

**I HAVE TO HATE MY FAMILY AND CARRY A CROSS?  
LUKE 14:25-27; MATTHEW 10:37-39; MARK 8:34-38**

Linda, who teaches first grade, tells about an interaction she had with one of her students on the first day of school. Accustomed to going home at noon in kindergarten, Ryan was getting his things ready to leave for home when he was actually supposed to be heading to lunch with the rest of the class. Linda asked him what he was doing. "I'm going home," he replied. Linda tried to explain that, now that he was in the first grade, he would have a longer school day. "You'll go eat lunch now," she said, "and then you'll come back to the room and do some more work before you go home." Ryan looked up at her in disbelief, hoping she was kidding. Then he put his hands on his hips and demanded, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?" As followers of Jesus, it's easy to feel a little like Ryan when we hear and reflect on some of the things Jesus said. We're considering several hard sayings of Jesus. Hard to understand. Hard to accept. Some of Jesus' requirements are daunting. "Surely the Lord doesn't expect me to forgive someone seventy times seven. Surely He doesn't expect me to turn the other cheek when someone hurts me." It isn't long before you maybe want to say with little Ryan, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"

The hard sayings we consider today might be the most difficult ones Jesus ever verbalized. Let's read them now and you decide for yourself. It sounds like Jesus called us to hate our families. If that wasn't hard enough, He linked it with carrying a cross and denying ourselves if we want to be His followers. We've gotten so used to hearing about Jesus dying on the cross for us that when we hear about us dying on a cross, too, it's a bit jarring. If Jesus died in our place, why do we need to carry a cross? Jesus made following Him seem very negative and unappealing. His statement was even more upsetting to those who heard Him first. Crucifixion was the Roman form of capital punishment. The memory of how Varus, the Roman governor of Syria, had crucified 2,000 Jews about 30-35 years earlier would have still been a big part of that audience's collective memory. It was an excruciating and humiliating way to die. So Jesus saw some kind of parallel between crucifixion and being His follower? Really? This is how you encourage people to become your followers? It seems like Jesus deliberately tried to discourage people from being His disciples. Jesus might as well tell us today to take up our electric chair, our lethal injection, or our firing squad if we want to follow Him! Well, let's join right up, shall we?

Then, Jesus also told us to hate our families. Oh, well, that should be a big help in recruiting disciples! Again, Jesus' statement might have been even harder to accept in His day and time than today. Jewish culture was even more family centric than our culture. People never imagined they'd have to choose between God and their immediate family members. If the image of carrying their cross wasn't enough to discourage them from following Jesus, I don't think this statement about family relationships helped at all. It makes you wonder if Jesus would have celebrated Mother's Day! It doesn't sound like it, does it? Jesus' statement seemed to go against nature itself, against what the Bible teaches, and against even what Jesus Himself taught elsewhere. Didn't God create marriage and the family? If Jesus said we're

supposed to love our enemies, why should we hate our families? It's hard to make sense of it. Well, since it was Jesus who said it, let's try. When I read these (what are sometimes called) "cost and cross" passages in the Gospels — several places where Jesus taught about the cost of being His follower — I hear an overarching principle. Jesus laid down a great requirement for any and all of His followers. What is it?

### **THE GREAT REQUIREMENT: JESUS EXPECTS MY ULTIMATE LOYALTY.**

Jesus explained there was a cost in making Him first in your life. It's important not to underestimate the cost of following Jesus both before you receive Him as your Savior and Lord and even after you've become His follower. Jesus got at this issue in several ways. Part of the cost of making Jesus first in your life is a denial of self. He said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mk 8:34 NLT) What did Jesus mean by self-denial? It wasn't about giving something up temporarily like when you go on a diet for a month or two. It meant to shift the focus of your life from yourself — what you want, what you like, what your plans happen to be, what brings you happiness or pleasure — to Jesus. Now the focus of my life is what Jesus wants, what Jesus likes, Jesus' plans, and what brings Jesus joy. It means a sustained willingness to say no to yourself in order to say yes to Jesus in every area of life and living. You give up the right to yourself forever.

We live in a country where we're afforded certain rights — the right to worship God or not to worship God, the right of free speech, the right of assembling with others -- just to name a few. Another way to think of self-denial is giving up to God any rights that you think you have. For instance, when you deny yourself, you give up the right to run your own life as you see fit. All of us have ambitions, desires, goals, and dreams about what we want to do or what we want to accomplish in life. They're not all necessarily evil or wrong. But when Jesus becomes your Lord, you voluntarily surrender all of that to Him. He may allow you to keep some of them. He may trash all of them.

By the same token, sometimes we want to retain the "right" to indulge certain sins that we enjoy even after we've decided to follow Jesus: pride, lust, trying to control others, anger, resentment, contempt for people we don't like — just to name a few. If you're truly a disciple of Jesus, the Holy Spirit will go after each and every sin that you think you still have a "right" to enjoy until it is expelled forever from your life. Along with your sins, denying yourself means giving up the right to pursue other things more than Jesus. People can pursue wealth more than Jesus, pursue possessions more than Jesus, or pursue career advancement more than Jesus.

Another way Jesus explained the cost of making Him first in your life is a surrender of self to Him. That's what I hear in His words about finding life and losing life. "If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it." (Mt. 10:39 NLT) He also said, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (Mk. 8:35-37 NLT) What did Jesus mean? Life is used in two ways here.

There's your everyday life on this planet. But there's also a spiritual, eternal life that can be yours if you truly follow Jesus. Jesus didn't advocate self-extinction. He doesn't want to destroy the real you. He doesn't want to erase your identity. Jesus never advocated self-hatred. It's not God's will to see yourself as some worthless piece of garbage. You're made in God's image. You're someone for whom Jesus gave His life. But, then, Jesus didn't advocate self-fulfillment either. He will never encourage you to develop yourself fully by making yourself the center of your own life. Here's what Jesus was advocating: self-surrender. Jesus doesn't want you to extinguish yourself, hate yourself, develop yourself, or focus on your potential. Instead, Jesus wants you to surrender yourself to Him. Jesus wants you to make Him the center of your life.

Jesus reminded us here there are certain things in life and about life which are lost by being kept and saved by being used. For example, if you're talented musically, you'll develop that ability and reach your potential, if you use it. If you don't use it, you'll lose the ability. The same principle is true spiritually. If we live life putting our own security, our own efforts to live as long and as trouble free a life as possible, we are likely to miss out on the real life itself. But if we make as our primary aim to surrender our lives to Jesus daily – to be used by Him and for Him to advance His Kingdom, or to bless the lives of others, or to point people to Him – we find authentic life. Something happens when you surrender yourself to Jesus. The orientation of your life changes. It's no longer about how much I can get, but how much I can give. It's no longer about what's the safe thing to do, but what's the right thing to do. It's no longer about what will make me happy, but what will make Jesus happy. We are given life not to hoard it to or for ourselves, but to pour it out for Jesus and to others in His Name.

Yet another way Jesus explained the cost of making Him first in your life is a dying to self. That's the deepest meaning of this hard saying of Jesus here and elsewhere. “And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple. (Lk. 14:27 NLT) “Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” (Mt. 10:38 NLT) “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mk 8:34 NLT) Yes, it can be taken literally. Remember the Bible was written for God's people everywhere in every situation. The first Christians would have found great comfort in these words of Jesus when they were persecuted and killed by the Roman government. Their martyrdom was right in line with what Jesus predicted and their sacrifice and loyalty to Him will be honored for all eternity.

We've dumbed down the whole concept of carrying your cross. We use it to describe a bodily disability. “My bad knee is the cross I have to carry.” Or, we use it to describe an on again off again relationship with a difficult person. “Well, Aunt Sally is our cross to bear, isn't she?” But, for Jesus carrying your cross was a symbol of death – perhaps literally for some of His followers, but certainly and always for each and every one of His followers in a spiritual sense. Carrying your cross was Jesus' graphic way of pointing out that reality. Literally, it meant you'd already been condemned to death and you were now carrying the means of your execution – the cross beam of the cross itself – to the place where you were going to be executed. You were, for all intents and purposes,

at that moment a walking dead man or a dead woman. A person on the way to public execution abandoned all thought of earthly hopes and ambitions.

But Jesus' words can also be understood as a spiritual metaphor and applied to our daily lives. Paul, the great Christian leader, wrote, "My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20 NLT) If you're going to be the new person you're meant to be when you become Jesus' follower, then the old person has to die. And not just once, but on an ongoing – even a daily - basis. There's not one corner of your life or mine that Jesus will leave well enough alone. He demands lordship over everything. Your cross may not be mine, and mine may not be yours. But there's some kind of cross for every true disciple of Jesus.

Way back in 1967, a student named Libby attended several evangelistic services with her boyfriend, Tom. During the final commitment evening, both submitted their lives to the Lord. For the next 30 years, Tom and Libby Little served Jesus in Afghanistan, providing vision care to the people of Kabul throughout seemingly endless wars and conflict. In August 2010, shortly after conducting a two-week medical camp in a remote valley of northwestern Afghanistan, Tom and his medical team were ambushed and killed. Upon receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her husband, Libby said, "Although Tom was killed in 2010, he had already surrendered his life to God's good purposes way back in 1967." For four decades, Tom Little had submitted himself to Jesus for whatever it meant to serve Him – good or bad, safe or risky. So in one sense, Tom Little had already died in Christ way back in 1967. That freed him to live in and for Christ from that day forward.

It might not be as prominent here, but don't miss the fact Jesus explained there was a cost in not making Him first in your life, too. If you choose to reject or ignore Him in this life, it will prove to be very costly indeed. For example, it will mean the loss of authentic live here and now. Jesus used language from commerce or business here – profit, gain, loss, give in exchange. Don't miss the paradox in what Jesus says about life. To gain the whole world demands the payment of any and all authentic life here and now. When you make your own existence, your own happiness, or your own success on this planet the center or focus of your everyday life, you actually forfeit the most meaningful kind of life you can live. You lose real life by holding on to an inadequate life. The fact is you were created by God for God. When you make and keep Jesus first, you experience the best kind of life possible this side of Heaven. By no means, is it always sunshine and roses. Jesus even said here we might have to forfeit things that people in this world believe to be all important. But it's still the best life this side of Heaven.

There's another heavy cost you will pay if you reject or ignore Jesus. It will mean the loss of eternal life then and there which is better than anything we can imagine right now. Jesus said, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." (Mk. 8:38 NLT) To be ashamed of Jesus is to reject Him, ignore Him, or minimize His supremacy. What you do with Jesus in this life

will determine what God does with you in eternity? If you're ashamed of Jesus now, Jesus will be ashamed of you then. He will not acknowledge or recognize you. Content to be without Jesus in this life, God will give you eternity without Him. Jesus is worthy of my ultimate loyalty both in this life and throughout all eternity. That's the great requirement for anyone and everyone who follows Jesus. But then Jesus provided...

### **A GREAT APPLICATION OF THE REQUIREMENT: JESUS BEFORE MY FAMILY.**

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.” (Lk. 14:26 NLT) “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Mt 10:37 NLT) What is Jesus really saying here? Let's clear up any misunderstanding as quickly as possible. Jesus meant I must prefer Him above my family, not that I must literally hate my family. Linguistically, the word “hate” here means “to love less.” Once again, Jesus was using strong, colorful language to make an important point. He liked to shock His listeners so they'd ask, “What did He mean? What did He say again?” Jesus meant no love in life can or should compare with the love we have for Him – not even the love we give to or receive from family members.

This was no attack on normal, healthy family relationships. After all, Jesus always treated His own mother, Mary, with the utmost love and respect. As He hung on the cross, Jesus asked John, one of the twelve disciples, to take care of her from then on. He wasn't contradicting Scripture elsewhere which says, “But those who won't care for their relatives, especially those in their own household, have denied the true faith. Such people are worse than unbelievers.” (1 Tim. 5:8 NLT) I'm pretty certain Jesus would have gladly celebrated Mother's Day, specifically, and any and all healthy family relationships, generally. But Jesus did clearly insist that following Him is more important than any and all family ties. Giving your family second place may end up being one way of taking up your cross. It if ever becomes necessary to choose between Jesus and your family, then choose to follow Jesus.

It's good to remember that some of Jesus' teaching might apply more to cultures and situations that I will likely never experience personally. But they're very real for other followers of Jesus in other parts of the world. Our church supports Brian and Shelley Fisher with Campus Crusade for Christ or Cru. In a recent report on their ministry, they told the story of Sue (nor her real name), a young southeastern Asian woman, who gave her life to Jesus as a result of their ministry and asked that we pray for her. Sue's family of origin is Hindu and they are vehemently opposed to Christianity. Nevertheless, Sue has been faithfully sharing her new faith in Jesus with her sister and fellow university classmates. In her culture, traditional Hindu families still choose spouses for their children which now means a real dilemma for Sue. She has one of three choices. She can marry the man her parents choose for her who will most definitely be a Hindu and who may well forbid her any involvement in Christianity. She can run away from her family, but she will then lose any opportunity to share her new faith in Jesus with them if she does that. Or, Sue can tell her parents that as a Christian she refuses to

marry a Hindu, which might result in a physical attack, being imprisoned in her own home, and forced into marriage, nonetheless. What would you do? What does it mean to put Jesus first in Sue's situation? I'm not sure I feel qualified to answer that question, but I simply want to point out that we have Christian brothers and sisters around the world that have to wrestle with and then live out Jesus' words here.

Let's broaden out the application of Jesus' words here. I must prefer Jesus over any and all other loyalties in this life. When you become a follower of Jesus, you surrender the right to give greater allegiance to any other person other than Jesus. Jesus addressed the most likely exception to that truth in the average person's mind - your family. If "hating" ones relatives is a shocking idea, it was meant to be shocking. Jesus made it clear nobody should demand your allegiance or loyalty more than Jesus. Not Mom or Dad. Not your spouse. Not your boss. Remember, His point was really more about preference, not literally or actually hating other people. But the distance between your allegiance to Jesus and your allegiance to any other human being should be as wide as the distance between love and hate. That was Jesus' point. There are many places all over the world – and sometimes in our own country – where to become a follower of Jesus can mean that kind of disruption in human relationships. Loss of precious relationships. Being considered dead by your own family. Even being physically attacked or killed by family members because of your allegiance to Jesus. It may not happen to any of us in this room, but it does happen. The fact remains that all loyalties must give place to my first, my greatest, and my ultimate loyalty to Jesus.

Just a few years ago, The New York Times told the story of a 32-year-old man in Afghanistan named Josef. He briefly escaped the civil war in his home country by fleeing to Germany, where many of his siblings live. At that point, he had already rejected the Muslim faith of his family. Out of curiosity, he got to know some missionaries and attended church services held in Farsi, his native language. When he threw away his Islamic beliefs, he was living in a space of spiritual emptiness. During that time he studied different religions—Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. He was very impressed by Jesus and His character long before he was baptized. The fact that He died for our sins moved him. After being released from a refugee camp, he became a follower of Christ. Then he was deported back to Afghanistan where he's been hiding from family members who have vowed to kill him for renouncing Islam. A brother-in-law named Ibrahim even offered The New York Times reporter \$20,000 to tell him where Josef was hiding. "If I find him, once we are done with him, I will kill his [three-year-old] son as well," Ibrahim said. Josef's wife and child are also in hiding in Pakistan, but as for Josef, his faith remains unshaken. He has to keep changing his hiding place. Time passes slowly now, with little company other than his Bible. He can hear the muezzin calling Muslims to prayer, a reminder of danger's proximity. Josef, disciple of Jesus, says, "My body is in prison, but my soul is free."

Has being Jesus' follower ever cost you anything? Has it ever required a denial of self, a surrender of self, or a dying to self? Has your ultimate loyalty to Jesus ever been really tested? If and when it is – and Jesus seemed to indicate this is something all of

His followers should expect – what will you do? As Jesus said on several occasions, “He (or she) who has ears to hear, let him (or her) hear.”