



I HAVE COME TO BRING A SWORD

Matthew 10:34-39

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Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

Introduction – Peace and the Purpose of Christmas

Peace is the purpose of Christmas. Or so it would seem. Peace is certainly one of the central themes of Christmastime, for the religious and non-religious alike. Christmas cards greet us with peace. Advertisements cajole us to buy more and more with the promise of peace. Even our songs at Christmastime, they celebrate peace: “Peace on the earth, good will to men.”

From a biblical standpoint, this would appear to make good sense. Were not the ministry and mission of Jesus all about bringing peace to the earth and good will toward men? The prophets prophesied that his coming would mean peace (Isa. 9:6-7): “his name shall be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end” (cf. Luke 1:79b: “to guide our feet into the way of peace.”). The angels announced peace at his birth (Luke 2:14); Jesus blessed those who would be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9); and he told his followers to pronounce peace when they enter into any one’s house (Matt. 10).

So, in light of all of this, it is only natural for us, or the earliest followers of Jesus, for that matter, to think that he came to bring peace to earth.¹ Yet, as we realize from these very surprising words of Jesus, it’s not that simple. For he says quite plainly: “Do not think that I have not come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (v. 34).

King Jesus Has Come Not To Conclude But Continue the Warfare (10:34-36)

Jesus has not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. These are two sharply contrasting images: peace, on the one hand, and a sword, on the other. What does this mean? What could this possibly mean? We need to realize that both ‘peace’ and ‘sword’ are symbols for something else.

Peace is what comes after war; it is the conclusion of war; it is the state of affairs after the war is over; you enter into a time of peace when the war is done. So, by saying he has not come to bring peace, Jesus is saying he’s not come to bring the war to an end or to its conclusion; he’s not come to usher in a time of peace. Most Jews at that time were expecting the Messiah to do just that, and so many, even among Jesus’ own disciples, were surprised when he didn’t establish peace (see the disciples’ question to Jesus in Acts 1:6).

Now, if peace is the conclusion to war, what then is a sword? A sword is of course the *weapon* of war. More than that, it is a particular kind of weapon: a weapon that cuts, a weapon that divides, a weapon that splits apart. Thus a sword is a symbol of division. So, by saying he has come to bring a sword, Jesus is saying not only that the warfare will continue and the

¹ So Leon Morris, *Matthew*, p. 266: “the general tenor of Jesus’ teaching and actions is such as to lead us to expect him to be a bringer of peace.”

kingdom will continue to advance, but also that his very presence will have a sword-like, dividing effect on the earth and in our lives.

But where do we tend to first experience the sword-like effect of Jesus' presence in our lives? For Jesus' first followers, and for you who are adult converts, you know that you first experience division in your most intimate relationships: those within your own family. Jesus thus explains in the next two verses that his bringing the sword means dividing families.

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 (vv. 35-36).

This, then, is the sobering truth about Jesus' coming. Jesus has come to bring a sword, even to families: "to set against," or, literally, "to halve" or "cut in two." So you and I need to understand that, "Jesus divides families just as a sword slices in half."² This is precisely what Jesus is saying here. His presence means strife and division, and this strife and division touches even the most intimate of relationships: those that exist among family members. Just to be clear: it is not the *purpose* of Jesus to divide families; division within families, however, is the *result* of Jesus' presence on earth.³

This has been the hard and truly heartbreaking experience of God's people down through the ages. The advent of Jesus in their lives has meant the advent of strife in their family as well. I recall the furious family quarrel that erupted when the great medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, announced to his well-to-do family that he wanted to become a monk. His biographer, G. K. Chesterton, tells us this didn't go over so well:

He said he wished to be a Friar, and his family flew at him like wild beasts; his brothers pursued him along the public roads, half-rent his friar's frock from his back and finally locked him up in a tower like a lunatic.⁴

Now, perhaps your family's not locked you up in a tower like a lunatic, but no doubt some of you have experienced similar difficulties and challenges in your own family because Christ has come into your life, and he has come bringing not peace, but a sword. This is of course a very painful reality, but precisely because it is so painful, we need to be very clear about.

So, these words of Jesus are in effect a warning to his disciples. As they go out on mission, the mission of Jesus will not everywhere be met with warm reception; in fact, at points with outright hostility—and this even within their own families.

Jesus is not triumphalist about the future of Christian mission; he knows that his mission is a rugged minority movement, a tough, divisive affair; and he prefers to make this clear rather than to give false hopes.⁵

So too, do you need to be clear about the costs of following Jesus. Following Jesus will not simplify your life. Yes, there will be a profound inner peace by virtue of your being made right with God and having the Holy Spirit take up residence in your heart (cf. Rom. 5:1). But there

² Robert Gundry, *Matthew*, p. 199.

³ So, rightly, Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, p. 292.

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 60.

⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, a Commentary: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 488.

will also be a profound alteration in your relationship with those around you, even within your own family, who do not swear allegiance to King Jesus.

Practically speaking, this may mean that Christmastime is no longer for you “the happiest season of all / With those holiday greetings and gay happy meetings / When friends come to call.” And because of your commitment to follow Christ, this may not be for you, “the most wonderful time of the year, with much mistletoeing and hearts that are glowing when loved ones are near.”

You just need to understand that, whether you are thinking about becoming a follower of Jesus, or whether you have become a follower of Jesus and are baffled by why things have become not only more complicated but more difficult in your life.

He’s Therefore Calling For Absolute Allegiance to Him (10:37-39)

By bringing the sword, King Jesus is signaling not only strife and division; but King Jesus is also issuing a call to arms and a call for allegiance to him and his purposes. It is affection and love that binds families together; so, too, affection and love bind followers of Jesus to him as their King. Not surprisingly, then, Jesus turns to the issue of affection and allegiance in the next couple of verses.

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 (v. 37).

Allegiance to family is primordial; it is an integral part of the creation. God created Adam and Eve and their offspring to be a family. Last weekend we saw the new I-Max movie on the human body. A pregnant woman spoke of the wonders of being pregnant and repeated a common outlook, so common it’s almost become cliché—namely that, as special as her husband is, her allegiance to her child will now take precedent over that.

Yet Jesus Christ has inaugurated a *new creation*, one that supersedes the first creation. So too, allegiance to him now supersedes all other allegiances, no matter how basic or natural. This is why he says to anyone who fails to give their allegiance wholly to him, that they are not worthy of me. If Jesus is not worth it to you, then you are not worthy of him.

To some, this may perhaps sound petty or even perverse: petty, because it makes him sound like an insecure megalomaniac who has to have all the attention on him; perverse, because who has the right to claim affection over the members of one’s own family, one’s spouse or parent or children?

Who does he think he is? He comes crashing into history, and then into our lives, and takes over, preempting our most instinctive loyalties, presuming on our deepest affections, usurping our natural ties, and asking (and so claiming) to be the most important person in our lives. We would not tolerate this presumption in most.⁶

Yet it is appropriate for Jesus. It is appropriate for Jesus because of who Jesus Christ is: the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the way, the truth and the life, the firstborn of all creation, the firstborn from among the dead, the one who uphold the whole universe with the word of his power; the wonderful counselor, everlasting father, mighty God, prince of peace. It is appropriate for Jesus to claim our absolute allegiance because of who Jesus is.

⁶ Bruner, *Matthew*, p. 490.

Of course, Jesus himself recognizes this will be extremely painful; in fact, he knows that this will, for some, feel like a slow and ugly death, like an execution or crucifixion. This is why he speaks of it as a cross in the very next verse: “And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (v. 38).

But the call here is not merely to *passively accept* the challenges that following Jesus implies. For Jesus, you’ll note, doesn’t call us simply to *bear* the cross, but to *take it up*. This is not, therefore, a call simply to embrace the givens of our lives: our difficulties or hardships or heartaches. No, this is a radical call for active discipleship. To take up our cross is a *daily decision*: “the decision, day by day, to seek to live and give fearless witness to Jesus Christ.”⁷

Yet Jesus wants us to be assured of this: allegiance to him and his purposes is where *true life* is to be found. This is the final point of this passage. “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (v. 39). Here we see the call to *self-denial* in all its color. Jesus demands that, as an act of faith, we turn away from where we used to think life could be found, to now find our life exclusively in him. No longer, then, do we seek for our sense of identity or security or happiness or hope in our biological families, in our being the child of so and so, or the mother of so and so, or the husband of so and so. Instead, we find our everything—our very life—in Jesus Christ himself: in his life, his death, his resurrection.

How Do We Wage This Warfare Against Those We Love?

Did you realize this about Christmastime? Did you realize that Jesus has not come to conclude, but to continue the warfare? He has not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. For he has come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. As a result, a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.

Yet how do we live with this? Does this mean, in the words of songwriter John Mayer, that our homes are to be places of “Heartbreak Warfare”:

Clouds of sulphur in the air / Bombs are falling everywhere / It’s heartbreak warfare /
Once you want it to begin / No one really ever wins / In heartbreak warfare.

Is this the situation some of us have to live with: heartbreak warfare in our homes? That is why it is so important to understand how to rightly wage this warfare when it is so close to home (yes, the pun is very much intended).

First, a word of encouragement to those who have lost family because of your commitment to follow Christ. This has, as we’ve already said, been the experience of the saints down through the ages. One of Jesus’ earliest and closest followers experienced this. Peter said to Jesus, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” I want you to hear Jesus’ response:

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29-30).

⁷ Bruner, *Matthew*, p. 491.

Second, a word of instruction about the weapons of our warfare: We must remember that our battle is not against flesh and blood. And our weapons are not the weapons of force, but of faithfulness. They are the same Jesus used. The weapons of our warfare are these: prayer, truth and love.

Third, a word of warning about our attitudes: Beware of smug self-satisfaction and arrogance and self-righteousness. Nothing smacks more of fanaticism to those around you, even within your own family, than these; rather we must seek to cultivate, by the grace of God, the humility and meekness of Jesus Christ.

Fourthly, and finally, a word of hope: While Jesus did not come to bring the warfare to its conclusion, the end of this war is indeed coming, soon and very soon. The irony is that we as Christians often view Jesus' first advent as him coming, in meekness and humility, to bring peace, while his second advent is about him coming, in majesty and power, to bring war. What I trust we realize today is that it's just the opposite: his first coming continues the battle; he's second coming will bring it to conclusion and then usher in an era of universal peace.

Conclusion – Peace Not Now But Nevertheless Certain

There are few earthly treasures more precious than a close and loving family. And there is certainly nothing wrong—and everything right—with loving your family deeply, indeed, passionately, regardless of where they stand with Jesus Christ. In fact, the Bible commands us to. It also says that he who neglects his family has “denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8).

Yet these words of Jesus remind us that there is something even more precious than our families: something more precious than a mother or father, than a son or daughter. In the words of that wonderful hymn, Jesus Christ is the sweetest treasure, fairest beauty, the most lasting joy.

Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature,
O Thou of God and man the Son,
Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor,
Thou, my soul's glory, joy and crown.
All fairest beauty, heavenly and earthly,
Wondrously, Jesus, is found in Thee;
None can be nearer, fairer or dearer,
Than Thou, my Savior, art to me.

May you and I find him to be “nearer, fairer and dearer” this Christmas.

Amen.