

**Matthew 10:34-39**

There is a little phrase which fits neatly into the rite of marriage, and although many couples today object to its inclusion there, it is best left alone and said word-for-word in its proper place. Following the words, “I take you to be my wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold,” that little phrase is: “For better or for worse.” Perhaps there are couples who would rather delete these words from their marriage rite because on the day of their wedding, when everything is so white and right, so pretty and promising, they don’t want to even consider the possibility that their marriage may, at some point, take a turn for the worse. Yet eventually the ceremony comes to an end; the reception hall puts away the champagne glasses; and the honeymoon is replaced by real life with all its problems. And the truth is that a bride and groom who desire only the “for better,” and are not willing to endure the “for worse,” should not ever have become married in the first place.

And I suppose that, in a simplified sort of way, this captures the thrust of Jesus’ words in our text. He is not speaking here in Matthew 10 of flowing champagne and cool evenings at Niagara Falls. His words are not the “for better” part of the Christian life; they fall more into the category of the “for worse.” He speaks not of peace, but of a sword. He talks about division within families, of carrying one’s cross, and of losing one’s life rather than finding it.

And just as there are ministers today who delete the “for better or for worse” words from their marriage rites, so they delete these same words from their confirmation instruction classes. Teenagers and adults who are being prepared for their life within the church; their life as the Bride of Christ we can say, are sadly, instructed only about the “for better” part of the Christian Faith, and not the “for worse” part.

In some parts of the world, however, the “for worse” part of becoming a Christian is painfully obvious. In countries where Christianity is not welcome, there are children who report their parents to the authorities when their parents become baptized into Christ; and there are parents who disown their children when their children become Christians. In some places becoming a Christian means losing your property, and in places it means losing your life. I recall becoming overwhelmed with emotion when, in Nairobi, a man from Somalia told us that when he became a Christian the Muslims kidnapped some of his children, and he did not know if they were living or dead. Some might say, “Better if that man had never been told about Jesus in the first place; at least then, he would still have his children with him. But he would disagree with that. He understood well Jesus’ words, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” And even though that sword had come into his family, he would not give up what he had in Christ. Even though he had lost his life in losing ones that he loved, he had everything, for he had gained Jesus Christ.

How about you? Where are you at in your Christian life? Are things “for better,” or are they “for worse?” None of us here have seen that bloody sword come into our families. We are spared violent persecution here in America. But that same sword, though unbloody, nonetheless is a part of our life in Christ. If you and I live as Christians; if we actually hold to Christ through life, then we will understand Jesus’ words: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Perhaps you have family members who resent you because you are a confessing Lutheran Christian. They resent you because they cannot commune with you at the Lord’s Table. That is the sword of division which has come into your family. Perhaps

you have a spouse who is against you for living your faith. Perhaps you have in-laws who treat you poorly because you insist that Jesus, as He declares, is the only way to heaven. The sword of division is cutting your family apart. There is strife, anger, bitterness...all because of Jesus.

But think of it—it has always been this way. If God had not promised Adam and Eve that He would send a Savior, Cain would not have killed Abel his brother; for then he would not have been envious of Abel's sacrifice; neither brother would have been worshipping God. If God had not sent His Son, born of a woman, to be that Savior, millions of lives would have been spared throughout history; for in the Crusades and other "religious" wars, soldiers, misguided though they were, were fighting on account of Christ.

Did Jesus come to bring peace? "No!" He says, but the opposite of peace; "I came to bring a sword." It's not that He is the problem; we sinners are. Because of the evil within us and within our families, when the truth of Christ comes, divisions erupt, strife reigns, problems multiply. And so what do we do when troubles come to us on account of Christ? Do we give up? Do we deny Him? Do we walk away from His truth in order to gain friendship with the world? What are a bride and groom to do when the "for worse" part comes into their marriage? Are they to abandon each other? Are they to quit on what God has joined together?

Just as God has joined husbands and wives to each other, so in your baptism He has joined you to Christ. Day after day, through sin and unbelief we are tempted to abandon our Savior. We are tempted to choose our spouse over Christ; to desire the love of our family over the love of God. We want their approval. We value their friendship, and so when Jesus gets between us, we often let go of Him and hold on to the ones we love. If relatives come to church with us, we may refuse to abandon them, and so we abandon Jesus instead.

We stay in the pew when it's time to come up for Holy Communion so that we keep their friendship with us, even though it means denying our Savior at His Table. Or we skip church with them altogether if it means keeping peace in the family. In conversations with family members we avoid speaking of Christ if it always leads to arguments. We allow our children to seriously date whomever they want, as long as "he" or "she" is nice, even if they are not faithful Christians, because we value peace in the family even more than we value the words and truth of Christ.

But Jesus says, "Whoever loves father or mother...son or daughter more than Me, is not worthy of Me." We need to ask ourselves the question, "Is there even one of us here who is worthy of Christ?" We are all weak. We all give in to temptation so easily. We are quick to say that we love God, family, and country in that order; but the truth is that family usually comes first, before God. The way we live our lives shows it.

Is there any good news for us? We who are hurting from hearing the Law, is there any peace for us in Jesus' words, or is it always and only a sword for us? Friend, listen to this word of comfort...Jesus felt the sword of God's anger for you. He was punished in your place, and so there is peace between God and you. Whatever strife is in your life, you can be assured that there is no strife whatsoever between your Heavenly Father against you. Have you loved your family more than you have loved God? Because God loved you, He gave us His Son for you. He forgives you for Jesus' sake. Have you abandoned Jesus to keep peace in your family? Do not fear. Jesus was abandoned by His Father on the cross

for you. He will, therefore, never leave you nor forsake you. He has no anger toward you. Have you given in to temptation, even again and again day after day, and denied your Lord in order to stay friends with the world? Jesus died for you, friend; you are forgiven.

Are you unsure whether you are worthy of Christ because so often you have not loved Him above all others? Then come to His Table of Grace and believe His words to you: “This is My body...My blood given and shed for you for the remission of all your sins.” This meal is for those who see their unworthiness before God. This meal is for those who have loved others more than they have loved God. It’s for those who have rejected their Lord; who have denied Him; who have abandoned Him. This meal is for sinners who see their wretchedness, but who seek God’s mercy in Christ; who come with repentant hearts believing that God forgives them for the sake of Christ. And believing this, you are worthy, for it’s all about Christ Jesus who declares you worthy by giving Himself for you.

Friend, there is no sword in this meal of grace. There is only pardon and peace for you in the body and blood of Jesus. There is no division among us here where Jesus unites us as one in His own body. You may come up to His Table having felt that all is lost; that you are lost because of overwhelming guilt and despair, but here in this Sacrament you lose your life for Jesus’ sake, and so here is where you find real life—for here Christ gives His lifeblood for you. Here in the Lord’s Supper there is no “for worse.” On the cross Jesus already took the “for worse” for you. He endured hell in your place. And so for you here is not just the “for better,” but the “for best.” In mercy He gives you a place with Him in heaven forever.

Because he believed this, that Christian man from Somalia could endure the “for worse” part of losing his children. He knew the “for better” part was still to come. Because you believe this—that God is merciful to you for Jesus’ sake—you can endure strife with family members for the sake of Christ; you can put up with persecutions for your faith. No matter how “for worse” it is now, the “for better” is coming because Christ is here with you and for you. Amen.