

“Happy are they who delight in the Lord,
and do not follow the way of the wicked.” AMEN!

Sometimes I read something in the Bible and
I’m like “Yes!” “AMEN!”

And then there are other times.

Times when there are words in the sacred text
that make me say, “Ouch! That hurts!”

Today is one of those “ouch!” days.

Today, Jesus told the large crowd following him
that there’s a cost to pay when one decides
to follow the Son of God.

Sure, Jesus welcomed all, fed everyone,
and healed multitudes but he also made sure
that people knew that there’s
a profound challenge to staying
connected to Jesus.

To some it will be an “AMEN” or “so be it.”

To others it will be an “ouch” that hurts. (Pause)

There’s an old cartoon that shows a drawing of

a radio host interviewing a missionary.

And this is the question the host asked the missionary:

But if the people over there think that
the Christianity presented in the Gospel is
too strict,

why don't you tell them about
the kind of Christianity
we follow here in America? :-)

Amen! Right?

We want the easy, pain free version of following Jesus.

Probably like many in the crowd that day,
we want the feel good words from Jesus.

We want to be in his presence without the sacrifice.

We want the welcome, the meal, the grace
without any discomfort, suffering, or lost family.

Presence without sacrifice is easy,
but somehow we know that is not realistic,
and not the real meaning of following Jesus,
so we need to admit the harshness of
his words hold a truth which

pierces us the lies
we tell ourselves.

We must respond to these words in
a world of profound violence and abuse.

A world that already knows the fact that spouses,
children, and even the elderly are abused.

So, we ask, “Is Jesus really saying that hate
is a mark of discipleship?”

We know the truth that the answer is no,
of course not, but it might be helpful for us
to briefly survey what Jesus might have
meant when he said,

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate
father and mother, wife and children,
brother and sister, yes, even life itself
cannot be my disciple.”

One option would be to take his words literally.

This perspective would mean we must literally
despise those in our family, possessions
and even life itself
if we want to follow Jesus.

While virtually everyone here, including me,
will never come to believe this to be true,
it is important to point to why we reject
that interpretation.

The clearest reason is that this interpretation
contradicts Jesus' previous teachings.

Earlier in Luke, Jesus summed up
the teaching of God's law by saying,

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
all your soul and all your strength, and
all your mind and love your neighbor
as yourself."

Then in another place in Luke Jesus said
to his followers,

"Love your enemies, and do good to those
who hate you."

And of course, Jesus affirmed the teaching that
called for honoring one's
father and mother-not hating them.

So, like everything in the Bible, we must weigh
what is said with other lessons and
not take specific things out of context.

So, the literal option is out.

Another option for understanding his
“ouch” words today is to interpret them
as hyperbole.

An exaggeration to get people’s attention.

There’s some truth to this interpretation,
but Jesus (I don’t think) is offering up hyperbole
for attention that would have dismissed
ethical treatment, or commitment, or
even self-care in favor of discipleship.

So, that leads us to a third option.

This one would be to recognize that the word “hate”
is sometimes used in the Hebrew Bible
(the First Testament) to mean “love less.”

Commentator E. Trey Clark points to an
example of this in Genesis where
the language said “Leah was hated” by Jacob,

but the interpretation is really that
Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah.

He loved Leah less.

Might Jesus be saying that those who want
to follow him must love others less
than God-even to such an extent that it
might look like you've turned

your back on family, possessions, and
even your own life.

Or as Biblical scholar Diane Chen puts it,
"To be a follower of Jesus,
one's preferences (loyalty, love, and priority)

must reside with Jesus over all people and
all the other things one holds dear."

I consider this understanding to be the most logical.
(Pause)

Even though it's the most logical,
that doesn't mean there's no cost.

We Americans are comfortable and most of us
believe there's nothing wrong with the way we are.

Our sense of privilege and blessing leads us
to neglect hearing the way Jesus' words
condemn us and our government.

His words cut deep when we look around at
the arrogance of our leadership and
the greed of the population.

When we slip into believing ambitious people
deserve to be well fed and dressed while
others are lazy and deserve nothing
but crumbs and discarded clothing.

When the type of vehicle one drives makes
them believe their superior and thus do not
need to obey rules of the road.

It's not very difficult to see how Jesus would
deny many from following him,
less they change their priorities.

Thankfully, we have ears to listen and eyes to see.

We can practice saying "good-bye" to the things,
people, and comforts we treasure, and love,
more than God.

It's one reason why the practice of tithing is
so important to our spiritual maturity.

It is a structured way to remind us owners
that all wealth belongs to God.

We are followers of Jesus living in the most affluent nation and we own almost everything.

Jesus calls us to live as though we possess nothing but Him.

Owners develop a hardness of heart less they hear Jesus' words.

Owners develop a closed mindedness when they are blind to the suffering around them.

We pledge to hear today Jesus' words:

"Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

And recognize how much more fulfilling life becomes.

AMEN!