

If it were up to you, would you follow Jesus? It's a hypothetical question based on the impossibility that any of us could actually *choose* to follow Jesus. Besides the fact that by nature we are spiritually dead in sin and want nothing to do with God, Jesus also tells us, "¹⁶ **You did not choose me, but I chose you...**" (Jn 15). We understand that by the grace of God alone do we believe and follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit has worked that change in our heart, so that we live our lives to "**...go and bear fruit [of faith] that will last.**" This faith and life that God has given you will last forever. When you put it that way, why would we *not* want to follow Jesus?

The thing is, not everyone sees Jesus and his Word through the same eyes of faith that you do. Some see Jesus as a great teacher and example to follow, but only to the pragmatic extent that it really works and makes life easier. "Love your neighbor, so that in turn he'll love you back." Or as some have been led to believe, "If I follow Christ and do the right things, God will give me even more and greater blessings in this life." And when they realize that they missed the part about having to carry their cross and to face opposition for the name of Christ, or that there are 'hard teachings' of Jesus that a lot of people in this world really don't care for, then they're not so sure about following Jesus any more.

As a follower of Jesus, however, you already what it means to carry the cross – that ongoing burden to struggle against temptation and doubt, to keep on trusting and holding onto your faith and your relationship with your Savior! You feel the burden and guilt of your own sin and how heavily it can weigh on your heart. But you continue to follow Jesus, because you know that only He can lift that burden by his perfect forgiveness and bring you a joy and peace that you get to live with every day and that lasts forever. Why would we ever *not* want to follow Jesus then?

Jesus stood before a crowd of many thousands of people on this particular day. It wasn't an unusual scene, not with Jesus. He spoke to his disciples knowing that many others were listening in. Some, like many of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, had already made up their mind about Jesus; they listened because they wanted to catch him saying the wrong thing. Others were curious or in search of something more meaningful and powerful than what their spiritual leaders had been offering them. Well, they came to the right man. Jesus had a captive audience here, as he did on many other occasions. So what did the Prince of Peace say to them?

⁴⁹ **I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!...** ⁵¹ **Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.**" In Matthew's account (10:34-36), Jesus also said he came to bring a sword. I can't say I know a whole lot about marketing or public relations, but I'm pretty certain that by today's standards this wasn't the right thing to be saying. Not if you want to appeal to your listeners and win their loyalty.

Some would suggest that Jesus said such things for the shock value and controversy that got people's attention. We see that happening today, where famous people say or do things that cause a media storm, but they get people's attention. The difference is, Jesus' words always have eternal implications, spoken for the benefit of his listeners with the ultimate goal being repentance and salvation.

Were they easy words to speak or to listen to? Definitely not. You can hear the tension and urgency in Jesus' voice when he says, "⁵⁰ **But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!**" Jesus was alluding to his crucifixion, his suffering and death. This baptism would not be a cool washing with water but an agonizing process of purification that Jesus would face as the Lamb of God, to take away the sins of the world. John the Baptist had pointed out that Jesus would come baptizing "**with the Holy Spirit and with fire,**" (Lk. 3:16), and now Jesus reminds his listeners what this baptism meant.

What Jesus said was certainly not what many today would consider even close to the right marketing strategy. Sure, it might be true, but if you want people to join your gym, you focus them on the positive idea of a new, thin, happy and successful self, not on how much pain they're going to be in for that first week or so, not on how difficult it will be to stick with it.

But isn't that what it sounds like Jesus is saying here? People are looking for peace and stability in their lives, for something that encourages them and makes them feel happy. But Jesus is talking about bringing "**fire on the earth,**" that final judgment and destruction that *HE* would bring as the Judge of this sinful world. He's talking about the suffering and conflict that he would face and how stressful that is to him. How do you think it will be for those who follow him? Right, more conflict and division – even within your own families!

In fact, here's what Jesus says you can expect if you follow him and his Word: ⁵² ***From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.*** ⁵³ ***They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.*** That doesn't sound like the Prince of Peace speaking; it sounds like the Dictator of Division or the King of Conflict! Why would anyone knowingly risk or sacrifice relationships so precious as those of family to follow a leader like that?

I'm guessing this summer some of you also had the distinct displeasure of having to say goodbye to family at the airport. You know what I'm talking about, standing there looking at each other as one of you goes through the security checkpoints, trying to wave while removing shoes, taking off your belt or emptying your pockets. People hate to saying goodbye to the ones they love so much.

Jesus is saying that if you follow Him, at some point you will have to choose, because wherever Christ and the gospel message are, there will also be conflict and division. The gospel is the wisdom and love and power of God, and we wonder why anyone would reject the gift of God's forgiveness in Christ, a gift so free, so complete and so everlasting! Maybe if we could offer people just the good news of what Jesus has done for us and focus on how wonderful life can be for a Christian, then more people would be willing to listen and give it a chance? No one wants to have to say goodbye to family or be ridiculed by people at school or work.

Jesus asks you, *'Are you prepared to be my disciples with all the baggage and hardship that goes along with it?'* Jesus was never One for telling people just what they *wanted* to hear, but what He knew they *needed* to hear. He wasn't interested in putting a temporary band-aid on people's self-esteem or society's ills, or to establish a superficial, earthly peace where people only agree to disagree. He came to proclaim the uncompromising gospel truth for the salvation of sinners, knowing that many of those for whom he would die would also hate him for it.

We have come to faith in Jesus as the only way to eternal peace and a right relationship between sinners and our holy God. We know that this message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, and that if we are faithful to it we will encounter conflict and resistance. That is what Jesus is telling us here, isn't it? But knowing this doesn't make it any easier to talk about Jesus and his Word with others. We wonder if maybe we lighten up on the talk about people's sins or the challenges of following Jesus, and if we can make them feel happy and excited instead of guilty and obligated, then we can reach people with the gospel. Wouldn't it be smarter to present God's Word in a way that addresses people's felt needs, you know, what they want to hear, but then give 'em the gospel, too!

We still struggle to accept the fact that Jesus and his Word do and will bring about division and conflict. We don't like the thought of having to make tough choices or to explain why all of Jesus' teachings are necessary to believe and obey. Sometimes we have convinced ourselves that the loving thing to do is to allow people to do what they want so that they don't feel too guilty or condemned. But that's not love for them. It's only love for ourselves. It's selfishness and pride that lead us to cover up this divisive Jesus. Our fear has led us to remain quiet about sin rather than correcting and rebuking it. Our lazy heart has lacked the urgency to share his Word. And rather than help souls, we have often hurt them.

Jesus felt the distress and the crushing weight of the baptism he had to undergo for our redemption and salvation. It was because of our sins that Jesus would face the terrifying agony and torment of hell, and he was willing to be divided and separated from the One closest to him – his own Father. Jesus became the sin-bearer and disgusting object of God's wrath, because he loved you so much and wanted you and this whole world to once again be at one with God. And so he shed his blood and gave his life on the cross, so that we could be united and at peace with God. To all who believe in Him, his empty tomb is God's promise that we shall not perish but have everlasting life.

My fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, my spiritual family, we follow Jesus knowing the conflict and division that we will face when we are faithful to his Word. In those moments when you are tempted to question the value or worth of following Jesus, remember that He chose you. Remember your baptism through which your sinful nature was crucified and buried with Christ, but then also raised to live a new life with Him. Let his Word and sacrament continue to prepare and equip you with the full armor of God, so that you can fight the good fight and share his Word boldly and without compromise. Rejoice in the forgiveness and peace that is ours today and for all eternity. Amen.