

34 Do not think that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter in law against her mother in law. 36 A man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

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. 38 Whoever does not take up 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.

40 Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. 41 Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Whoever receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. 42 Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink because he is my disciple - Amen I tell you - he will never lose his reward.

The Truth About Life with Christ

1. A life of accepting rejection
2. A life of anticipating rewards

Simon's day was not going to turn out the way he thought. He was a man in a crowd, walking on a road into Jerusalem from the countryside. He had his day planned, no doubt. It was the morning after the Passover meal. Perhaps he was going up to the temple to worship, or to visit some relatives who were there for the feast; maybe he wanted to finish some business before the Sabbath began that evening, when no one could work. Simon had a family: the Bible tells us he had two sons, Alexander and Rufus, so presumably he had a wife. Were they there with him, walking along behind him on the road? Or were they already in the city awaiting his arrival? Perhaps they were back home in the country awaiting his return. In any case, as Simon approached the city gates, he was halted by an ugly procession: a gang of Roman soldiers encircling three men condemned to die, each dragging a cross of wood over their shoulders. One of the men was badly beaten, soaked in blood from head to foot, and just then he collapsed to the ground. Whether Simon looked at him with sympathy or disgust or indifference, we don't know, but he fully intended to pass by - on with his day, on with his life - but it was not to be. Suddenly, a soldier growled at Simon: "Hey you, come here! Pick up the cross and follow us!" That was the last thing Simon wanted to do, but he didn't dare disobey. The soldier had a deadly sword on his belt and knew how to use it. So Simon knelt down, heaved the lumber onto his shoulder, and hauled it along behind the beaten man, away from the city, back the way he had just come, until they reached Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Once there, Simon dropped the cross and the soldiers let him go to begin their terrible task of crucifixion. The ordeal was over for Simon, but now he was all disheveled, sweaty, scratched up, tired, stained with the blood of the victim, and likely a bit shaken up. His day had not turned out as planned. When Simon met Jesus, he got completely turned around and literally had to carry a cross.

This little tidbit about Simon of Cyrene that we hear about briefly in the Scriptures is all the more memorable because it gives us a vivid picture of our life with Christ, too. When we meet Jesus, he turns our life in a completely different direction and gives us a cross to carry. As

he explains in our text for today, the truth about our life with him is that it is a life of accepting rejection, and that's something we would never have expected. But there's more to life with Jesus, another wonderful surprise. Jesus promises that as we walk in faith with him throughout our lives, we can also anticipate many gracious rewards from his hand.

1. A life of accepting rejection

Probably the most popular preacher in America today wrote a best selling book called "Your Best Life Now," and every week he speaks to an arena full of eager listeners about how they can live a happier, more fulfilling life. As you drive through the streets of Wausau, you might see the church with a rainbow-colored banner that states their goal: "A Just World For All." But Jesus says, **"Do not think that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."**

Hmm. Wait a minute. On the night that Jesus was born, didn't that great multitude of angels from heaven proclaim that Jesus' coming brings "peace on earth, good will toward men"? Were the angels wrong? Did they just get too excited? Or is Jesus going rogue here, calling an audible and changing his Father's game plan of "peace on earth"?

No, Jesus DID come to bring peace! In this very chapter of Matthew, he sends his disciples out on their first missionary journey and tells them, *"If the household [you enter receives you and listens to your words], let your peace rest on it"* (See Matthew 10:11-14). But the peace Jesus came to bring was peace between holy God and sinful mankind. *"God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross"* (Colossians 1:19-20)

Here in our text, Jesus explains the rest of the story, the truth about our life with him on this earth. He did not come to establish world peace - "A Just World For All" - or to give you and me "our best life now," even though people assume that's what God would do, and we might even wish he would. But no, Jesus says his coming is like a sword that divides people. Picture it this way: All people are traveling down a six-lane highway of life, and Jesus comes down from heaven with a sword that splits the road in two, five lanes to his left and one lane to his right. He calls everyone to merge into the one narrow way with him, where there is forgiveness, life, and salvation, to leave the wide way without him that leads to God's judgment and eternal destruction. And the result is that mankind gets divided into two groups: those who follow him and those who do not. Believers and unbelievers are now both going down the road of life but are on completely different paths. That's just the nature of his coming, the way things are.

Jesus is that important, that vital; he is the road less traveled that makes all the difference; Jesus is the watershed moment of every person in the world. How can he do such a thing? How come he has to be so divisive, so exclusive, so hard-and-fast, so matter-of-fact? We're on our way to world peace, people say, and God's Word just makes it harder - as if a "just world for all" would magically appear if people just had their way! Aren't at least two lanes safe to travel on, or even three? Aren't five lanes really just fine as long as we just stay off the one lane of whatever society says is really bad?

How can Jesus say he is the only way? Because Jesus is the Holy Son of God who tells the truth about our sins, that they are so great, so heinous, that our hearts are so skewed, so selfish, so godless, that we don't deserve the life we have now, much less to live with God in heaven! And Jesus is the one person who could and did redeem the world by living the life of perfect love that we did not and suffering the death that we deserve in our place!

People ignore Jesus at their own peril. If your motto is “What a wonderful world! You just have to look on the bright side of life! Life has its lemons but you have to make lemonade!”, you ignore the plain fact that this whole planet and you yourself are infected with deadly evil! You ignore the fact that Jesus is the one light shining in the darkness: the one Sinless, the one Perfect Love, the one Full Payment, reaching out to you!

But you, you have been chosen and called by Jesus, not forced but drawn to him by his light and his love, learn the truth about life with Christ. Following him sets us on a path that is just not compatible with that of unbelievers. Ours doesn’t jive with theirs and theirs doesn’t jive with ours. Life with Christ then means accepting the fact that the others will oppose you and even reject you, because you are seeking two different kinds of life. And that is a cross to bear, a great cause of sadness and suffering, because even some of those who are closest to you, whom you love the most, will not walk with you and will even ridicule you and pressure you to walk the supposedly easy path of the crowd, led by the desires and reasoning of our sinful nature and really the devil. Life with Jesus means that *we will have enemies even among the members of our own households*. And our Lord is clear which path we must remain on and which path we must shun, which One we must give our allegiance to and which ones we must say no to: **Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me... whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me**. That is the cost of following Jesus; he will have it no other way. As the apostle James puts it: *“Don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (4:4)*.

And life with Christ is a life of rejecting the pursuit of “the good life” here, “our best life now”:: **Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it**. It’s a life of carrying the cross of never saying “I’m all good here!” but rather “I repent; forgive me: help me to love you above all things and my neighbor as myself.” It’s a life of sacrifice, of giving, with no thought of being repaid or being owed anything from God.

Yes, life with Christ means accepting rejection from the world and rejecting the life the world offers here. But remember, it is worth it because it is life with Christ! With him and with him alone, we have forgiveness from God and freedom from our sin and guilt. With Christ, we have God our Father and no longer our angry judge. Life with Christ ends not in God’s judgment and condemnation, but in God’s embrace and commendation (Mt 25)

And, as Jesus goes on to explain, it’s a life of anticipating all kinds of rewards! Real rewards, not the kind of things that the world would tell us are valuable, but - if we listen to Jesus and consider his words - we’ll find contentment, peace, and happiness, because what he offers is truly good, beautiful, and eternal!

2. A life of anticipating rewards

We’re kind of hesitant to think about rewards from God, aren’t we? But in the second half of our text, Jesus promises us rewards just as plainly as he promises division and rejection. In a way, it’s good that we’re skeptical of reward talk, because our sinful nature is quick to latch onto that word and starts to greedily rub its hands and think, “Ooo, what kind of earthly treasures and pleasures can my suffering and sacrifices earn for myself from God!” But we do not earn or deserve these rewards; God does not owe us for what we suffer or give up for him. If anything, we owe that to God! Yet we will be rewarded! We will receive gifts of grace from our heavenly Father as we faithfully follow Jesus.

Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. As we walk with Jesus and share the gospel with those around us, some will believe the good news! And we receive the joy of connecting people to their Savior God and the reward of more brothers and sisters in Christ!

Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Whoever receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. When we receive our pastors and teachers with love and respect because they serve us with the Word of God that saves us... When we receive our fellow believers with family-like hospitality and share the same faith in Christ, we share in the reward of eternal life that comes by that faith.

Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink because he is my disciple - Amen I tell you - he will never lose his reward. God will make sure to reward whatever we do in love for our Christian family members, even things that seem as tiny, as trifling, as insignificant as helping one of the Sunday school kids get a drink from the water fountain. What rewards will he give us? Jesus explains in Mark chapter 10: *"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields-- and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life"* (vv. 29-30) The reward is that, although we may lose the friendship of unbelieving fathers and mothers, unbelieving brothers or sisters, unbelieving spouses or children, the Church will always be family to us. God will make sure that as we give, we will receive; as we share, others will share with us; as we are friendly, we will gain many friends.

Right now at home, I have my kids working with me on our landscaping pretty much every day. It's hot out, there are bugs. I can see it in their faces, they are toiling, they are looking forward to a break. And on the one hand, I say, we have to keep going, we have to finish this project, that's the plan, no ifs ands or buts, no complaining. But I see they've accomplished one section, I'm happy to reward them with a break. When they've finished their work for the day, I'm happy to make them a special dinner or take them out for ice cream. And when we finally finish the yard, I'll be happy to put some money in their pockets or take them on a special trip. I'm not going to work them hard and then leave them cold! I want to teach them to work and contribute to what our family needs, but I also appreciate what they do, I'm happy to share with them whatever I have. In short, I LOVE THEM. I don't owe them rewards. In truth, they owe me the work because I provide them with care and shelter and a whole lot of food! And yet I want to reward them. God treats us in the same way. We only give to him what belongs to him in the first place. Whatever we do for him, he deserves. Whatever we suffer for him, those are sacrifices we owe him. But he does not treat us as slaves, but as dearly loved children in Christ, and that means we can anticipate his rewards of grace!

Remember Simon of Cyrene? One might say that the day he carried Jesus' cross was a day lost. But Simon would remember it as the day his life really began, because it seems that later Simon of Cyrene became a Christian. The truth about our life with Christ is, on the one hand, a lot of rejection, but on the other hand many, many rewards! We gain far more than we lose, we are gifted far more than we could ever deserve! Don't assume what life with Christ is supposed to be like, or you will be mistaken and sorely disappointed! But believe the truth that Jesus reveals about life with him, and you will be wonderfully, wonderfully surprised!