

Jesus said to the crowd, *"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.....So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."*

Oh brother! What are we to make of this? When I left seminary, I felt much the same as when I left nursing school. I had a new license, but wished I had more time to learn how to use it. Seminary gave me tools, but not a class on "Teaching and Preaching the Difficult Sayings of Jesus." And this is one of those sayings.

Thankfully, and conveniently for us, Vanderbilt Divinity School professor emeritus, Amy-Jill Levine, has written about these texts in her book, *The Difficult Words of Jesus*. She reminds us, *"All scriptures have passages with which people of conscience wrestle.... Since the name 'Israel' traditionally means to wrestle with God, we do well to wrestle with passages that confuse and disturb us."*¹ So here we go.

Does Jesus really mean we should "hate" those who love us? After all, this the same Jesus who teaches love of enemy and neighbor. Luke's words are harsh. Matthew softens it a bit: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." Still not comforting. But remember—Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem. His earthly ministry is nearing its end. His words are sharp because the stakes are high. Discipleship, he warns, is not an easy road to follow, then or now.

Perhaps this is hyperbole meant to wake us up. But the meaning is clear: following Jesus will demand difficult choices. Levine writes, *"To understand the gospel—indeed to follow Jesus—should not be a continuing effort of making the teachings less demanding. Jesus never said being a disciple would be easy; to the contrary. But he did assure his followers that being a disciple would be worth their while."*²

The Greek word *miséō*, translated here as "hate," is not the same as hatred born of violence or malice. Instead, it suggests a disruption of relationship, a sharp distinction in loyalty. Following Jesus sometimes puts us in tension with those we love, because the Gospel demands new priorities. Of course, that tension feels a lot like loss, but it is really about reorientation.

And this is where Paul's letter to Philemon helps us. Paul writes from prison, urging Philemon to welcome Onesimus—his runaway slave—not as property, but as a beloved brother in Christ. Paul could have ordered Philemon, but instead, he appeals in love, inviting him to make a decision that

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Difficult Words of Jesus*, Nashville, Abington Press, 2021.p.ix.

² Levine, 35.

went against everything his culture told him. Freeing Onesimus, seeing him as kin, meant dismantling accepted structures of ownership, wealth, and status. Paul places Philemon right in the tension Jesus describes: a choice that will likely disturb the comfortable order of his household and reputation, but one that is faithful to the Gospel.

In both voices—Jesus and Paul—we hear not demands for blind obedience but calls to use the God-given gifts of free will and discernment. *Jesus forces his disciples to ask: What will you truly value? What will shape your life?* Paul invites Philemon to choose love over convention, to discern the deeper truth that Onesimus is not a possession but a brother. Neither Jesus nor Paul eliminates the struggle; both affirm that faithful living requires difficult, intentional choices.

So, like Philemon, we are asked to choose the harder way. Will we cling to what is familiar, socially acceptable, and safe—or risk obedience to Jesus, even if it costs us? The Gospel presses us to see people not as “less than,” but as siblings. It calls us to let go of power, privilege, or possessions for the sake of love and justice. Paul’s letter is short, but it models how faith demands uncomfortable, countercultural choices rooted in discernment.

I think of a lesson from early sobriety. I was asked to list the ten most important things in my life: family, career, friends, home, education, health, faith..... (*What would be on your list?*) My sponsor drew a big X through it all and said, “If you don’t put your sobriety at the top, you will not have any of the rest.” She didn’t ask me to give up those things, but she reminded me of what had to come first if I was to have life, and to have it more abundantly. That is what Jesus and Paul are both saying. Without God’s kingdom at the center, all else crumbles. Without faith reshaping our choices, we are left clinging to illusions that hold nothing for us in body, mind, or spirit.

I believe Jesus is saying the same. Without the kingdom of God, we have nothing. Without the way I have shown you, you do not have life. This is more than simply rhetorical. And we know this. In the times of our life we have walked away from what we sense God wants for us, we feel lost and disconnected. And we also feel the connection, the energy of the Spirit within when we turn toward God once again.

The Gospel always challenges us to be more than we believe we can be on our own. It changes how we spend our time and resources, who we welcome, what loyalties we hold. It asks us to love those who do not think like us, to care for creation even in small daily choices, to resist making politics or possessions our ultimate allegiance. It is a call to let faith reorder everything. It is a call to use discernment, to test our loyalties, to step into the freedom of choosing life as Christ defines it.

Over and over, Jesus calls us to life. And we want life in all its fullness. Isn’t that why we are here today? Here in this blessed place with each other, to be fed, to be changed, to practice love in our

community so we can carry it outside these walls. These words of Jesus and this appeal from Paul are not meant to frighten us, but to shake us up, and to remind us that discipleship is seldom easy, yet always worth it. Both of their voices affirm that the Spirit is alive in our choices, in our discernment, in our free will surrendered to love.

So let's not be afraid to accept these hard teachings. Let us hear them as the invitation they are: to wrestle, to discern, to risk using our freedom for the sake of God's kingdom. For in Christ, this is how we will live, and love, and be.

Amen.