

Title: “When Jesus Becomes the Problem”

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Matthew 10:34-42

6/28/2026

Service Readings: Jer. 28:5–9; Rom. 7:1–13; Matt. 10:34–42

Jesus disrupts before He restores.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Jesus said:

³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷Whoever 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.

His adult life has been a life anchored in Christ. His faith, firm. And for 30 years he has been married to a wonderful woman who held the same convictions. Their children had been raised in the church, confirmed, and to this day believed in Jesus and His work on the cross. They were actively engaged in church activities and for many in the community were held as a model of a strong Christian family.

That was then; tonight was became different. It was not sudden; he had sensed this for years as he watched his daughter grow into an adult and move out into the world. But the topic just never came up until now and so he could suppress his concerns and rest in the comfort of his ignorance. But tonight his daughter visited and over dinner conversation she made clear that she was struggling with her faith. Maybe “struggling” was the wrong word – it was the word he chose because it was more comforting than the word she used. She still believed in God and Jesus, but not the same kind of God and Jesus that mom and dad believed in. Or maybe she just didn't believe in all that her church had taught her. She stated quite simply that it was impossible to believe in a Jesus who insisted that the only way to heaven was through a Christian view that just didn't seem applicable in today's world. Science, she insisted, has proven that biology is far more complicated than once thought. Understandings of gender, sex, even morals are constructs of culture and society and if God is truly the creator, he already knows this. And so he has given us science so that we can explore and better understand his creation. But he has also given us the responsibility to enhance our understanding of him with all that we learn. And so, she concluded, it only makes sense that as the world begins to understand the complexity of the human mind, the human body, and everything else, it must inform that which we believe. And so if God exists, and she still thinks he does, then it is not him that is wrong but the church that is wrong because they are not keeping up with the discoveries that the world has made about creation.

It was a logical argument and one that we discussed for quite some time, but she refused to consider where she might be wrong, and she continued to insist that he was just blinded by a lifetime in the church. And so the evening ended in a standstill. The relationship between the daughter, father, and mother was not broken, and it probably wasn't even damaged: they all still loved each other as much after the discussion as before, but now the tension that was once ignored, once hidden, was now made visible and could no longer be suppressed.

Jesus said:

³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Their family relationships are now strained. Tonight these relationships are safe, but for how long? If he and his wife continue to stand firm in their convictions, even lovingly, will the relationship with their daughter erode? Will it eventually be severed? These were the questions as he lay down for the night. In his prayers he called out to God, "I've been faithful my whole life. I've been in church. I've raised my family in faith. Why is this so hard? Lord, haven't I done what you asked? Haven't I been faithful? Why doesn't faith make this easier?"

Maybe you have been in his shoes. Maybe you are right now. You see, when Jesus spoke these words, he wasn't just speaking about the decisive moments. He wasn't talking just about a Christian being condemned or ostracized by strangers because of their faith. Those are terrible events, to be sure, but they are clear cut. It is easy to analyze and even minister to these situations. A person disowned from his family because he is now a Christian is something that the church can gather around. It is clear what support they can give this person. But what about the situations that are not so clear? What about the relationships that don't have these sharp demarcations, that are blurry, like this man and his family? What about those?

Jesus was speaking to them, also. What he says is that following him does not automatically remove tension from every relationship – even those messy ones that are full of nuances. Jesus never promised they would miraculously be resolved. He never promised that faithfulness to him would always be understood. He never promised that the people we love would always appreciate our commitment to him. He never promised that those we love would love him with the same conviction.

His teaching is difficult exactly because what he is speaking about are good gifts. Family is a good gift. Friendships are a good gift. Peace in relationships is a good gift. But when Christ stands at the center of our lives, when we anchor ourselves to him in faith, even these good gifts can become places of struggle.

And it is in these moments when we discover our own sin; we discover that what we expect from Jesus is not what he is offering. We discover that maybe we don't want a savior but rather a savior who can guarantee a comfortable life. We discover that we don't just want Jesus but rather want Jesus and an uninterrupted life. Jesus and family harmony. Jesus and comfort. Jesus and approval.

But here is the irony of all that. Jesus understands this pain better than this man ever could – better even than we ever could. His own brothers did not believe him. Many disciples abandoned him. His closest friends fled. He was rejected by the very people he came to save. The Jesus who said, "take up your cross and follow me," is the very Jesus who carried his cross first.

Jesus never promised an easy life. What he did promise was himself. He promised forgiveness. He promised a cross. He promised a resurrection. Our comfort is not that Jesus makes every relationship easy. Our comfort is that no strained relationship, no rejection, no loss, and not even death itself can separate us from the Christ who has claimed us as his own.

Now, maybe at this point you are expecting a resolution to this strained family relationship. Maybe you are hoping that I can bring some sort of wisdom to it – something that will help this man turn his daughter back to Jesus – to help her understand that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But that's just not how life works. I have no easy resolution, no miracle words. I have no wisdom beyond this:

Keep loving your daughter. Keep speaking the truth with gentleness and humility. Keep praying for her. And keep trusting Christ. Because the burden of saving her soul does not rest upon your shoulders. It rests on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd who loves her even more than you do. The same Jesus who died for you died for her. The same Jesus who called you by name in Baptism called her by name, also. And the same Jesus who has been faithful to you throughout your life remains faithful even when you cannot see what he is doing.

That does not remove the pain. It does not answer every question. It does not even guarantee the outcome you desire. But it does remind you where your hope belongs. You are not saved because your family is perfect. You are not saved because your children remain faithful. You are not saved because you have done everything right. You are saved because Christ has taken up his cross for you.

And because he has, you can take up your cross and follow him – even through tears, even through uncertainty, even through strained relationships.

For one day every sword will be put away. Every division will end. One day every division among God's redeemed people will end. And on that day we will finally see what we cannot yet see: that our Lord was faithful all long.

Until then, we follow him.

Let us pray

Lord Jesus Christ, when following You brings pain, give us faith to trust Your promises. Grant us courage to speak Your truth in love, patience to endure what we cannot change, and confidence that You remain faithful to all whom You have claimed as Your own. Keep us steadfast in Your Word until the day when all division is ended and we rejoice together in Your eternal kingdom; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.