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Matthew 10:34 - 10:39



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg provides his interpretation of Matthew 10:34, where Jesus says he did not come to bring peace but a sword. Gregg clarifies that Jesus was not advocating for violence or leading a revolution against Rome, despite the misinterpretation that arose during early Christianity. Rather, Jesus warns his disciples that following him may result in opposition and division even within families, and that they must be willing to bear their own cross, which could even mean facing persecution and death for their beliefs. The passage serves as a reminder of the sacrifices and challenges that come with dedicating oneself to Christ.

Transcript

Our studies in the Gospel of Matthew bring us now to chapter 10 and verse 34. We still have this lengthy discourse where Jesus is speaking to the twelve on the occasion of sending them out to do a short-term evangelistic outreach. And among the things he says to them are these right here, beginning at verse 34.

He says, Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes will be those of his own household.

He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.

Now, he begins this paragraph by saying, Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I personally do not think that Jesus was one who would have taken up arms to fight in a revolution against Rome.

Although there were many Jews in his day who thought that was the loyal, patriotic Jewish thing to do. There were the Zealots, that was a party among the Israelites in Jesus' day, and one of Jesus' disciples came from that party. They were the ones who

wanted to take up weapons and overthrow the Romans who were occupying Israel at that time.

And there were many who tried to get Jesus involved in that project, and he didn't seem to show any interest in it, because his kingdom was not of this world. And over in John 18, 36, Jesus said, My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would have fought that I would not be taken by the Jews.

But henceforth, my kingdom is not from here. Now, I don't believe that Jesus would have fought in a war. I believe that as the Prince of Peace, as he is sometimes called, and certainly he's called that in the book of Isaiah, chapter 9, in verse 6, he would not promote peace in that way.

He had opportunity to do so, by the way. In John chapter 6, in verse 15, there was a time when many thousands of Israelites were following him, and it says that he saw that they were prepared to take him and make him a king by force. That is, they were going to forcibly put him in the position of leadership over their revolution against Rome.

And he had nothing to do with it. He sent the crowds away, and he went off by himself to pray. Jesus was not the type to go to war or to strike with the sword, I believe.

There was a time in the garden when he was to be arrested that somebody, one of his disciples, asked, Lord, shall we smite with the sword? And one of them, Peter, took a sword and actually tried to defend Jesus physically and ended up cutting off a guy's ear. And Jesus healed the man's ear, and he said to Peter, Peter, put up your sword. Those who live with the sword will die by the sword.

And it seems clear that Jesus was not one who promoted violence and the sword in particular. Now, there are many Christians who feel that at times it is right to go to war, that Christians themselves ought to fight in war. There's been division over this for a very, very long time.

The first three centuries of the Christian church, the position of the church fathers was that it is not proper for Christians to fight in war. One of the fathers stated it really well when he said, Christ does not even allow us to dislike or curse our enemies. How much less is it proper for us to go out and kill them with the sword? And this is the attitude of the early church for several centuries, that even though they were threatened by forces that were armed and were willing to use the sword against them, they were more willing to lay down their neck on the block and be beheaded or be thrown to the lions or otherwise be persecuted without resistance.

James makes reference to this over in James chapter 5 where he's rebuking actually the persecutors of the Christians, and that's the context of this statement. And he says of those who are persecuting the Christians, in James chapter 5 and verse 6, he says, You

have condemned and murdered the righteous, and he does not resist you. That is, the righteous man does not resist them as they are condemning and murdering him.

That is the way the early church responded to attacks. They did not take up the sword because they understood that Jesus did not want them to do so. Well, when Constantine became emperor of Rome and later became a Christian or professed to become a Christian, this got things kind of mixed up because it had been the Romans and the emperors who were previously persecuting Christians, but now the emperor was himself professing to be a Christian, and he not only stopped persecuting Christians, he started promoting Christianity.

And this caused Christianity to be merged in the popular mind with the state itself. The Roman state became part of Christianity. It came to be called Christendom.

And then, of course, the wars of Rome became the wars of the holy church, and it became very much more confused. So people like Augustine later on developed a new concept of Christians fighting in war that was different from that of the earlier church fathers and of Jesus probably. And that was borrowed actually from Plato.

It was Plato, the pagan philosopher, who first came up with the principles of what is usually called just war, meaning a war that is just, a war that is right, that is equitable, is all right to fight in. A war that is unjust is not right to fight in. And this became adopted into Christianity by Augustine from Plato and became normative Christian teaching even up until the present time.

Most Christians believe that there are some wars that Christians ought to fight in. And this is, generally speaking, the just war theory. Now, there have been a resurgence since the time of the Reformation of people, Christians, who believe it's wrong for Christians to fight in war.

These people are taking the position that the disciples took and that the early church took for three centuries. These people were the Anabaptists. These were the Mennonites and those of that same stream.

And that group still exists. The Quakers also took this position. And there are some other Christians who are neither Mennonite nor Quaker who have come to these conclusions from reading the scripture.

And so there is, of course, controversy in the church as to whether Christians ought to fight in war. Now, the reason I give you all this background is because this verse we're looking at, Matthew 10, 34, often enters into the debate. Those who feel that Christians ought to be prepared to fight in war and that it is right to fight in war often quote this.

Because, you know, those who don't want to fight in war, don't believe it's right, usually quote Jesus. Well, those who want to oppose this viewpoint want to quote Jesus on their

behalf, too. And Jesus said, Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth.

I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. Now, this would suggest that anyone who thinks that Jesus came to bring an idyllic, pacifistic, you know, peaceful world is certainly wrong. Because Jesus said he came to bring a sword and not peace.

And therefore, they argue, it is right for Christians to take the sword because Jesus himself stated that he was in favor of it and that he didn't come to abolish it. Well, those who argue this way, I won't at this point attack any other arguments they make, but this particular verse in no way lends itself to this interpretation. When Jesus said, I didn't come to bring peace, but I came to bring a sword, it doesn't mean that Jesus was advocating the sword.

What he was saying is, if you think that by the coming of the Messiah, the result will be a peaceful, undivided kingdom, you are mistaken. Rather, the coming of the Messiah will bring conflict. The coming of the Messiah will bring division.

In fact, it's interesting, in the parallel passage to this, which is found in Luke, it says, Do not think I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but division. That's how Luke's version reads it.

So, we can see that a sword here does not mean a literal sword in the sense of Jesus telling his disciples to get swords, but rather, he said they should expect hostility and division from people. Now, that doesn't mean that the disciples are to be perpetrators of hostility and division. When he says, 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 man's foes will be those of his own household, Jesus is not advocating that sons oppose their fathers, and that daughters oppose their mothers.

He is simply saying this is what can be expected when the Christian takes a stand for Christ, and others in the family, and others in the neighborhood, and close relatives and friends, if they don't follow Christ, they will be offended, and they will persecute you. Jesus is talking about persecution. He is not saying that Christians should persecute people that are opposed to them.

He is saying this is what they can expect to happen to them. Now, in saying that people will persecute you, Jesus is not advocating persecution of Christians. He is simply predicting it.

He is simply saying this will be the result of you choosing to follow Christ. And therefore, when he says, I came to bring a sword, he doesn't mean that he's advocating that people should take up swords against each other. He's warning the disciples that the result of their following him will be that there will be people who oppose them.

There will be division. There will even be people with swords who will attack them. But

he is not suggesting anywhere here that the disciples should themselves take up the sword.

As a matter of fact, he had said in the same discourse back in verse 16, Matthew 10, 16, he says, Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves. How could somebody be as harmless as a dove and yet be fighting with the sword against his persecutors? That doesn't make sense to me, and I don't think it made sense to Jesus either.

I think that those who use the words of Jesus here to try to make Jesus an advocate of fighting in war, they'd best look in other places for their evidence, because this is not a passage that lends itself to that at all. Now, Jesus, by the way, when he mentioned that he had come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and so forth and so on, and ending with that statement that a man's foes will be those of his own household, Jesus is actually quoting from the Old Testament from one of the minor prophets. He's quoting from Micah, and Micah made this statement, and let me find it for you here.

I'm going to turn to it. How's that sound? Micah chapter 7 and verse 6, it says, I'll start with verse 5, Do not trust in a friend. Do not put your confidence in a companion.

Guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your bosom. For son dishonors father. Daughter rises against her mother.

Daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies are men of his own house. Now, what Micah is doing here, the prophet, when he's saying this, he's simply describing how corrupt the people of Israel had become in his day.

He is saying that you can't trust anybody. You can't trust your wife who lies next to you in bed with your secrets. She'll betray you.

He says, don't trust a friend or put your confidence in a companion, because even sons dishonor their fathers and daughters against their mothers and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law. A man's enemies are the men of his own house. He's simply describing how disloyal people are to each other in Israel, and how the person who is righteous is going to have no one that he can trust, even in his own family.

Now, Jesus is taking that scripture from Micah and saying, you know, following me is going to bring that into a reality in your lives. There will be people who accept the lordship of Christ in their lives, but their fathers or their mothers or their children do not. And there will be this division in the family.

There will be hatred. There will be rejection. But Jesus never indicated that you should shy away from discipleship just because of the rejection you'll experience.

Many people will do anything to avoid rejection, because rejection is very painful. But Jesus indicated that to be rejected by men for his sake is definitely worthwhile. David said in the Psalms, he said, when my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.

And that is certainly what Jesus would have us to realize, is that we may lose friends. We may lose the loyalty of family members. They may disown us if we follow Jesus.

But that is worthwhile. The Lord will take you up. The Lord will accept you.

And to be accepted by God is far more important than to be accepted by man. What is man? That anyone should be concerned about man's approval. And who is God? That his approval matters.

Well, God is everything. God is all important. And if we are rejected by God, even if all men praise us, then we are in serious trouble for eternity.

Now, Jesus goes on and says, therefore, he who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Now, of course, what he is saying is, where there is a conflict, where you have an opportunity to follow Jesus, but the members of your family are opposed to it and forbid you to do it, well, then you have a conflict here between them and Christ. You've got to either be loyal to them or to Christ.

Jesus in another place in Matthew chapter 6 said you cannot serve two masters. You can't serve God and money. You have to be loyal to one or to the other.

Likewise, when it comes to family relations, if a person loves father and mother more than they love Christ, then if that father or mother forbids them to do what is right in the sight of God, forbids them to follow Jesus, then they will follow their father and mother instead of Christ. And that person is not worthy of Jesus. He says, he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

I have known of people who in their retirement years felt called to go on the mission field, but their adult children shamed them into staying home because, you know, the grandchildren need grandma and grandpa around and so forth. And so, in some cases, I've known grandparents to turn aside from the call of God in order to please their children. And Jesus said, whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

And he says, and whoever does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Now, what does it mean to take up a cross? Christians for, I suppose, centuries have been wearing little ornamental crosses on chains around their neck. And is this what it means to bear your cross, to wear a cross around your neck as a piece of jewelry? Well, in biblical times, a cross was not a piece of jewelry.

And Jesus and his disciples would never have understood it as such. A cross was a rugged piece of wood, really, two pieces of wood, such as the one that Jesus was crucified upon. And it was a method of execution for criminals.

If a person was really hated by society and by the government and was condemned to die, they were given this cruel form of death, which is crucifixion. They'd be nailed to this wood and hung on it, sometimes for days before they would expire. It'd be a torturous and hideous form of death.

Now, the cross, therefore, was not a religious symbol in the days of Jesus. It was simply a form of execution, like the electric chair or lethal injection today. You know, today, if Jesus were speaking, he might say, whoever will not take up his lethal injection cannot be my disciple or is not worthy of me.

Of course, he is not talking about actual suicide. He's not talking about actually, you know, killing yourself. What he is saying is that just as those in his day who were carrying a cross were those that were rejected by society and their way of life had been condemned by society.

That's the point. Usually, people who were crucified were criminals. And their way of life was considered criminal by the authorities, and therefore, they were executed in this manner.

And as you saw a man carrying a cross through the streets of Jerusalem, you saw a man who had been condemned. His way of life had been condemned. He was rejected by everyone.

He had no friends left. He had no rights. He was a condemned man.

Now, Jesus said, when you follow me, you've got to be prepared to be treated that way. You've got to be prepared to be like a man carrying a cross, and you've got to accept that, that the world rejects your way of life. You've been condemned by them because you follow me.

They don't approve. They treat you as an offender because you're doing really what is right. And if you do not take up your cross and follow me, you're not worthy of me.

That means if you're not willing to accept all the rejection that comes with being a follower of Jesus, the world's rejection, then you're not worthy. Now, you know, we may be very familiar with this statement without really letting it drive home to our hearts. I mean, think about it for a moment.

What does it mean to accept total rejection from society against yourself? Would you take a stand for what is right if you knew that everybody that you worked with, everybody in your family, everybody at your school would condemn you for it and would

reject you for it and would view you as somebody who's worse than scum and one who ought to be crucified? And by the way, there are societies in which they go so far as to actually crucify them. There are Muslim countries right now where Christians are being crucified on crosses by their persecutors. And, of course, there are other countries where they don't use crucifixion, but where Christians go to jail and are tortured and are put to death for their faith.

Is this what you're prepared to do? Are you prepared to face this for Christ? If not, well, I'm afraid he said you're not worthy of him. Now, when he says you're not worthy of me, he means that you cannot make the grade. You can't be a disciple.

You can't follow him. You can't be a Christian. The word disciple in the Scripture is the same as the word Christian.

In Acts 11, 26, we find the definition of Christian. It says the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. So, a disciple and a Christian are the same thing.

And Jesus, in another passage, in Luke 14, said all the things he says here about he who loves father and mother more than me, he says, cannot be my disciple. Here he says, whoever does not take up his cross and fall after me, in Luke 14, he says, cannot be my disciple. In Matthew, he says, is not worthy of me.

But, basically, you're not capable of being one of his if you're not willing to make him everything to you. And he even puts it in the final analysis. He says, he who finds his life will lose it.

And he who loses his life for my sake will find it. Well, speaking of finding your life may confuse you a little bit. I mean, what does it mean to find your life? Well, he made a better or a clearer statement of the same point over in Matthew 16, 25, where he said, whoever desires to save his life will lose it.

And whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. That is what he means. That if you try to save your own life by compromise, you'll lose it anyway.

If you deny Christ under torture to avoid death, you're not going to live forever anyway. You're going to still die sometime. You'll just die unfaithful.

If you seek to save your life by rejecting Christ, you'll lose your life anyway. You will not have it forever. But if you will lose your life for his sake, if you'll die for him, then you'll find it for life eternal.

You'll exchange a temporary life for a life that lasts forever. Now, he's suggesting, of course, that following him is the means by which you might lose your life. You might lose your life because people persecute you and kill you for being a Christian.

That may seem very unreal to us in America, listening to these words, because there just aren't people at this point killing Christians outright, at least not with government approval quite yet. But you can see that the temperature is rising here, too. Persecution of Christians is not absent.

And perhaps even martyrdom is not far away. Are you prepared to follow Jesus all the way? Are you prepared to be rejected and killed for him, if that's what it takes? If not, then I can only quote to you what Jesus said about you. You are not worthy of him.

You cannot be a disciple. This is the cost of discipleship. Jesus always encouraged people to count that cost before following him.

Count it. It's worth it.