

# Follow Jesus

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Preacher: Gordon McBirnie

[ 0 : 00 ] Let's share in our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence.

! May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher,! and your great glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

When I first read this passage a wee while ago when I was starting to prepare for this morning, we had just watched a TV show that was talking about a famous windsurfing competition on the island of Tyree.

I don't know if anyone, I'm sure some of you have been to Tyree, anyone? Very good place by the look of it. Apparently though, the wind and waves on the island of Tyree are perfect for windsurfing and normal surfing.

Now you might be wondering what that has to do with these verses from Matthew, but the reason I put them together is the prize for the windsurfing competition in Tyree is a sword and even when they were talking about that on the TV show, no one seemed to know why the windsurfing prize was a sword but that seems to be what they'd been done anyway.

[ 1 : 15 ] But it's a good looking sword anyway, so I could see on the TV. But no one really knows why, but there it is. Now I don't know about you, but I don't come across that many swords in my daily life.

But for the people who heard Jesus talking that day, as we had our reading earlier, swords would have been very normal. They would have been used to seeing the Roman soldiers walking about each day armed with swords.

So it wasn't a very unusual thing for Jesus to use as an example. So the first verse of this passage can seem a bit confusing to us when we first read it, but for those who heard it, swords were normal.

But the unusual thing for us is not the swords, but Jesus saying he had not come to bring peace. Verse 34, Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.

I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. Now, I do seem to keep mentioning Christmas these days, but this time it's last Christmas, and I'm not thinking forward to next Christmas already.

[ 2 : 21 ] But one of the passages we read in the Nine Lessons service from Isaiah 9 says, For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders.

His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Now, Prince of Peace is a familiar title for Jesus, and one that we are very familiar with as well.

So why does Jesus say that he has not come to bring peace, but a sword? Now, if we are transported back to Israel when Jesus spoke these words, there was a good chance that the people hearing it would not have had any problem with what Jesus said about bringing a sword and not peace.

Though perhaps what they heard wasn't really what Jesus had meant. The country of Israel, as we have already said, was under occupation by the Romans, and the people of Israel were expecting the Messiah.

The two things together in the minds of many people meant the Messiah, when he came, would lead them to kick out the Romans, establish Israel to its former glory, which was to expand its borders, and to dominate the area as a military power.

[ 3 : 34 ] So when Jesus said he had come to bring a sword, maybe that was music to their ears. But perhaps as Jesus continued to speak, they were maybe a bit less sure.

Jesus said in verse 35, 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.

If what Jesus said about not coming in peace confused us, then these verses can seem to make it even worse. Why would Jesus talk about bringing divisions to families like this?

We become very uncomfortable thinking about this, because for most of us, we don't want to see divisions between members of our families. Of course, not all families are the same.

Many family relationships are good, but equally many are not good. And this sort of division already exists, or maybe in some cases we might wish it were so. And this can be a source of sorrow.

[ 4 : 39 ] And these words of Jesus can seem harsh, but as we continue to look at what he's saying, we'll hopefully see that our first assumptions might not be right. However, having mentioned difficulty in family relationships, and wanted to say that, I or others would be happy to talk and pray with anyone of you who are living with this at the moment, if any of these sort of thoughts are being brought up to you.

Jesus' listeners would also have found it difficult, because loving and respecting family members, and parents in particular, was one of the highest duties in Judaism. The only one who would rightfully demand greater love was God.

But what Jesus was telling them was that for anyone who followed him, when it came to a choice between him and anyone else, we must choose him. Now we must be clear that Jesus isn't advocating a lack of love for families, but he is saying that he has first call on our loyalty and obedience.

He's not calling for an unloving attitude, but a willingness to put him first, in a situation where the call of Jesus and our families conflict. Now this seems like a difficult thing to accept, and we can fixate on one part of it and forget the rest.

But we don't want to leave today thinking Jesus wants to separate us from our families. This can't be what he meant, because he did not do that in his own life with his own earthly family.

[ 6 : 10 ] You might remember the account of Jesus' crucifixion, where Jesus, while nailed to the cross, gave his mother Mary into the care of the disciple John, and John into the care of Mary.

Also Mark's gospel tells us that when Jesus was teaching in a house and heard that his mother and brothers were outside looking for him, he said, whoever does the will of God are my mother and brothers.

So Jesus showed love for his family, but also demonstrated that he put the will of the Father first. And Jesus' example gives us a confidence that when we put him first, before anything or anyone, we're following God's pattern for how we should live.

And that pattern is the one we are created to follow as people made in the image of God. Now I don't know if any of you recognize this advert for an iPad when they first came out many years ago.

A father and grown-up daughter were working together in the kitchen, preparing a meal, and the daughter says to the father, how are you getting on with the iPad we bought you for Christmas? And the father says, oh very good thanks, and he shows it to her as he's chopping his vegetables on it and rinsing it under the tap.

[ 7 : 25 ] He didn't know what an iPad was, so he assumed it was a very fancy chopping board. And of course an iPad would work as a very expensive, quite small chopping board, but that's not really its purpose.

It only comes into its own when it's used for the purposes for which it was created. And the same is true for us. When we put Jesus first in our lives, we're following our purpose, and in that way we will know the blessing of being in God's will.

The other important thing to remember in this is that choosing Jesus over anyone else will not lessen our love for our family, but increase it. If following Jesus is the best pattern for our lives, then other things and other relationships will follow.

That's not to say that everything will be perfect. We strive as we know God wants us to live, but we don't always succeed. Our walk with God is sometimes good, and we feel good about it, and sometimes not so good, and we can feel down about that.

And in the same way, we will sometimes put God first in our lives, and sometimes others or ourselves. Praise God for his gentle, loving, gentle patience.

[ 8 : 40 ] These verses or similar verses are found all over the Old Testament, and they're lovely things to remind us of God's nature. But you, O Lord, are God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, thank goodness for that, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

The final thing to note from this section is that when people in our lives see that we put God first, it can cause them to wonder about who this person is, to whom we give such allegiance and obedience to.

One way we can get to know new people, of course, is by being introduced to them by a mutual friend, and then that person can sometimes become our friend. After all, if our friend likes them and gets on with them, there's a reasonable chance that we will as well.

So we can pray that our witness of love and obedience to Jesus will help us introduce him to others so that they can know the blessing as we know and become followers of Jesus as well.

This is a mission opportunity, and we can ask God to help us make the most of it. Now, we've already had two potentially confusing or difficult verses in this passage.

[ 9 : 53 ] Jesus comes not to bring peace but a sword, and I've come to set a man against his father, etc., etc. And now we come to another one in verse 38. Now, you might have heard someone say something like, this is my cross to bear.

And for them, of course, it means a burden to carry or an obstacle to overcome. It's a common phrase, but it goes back to Jesus' crucifixion. However, Jesus said this to his listeners well before his death on the cross.

So what sense would it have made to them? Well, crucifixion, you may know, is very common in this time. It was quite a favoured way for the Romans to execute people and use them as terrible examples.

When a person who was to be crucified was led to the place of execution, they would often be made to carry the crossbeam on which they would be killed. This was them literally bearing their cross.

And we know the same thing happened to Jesus because we read in Matthew, Mark, and Luke that Simon of Cyrene was made to help Jesus carry it, his crossbeam, because he'd been beaten so badly, Jesus, that he wasn't able to bear the weight of the crossbeam.

- [ 11 : 19 ] So we can see that the phrase would have made sense and what Jesus, but what did Jesus mean it for his followers? What did it mean that they were to carry their cross? Taking up our cross is a conscious decision to follow Jesus no matter what it may cost.
- It's not deliberately courting persecution or martyrdom, but willingly submitting to it when it results from our faithful discipleship. We cannot read the New Testament without seeing the disciples suffered greatly from a great deal of persecution, much of what led to their deaths.
- And the Bible is clear that for all followers of Jesus, persecution of some kind is to be expected. Now for us living in Scotland, it's not common, but neither is it unknown.
- But this is the Open Doors World Watch List map for 2025, showing the countries, the 50 countries in the world, where it's most dangerous to be a follower of Jesus.
- The idea of people in these countries joining together with other Christians openly to worship and pray, to listen to God's word, as we are doing now, would be completely unthinkable.
- [ 12 : 34 ] And this shows us very clearly that for some, taking up their cross might indeed mean death. And those people facing that on a daily basis are members of our family.
- We are the family of God that meet here in Craiglock, but we are also part of a worldwide family of believers. And the people who would never be able to do this in all their Christian experience are part of our family as well.
- They live in North Korea, Somalia, or any of the other of these 50 countries. And they are as much part of us as we are are the people sitting next to us this morning.
- And we should pray for them and support the work of those who are working with them, as I know that many of you do. However, for us, taking up our cross means denying ourselves and putting Jesus first and obeying his call on our lives, spreading the gospel regardless of the results for us personally.
- To follow Jesus is a moment-by-moment decision, requiring denial of self and taking up of our cross. Following Jesus does not mean walking behind him, but in taking the same road of sacrifice that he took.
- [ 13 : 49 ] And the blessing for us is that he walks with us along the way. Many of us will be familiar with the story of Jim Elliott and a few others who went to Ecuador in 1952 to witness to a previously unreached people called the Aucas.
- Before he left America and before he set out, he was encouraged by his family and others to stay at home and minister to the local church where he lived. But he felt God calling him to Ecuador because he thought the American church was overfed and other places needed the gospel as well.
- Now, after some time, they were able to make contact with the Aucas people, but soon after, in 1956, Jim and four friends were killed by people from that tribe. Jim's wife, Elizabeth, carried on the work at great personal cost and was eventually able to see the people who had killed her husband baptized into the Christian faith.
- The whole story is told very movingly in her book, *Through Gates of Splendor*. The second part of verse 38 says, whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
- And this is Jesus summing this whole section up. We've seen that he wants us to put him first and the blessing of living according to the pattern of life has laid out for us in his teaching.
- [ 15 : 19 ] We've seen that there's a cost to this way of living, but that we gain in our relationship with God what we gain outweighs anything that comes our way. And that truth is demonstrated in the lives of the people we read about in the Bible as well as the lives of the saints that came after who did lose their lives for Jesus' sake.

Putting aside our own desires in favour of Jesus will give us more of the life and relationship we were made to have as people made in God's image. It almost seems counterintuitive that giving something up helps us to gain it back even more abundantly, but that seems to be what Jesus is saying here.

And going back to Jimmy Elliott, some of you may be thinking of that phrase for which he's so well known. He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Now all of this can seem quite difficult as God's word sometimes is. The call on our lives as Christians is not always easy and neither is it easy to do.

But right at the end of our passage there's a little clue as to how we can begin at least to achieve it. Read in verse 42. Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.

[ 16 : 40 ] Now I know that not everywhere has ample water, but the idea of running out of it for those of us who live in Edinburgh seems fairly unlikely. In fact, as Faye and I were standing at the door, practically everyone said it's Guy Dreech out there as they came in and Scotland continuing to supply us with plenty of water.

So giving someone, for us, giving someone a cup of cold water is maybe the simplest thing we could do. Every week at the youth club at Impact we have our kids running around playing football and basketball getting very sweaty.

At some point they'll come to the hatch where we serve the snack bar and ask for a cup of water. And James, who runs our snack bar, brings cup after cup to refresh the young people. It's also partly that they've spent all their money on sweets at the beginning of the night and that water is free, but it does revive and refresh them as they go off and carry on doing all the activities.

Serving God in obedience does not have to be complicated. It doesn't always have to be a big thing. In fact, I think that most of the ways we serve God on a day-to-day basis in Jesus' name are little things that witness to people and step by step draw them closer to Jesus.

If the things we've been thinking about seem a bit overwhelming, just ask God to show you what little thing you can do today and then tomorrow and you'll find ourselves living in a life of faithful obedience which is the life that he has called us to live.

[ 18 : 12 ] The life he promises to equip us to live and to walk every step with us. Let's pray together. Lord, we pray that you will give us all we need to live the life you have called us to live and thank you, Lord, that at every step you are walking beside us.

We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.