

Jesus Describes the Cost of Discipleship

Matthew 10:17-42, Mark 13:9-13, Luke 12:4-9, 51-53, 14:26-27

“Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.”

“So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. 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. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”

(English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Before 70 AD, local courts (v. 17) were run by local elders or priests. Synagogues were the local places of public assembly, and thus provided the location for hearings and public discipline. Sometimes discipline was administered in the form of flogging. These words would have struck Jewish Christians as particularly painful, because they signified rejection by their own people.

- In Jewish thinking, a Jew betraying any Jew to Gentile persecutors (v 18) was a horrendous act.
- Jews regarded the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of prophecy (vv. 19-20), who anointed the prophets.
- In a culture where family loyalty and the honor of parents was paramount, the words of Jesus (vv. 21-22) would have sounded incredibly harsh.
- Disciples were to serve their teachers (vv. 24-25), in hopes of ultimately becoming master teachers themselves. A slave could attain status if owned by a prominent master, and under rare circumstances (e.g. if owned by a freed person), he could attain equal status after becoming free and attaining wealth. Verse 25 contains a play on words: by reading “Beelzebul” as if it meant “master” (Aramaic be`el) of the house (Hebrew zebul), Jesus spoke of the “master of the house.”
- Body and soul were instantly destroyed in some Jewish traditions about hell (v. 28); in others, they were perpetually destroyed and tormented. Contrary to the assertions of many modern scholars, most Jewish people agreed with the Greeks that soul and body were separated by death.
- Sparrows (vv. 29-31) were one of the cheapest items sold in the marketplace for poor people’s food. Two were purchased for an assarion, (i.e. small copper coin, less than an hour’s work).
- In Jewish descriptions of the Day of Judgment, the testimony of righteous people for or against others (v. 32) bore much weight with God. Jesus’ advocacy before the Father (v. 33) weighs more heavily than anything else in this world.
- It was generally believed that there would be great sufferings before the end (v. 34), and that Messiah would lead his people in a triumphant war followed by a time of peace. Jesus assures his listeners that the promised era of peace is yet some time off, and goes on to explain the nature of the current sufferings and conflict.
- The context of Micah 7:6, cited in vv. 35-36, describes the terrible evils in the land and the untrustworthiness of even the closest relatives and friends that would continue until the Lord would come to vindicate those who hoped in him. Given the belief held by many Jewish people that a time of sufferings would precede the end, the disciples would probably have understood this saying as suggesting that they were already experiencing the sufferings of that time. In v. 37 Jesus expounds on the text just cited (Mic 7:6) to make a point virtually inconceivable to most of his hearers, because love for family, especially parents, was one of the highest duties in Judaism.
- A condemned criminal would carry on his back the horizontal beam of the cross to the site of his execution, usually amid an antagonistic, jeering mob. Verse 38 refers to a shameful, painful road to a dreadful execution.
- Vv. 40-42 returns to the theme of hospitality toward the messengers of the gospel (10:11-14). The principle here is like that of the appointed messenger or agent in Judaism, who represented his sender to the full extent of his commission. A cup of water was the only gift a poor person might have. Cold water was highly preferred for drinking.

Questions:

- + For what reasons would the disciples of Jesus be persecuted for his sake in the 1st century?
What are some reasons why the followers of Jesus are still persecuted for his sake today?
Have you ever been ridiculed for your personal faith? If so, why, and how did you respond?
When Jesus says that “the one who endures to the end will be saved,” what does he mean?
If you are a Christian, what has it cost you? How much would you give to follow Jesus?
Jesus expects his followers to be like him. What must happen for you to be more like Jesus?

- + What does Jesus mean when he says, “What I tell you [disciples] in the dark, say in the light?”
What does he mean by saying, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul?”
What or whom do you fear most, and why? How would God have you overcome that fear?
How much are you worth to God, and why? How much is God worth to you, and why?
If you acknowledge God publicly, how do you say it and/or show it? If not, why not?

- + Jesus is the Prince of Peace, yet says, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Why?
Does your family or your faith come first? Have you ever had to choose between the two?
What does it mean to take up the cross in order to follow Jesus Christ? What is your cross?
What does “whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” mean? Where do you find life?
What reward is Jesus talking about in verses 40-42? What reward can you expect from God?