

“I Came to Bring a Sword”

Matthew 10:34-39

My mother was raised in a Jewish household in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She attended a Christian prep school and then went to college at Wellesley (near Boston). While at Wellesley she developed some warts on her fingers. Having memorized passages from the NT in elementary and high school, she had in her mind that there is power in the name of Jesus. She prayed in Jesus name that God would remove her warts; then she made the sign of the cross (because she'd seen some friends do so after praying). A few weeks later her warts were gone. That experience piqued her interest in Jesus.

When she moved back to Chattanooga after college, she began attending various churches to learn more about Jesus. At some point her family's rabbi visited her and tried to dissuade her from exploring Christianity, but her mind was made up. Eventually she put her faith in Jesus and began walking with Him. When she thought about being baptized her pastor talked with her. He told her that someone (anonymous) had called the church and said that if Nancy (my mom) made a public profession of faith it would kill her parents (who were both in failing health). Mom still doesn't know who this was, but the impression was that since they were so prominent in the community that having a daughter profess faith in Jesus would be too hard on them. The person asked, "Why can't she be a private Christian?"

My mom's response was, "Jesus is my Savior and I don't think He would allow anything to happen to my parents that would dishonor His name." She really believed that God is sovereign over such relationships. Her parents refused to attend her baptism, but they were generally supportive of her decision to follow Christ. But she entered the Christian life realizing that opposition and strife were a real possibility.

Today we are going to consider a passage of Scripture in which Jesus tells His disciples about this very possibility - that following Him might lead to opposition within their own families. We'll be studying Matthew 10:34-39. This Advent season we are taking four weeks to consider four of Jesus' own statements about why He came to earth (advent means "coming"). Last week we considered Jesus' statement, "I came to seek and save that which was lost" (Luke 19:1-10). This morning we are going to examine Jesus' statement in Matthew 10 in which He says, "I did not come to bring peace but a sword."

This passage has relevance for those who face opposition within their families as well as for those who don't. I hope that you lock onto the relevance for you.

“I Came to Bring a Sword” (Matthew 10:34-39) Earlier in Matthew 10 Jesus explains to His disciples about the opposition they would face as they went around Israel announcing that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. In this paragraph Jesus tells them that they should expect opposition within their own families.

34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

This is a shocking statement in light of other Scriptures that speak of Jesus coming to bring peace. At Christmas time we often read Isaiah 9:6 which speaks of the future Messiah whose “name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” And so here we have the Prince of Peace telling His followers, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” As well Jesus had taught His disciples in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). Those who act as peacemakers bear the family resemblance and will be known as “sons of God.”

In light of these (and other) Scriptures which associate Jesus with peace, in what sense did Jesus come to bring a sword? A sword represents warfare and conflict and even violence (see Matthew 26:52). When we come to passages like this, we give Luke the benefit of the doubt and presume that this isn’t a blatant contradiction. Rather, we settle in and pay attention and discern why Jesus said what he did.

Notice how Jesus continues:

35 For 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. 36 And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.

As we move through this passage it will become clear that Jesus is talking about the strife that is sometimes unavoidable when some members of a household follow Him and others don’t. Jesus is speaking of the **fallout** or the **consequence** of following Him.

Jesus is quoting from Micah 7:6 in verses 35 and 36. In Micah 7 the prophet describes how family relationships in Israel had become infested with sin and strife. The same dynamics would be played out in families where some followed Jesus and others didn’t. Of course Jesus **isn’t** saying that family conflict is His highest objective; but He **is** saying that such strife is the unavoidable consequence at times. (See also Matthew 10:21-22.)

Many of you knew Gene Hoerman (who passed away about 8 years ago). A few years before his death, Gene told me about how Jesus brought a sword into his own family. When he was in his 20s he worked in the family business drilling water wells. In August of 1961 Gene came to the place in his life where he submitted to the lordship of Jesus in every area of his life. Gene’s relationship with Jesus was immediately a great blessing for his marriage and his parenting, but not for his relationship with his dad. Gene wrote about the tension that developed between him and his father in this way:

My relationship with my dad was different, because my earthly father was telling me to do things that my Heavenly Father wouldn’t want me to do in ethics and in business. Dad would say something that wasn’t so, and I knew it wasn’t, and couldn’t go along like I had before. This put some rough edges on our relationship. It started out kind of mild, you know, and I could kind of pacify him. But as he had less and less control over me, the tension began to build.

Eventually things got so contentious that Gene had to quit the family business. Gene and his dad didn't speak to each other for four years. Gene experienced what Jesus described in Matthew 10 when He said, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." That was the natural consequence of Gene seeking to please His heavenly Father.

This is a fairly common experience. Sometimes a family will be very dysfunctional, but there is equilibrium; everybody knows what you can and can't say and do. But then one or more person within the family begins following Jesus and begins to think and speak and act differently. That person's health and wholeness can actually upset the equilibrium. The resulting conflict makes you wonder if it's worth it to follow Jesus.

Jesus' comments in verses 37 through 39 confirm that loving Him supremely is hard but definitely worth it.

37 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.

In other places Jesus spoke about honoring father and mother (see Matthew 15:1-9). Jesus taught that you should love your father, your mother, your sons and daughters, your neighbors, and even your enemies. But here He says that His disciples must love Him "supremely" (see Carson, p. 257). If you love anyone or anything more than Jesus, you're not "worthy" of Him; you aren't "fit" to be His disciple. If indeed Jesus is the Lord of all creation, demanding that people love Him supremely is entirely appropriate. You can really only have one "God" in your life.

As some of you know all too well, when your father or mother or son or daughter finds out that you love Jesus supremely, it can be very threatening. People don't always understand that when you love Jesus first, you love others best. They don't understand that it is only **as** you keep the first commandment (to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength") that you are **able** to keep the second commandment (to "love your neighbor as yourself" - see Mark 12:28-31).

Ideally every member of your family will love Jesus supremely. When that's the case, there is great unity and camaraderie and support and encouragement. If you are part of a family in which everyone follows Jesus, you are blessed by God. When that's **not** the case (when some love Jesus supremely and some don't) you will experience Jesus "bringing a sword."

38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

In the first century "carrying your cross" meant one thing: you were about to be crucified. It didn't merely signify hardship or difficulties; it meant death. F.F. Bruce comments that when you saw a person "taking up his cross" (i.e., carrying the crossbeam on his shoulders), he was on a one-way trip; he would never be back because he was going outside the city to be crucified. Taking up your cross means dying to self in order to live

for Jesus. You are saying no to yourself because you are saying yes to Jesus - wherever He leads, whatever the cost.

Instead of being a sad, drab, boring life, the person who loses their life for Jesus' sake really begins to live. The person who actually follows Jesus in this way will eventually conclude, "Dying to self was really no sacrifice; what I've gained is worth vastly more than I ever gave up. Now I'm really living!"

Jesus often emphasized that discipleship is both costly and invigorating; it will cost you everything but it will lead to life. Understanding that discipleship leads to life gives us the larger context to understand the reality that Jesus came to bring a sword. Even though loving Jesus supremely will sometimes create unavoidable conflicts within families, it's worth it because you've finally found your life.

This past week numerous ones of you at Faith have come to mind. Some of you have been ridiculed or even rejected by family members because of your devotion to Jesus - fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. Sometimes the conflict comes because of your convictions about heaven and hell, lifestyles, money, etc. Some of those relationships *might* be easier if you denied your faith or if you compromised your convictions. Jesus taught what He did about bringing a sword because He wants ***you to know*** that ***He knows*** what you're experiencing. Jesus experienced the same ridicule and rejection - from his family and from the people in His hometown (they wanted to throw Him off a cliff - Luke 4:29). You are experiencing the fellowship of His suffering (Philippians 3:10). There is comfort in knowing that.

In our time remaining I want us to consider two ***implications*** (actually one implication and one non-implication) of Jesus' teaching, "I came to bring a sword."

Jesus' statement does NOT imply that every conflict we face in our families is because of our love for Jesus. Jesus' teaching here isn't the explanation for every difficulty and/or conflict that you might experience in your family. Even when husbands and wives both love Jesus, marriage is still hard sometimes. Even when parents and children both love Jesus, there will be honest disagreements and normal parent/child issues to work through, especially as your children grow older.

We could apply this reality in a number of different contexts. But I'd like to address 1) college students (or college-aged people) and 2) parents of college-aged people. If you're a college student and you've started walking with God while at K-State or MCC, not all the resistance you experience from your parents is because you love Jesus and they don't. I'd encourage you to honor your father and mother. I don't know each of your situations, but the average, imperfect parents pour out their lives for their children and make sacrifices for the good of their children then others never see. Be gracious and humble in the way you talk with your parents.

To those of us who are parents, I'd simply say, think back to when you were 20 years old. . .the decisions you made, the way you thought, the way you spoke. For many of us that's a ***very*** humbling exercise. We need to be open to the possibility that God is

leading our children in ways that don't fit our preconceived notions for their lives. God can really be trusted to lead our children into the future. This obviously doesn't eliminate every problem, but it does provide a perspective that informs the problems our children face.

Having said all of that, there will be times when devotion to Jesus brings division and opposition within families. That's why Jesus explained all of this to His disciples. He wanted them to know that people would treat them the way they'd treated Him - even people within their own families. The same is true today. That being the case, there is an implication that we need to understand very clearly:

Jesus' statement demands that we live out our calling as a spiritual family. Jesus doesn't bring a sword into your family and then abandon you in this world. Jesus provides you with a spiritual family so that you now have spiritual mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. In Matthew 12 we read this account:

46 While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. 48 But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Those who are now committed to doing the will of God constitute a new spiritual family. Paul spoke of the church at Ephesus as a "household of God" (1 Timothy 3:15).

Every single believer needs the support and encouragement from others in their spiritual family. But a spiritual family might be an especially important and urgent need for those who have experienced opposition or rejection in their family of origin. Having spiritual brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers isn't icing on the cake; it's essential for their spiritual health and perseverance.

This challenge applies to all of us, but I'd like to make a few comments to those who a bit older (40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s). There is a huge need for us to befriend and mentor younger generations - perhaps especially those who weren't raised in Christian homes.

I've stumbled into a few of these relationships over the years. Some of you know Thomas White (some of you are related to Thomas White). When he was at K-State he attended Faith and served in our KidMin for years. When he was a junior in Architecture Engineering, he came and talked with me. He asked me if I would mentor him. He said, "I don't want to meet at Starbucks once a week. I want to come and have a meal with your family once a week and then hang out with you and your family." I was like, "Dang, Thomas, that's a bold request. . . I'm gonna need to ask my wife about that." Brenda was agreeable, and for the next couple years Thomas showed up once a week for supper and conversation. Eventually I'd have to tell him, "Thomas, you should leave now," but that was fine. It wasn't organized or flashy, but I was like a spiritual dad for him. There are so many of you who have so much to offer others. You've got experience and wisdom that others would benefit greatly from.

If you and I don't befriend and mentor younger generations of believers, who will? How will the person who wasn't raised in a Christian home learn what a Christian marriage is all about? How will they learn a Christian attitude toward work and money? We talk about these things on Sundays, but these things are really learned in life-on-life relationships. Here at Faith we are getting a steady stream of younger people who are asking for mentors. Occasionally we are able to find a match for those looking for a mentor; but more normally such mentoring relationships surface in the normal flow of relationships in the church (through life groups, through relationships initiated on Sunday mornings, etc.).

Because Jesus came to bring a sword, we have GOT to live out our calling as a spiritual family. Jesus calls us to live with one another as brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers.