurance that what we can do for His sake will be life for the world.