

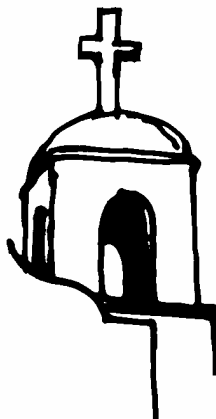
# **Cross Roads, Part 5:** *A Double-Edged Sword*

Sermon by

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*First United Methodist Church of Winter Park*

*On the move to make a difference through Jesus Christ.*

**Cross Roads, Part 5: A Double-Edged Sword**  
**Matthew 10:32-39**

Have you heard the phrase “the hard sayings of Jesus”? It’s the label that biblical scholars give to passages such as the one we read this morning from Matthew’s Gospel – words of Jesus that hit the reader between the eyes, words that give us pause, words that present a way of thinking that at first reading is at best puzzling – at worst disturbing, words that challenge not only our ways of thinking but also the way we live, the values that we embrace, the priorities that we hold dear.

For example:

*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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.*  
Matthew 10:34-35

These verses are a far cry from other words of Jesus that provide comfort or that demonstrate the ultimate in compassion that characterized his life and teachings.

Many of you know that I sent out a congregational email on Monday inviting you to share an experience in your lives that involved a decision you made that was directly related to your commitment to Christ and that caused conflict in a relationship or some other difficulty.

One of the first responses that I received reads, “this has always been one of the thoughts that I think are hard to come to grips with. How could I ever be against a member of my family? Isn’t that unconditional love like God has for us?”

And then, as this person went on, I could see the process of his thinking about the Matthew passage unfold. He continued, “But, if that person has *so* turned their back on God and they refuse to modify that position, I guess it makes sense.”

Subsequent to that email I received others that spoke clearly of the pain of a broken or strained relationship with a parent or a child, including

- A mom who wrote about herself and her husband working hard to stick to their sense of God's leading in their parenting, and how difficult it is when their teenagers encounter a permissive style of parenting in the families of their friends whose parents don't consistently base their parenting decisions on clear Christian values. The inherently challenging relationship between Mom and Dad and adolescent children then becomes even more strained.
- Someone else wrote me about some years back being an engaged college student who became pregnant. She and her fiancé struggled with what to do. They prayed about it. They sincerely sought God's guidance. In response they felt led to move ahead with the wedding that they had thought would be a couple of years away and to have the baby. Her parents put an inordinate amount of pressure on the young couple not to do this – to make another decision that would not involve having and raising this baby. The couple persisted. They are still married today, and see that unplanned baby as an indescribable gift in their lives. Following their sense of God's leading in their situation caused severe damage to their relationship with her parents, fundamentalist Christians who felt embarrassed by their daughter.
- I had an email from a young adult who is struggling with the reality of her father's adultery. Her relationship with Christ is strong, and she prays about how to respond to her father who appears to think that he has not done anything wrong. The father/daughter relationship is strained because she has not embraced his new relationship because she sees doing that as antithetical to the claim of Christ upon her life.

- Others wrote me about conflict within a marriage over the depth of financial commitment to the work of Christ or to the issue of giving time in service to others.
- Two people wrote about career changes that they felt led to make through their relationship with Christ that resulted in significantly reduced income and varying degrees of ridicule from important people in their lives.

The truth is that the Gospel message, the message of Jesus, comes to us as a double-edged sword. Certainly it's a message that brings comfort to those who desperately need it. It also brings *discomfort* to those who think they have it all together. In many ways the Gospel of Jesus Christ is counter-cultural good news. It's a call for drastic commitment, commitment that goes beyond the commitment that we have to anything or anyone else.

The Psalmist foreshadows this juxtaposition as he writes about his own journey with faithfulness to God:

*I have become a stranger to my kindred, an alien to my mother's children. ...  
Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair.* Psalm 69:8, 20

Have you ever been in the position of sensing God's direction, of following God's leading, only to be criticized, judged, or even shunned?

One person wrote me this week about making a decision as a college student to answer what he experienced as a call from God to full-time Christian service. The response from this person's father, a very successful corporate executive, was clearly expressed disappointment and disapproval.

What is it about God's call to the faithful that at times drives a wedge, that can push people apart, that threatens and frightens and sometimes causes one who follows it to be shunned, perhaps even by someone with whom he or she has had a close relationship?

To be sure, the Gospel message is good news. That's what the word means – "Gospel" literally means *good news*. In his inaugural address, as it is recorded in Luke, Jesus says he comes to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. That is good news to those who are oppressed, bound, or blind.

It is good news, too, for those who acknowledge that they are psychologically oppressed, or bound by sin, or blind to the light of Christ. It's good news for those who repent and seek God's help in being restored and made whole.

But the gospel – this good news – is bad news... it is downright lousy news... it is aggravatingly offensive news... for those whose values and priorities and intentions are rooted in the secular culture, the values of which often represent the antithesis of the claims of Christ, and who really don't grasp their own need to be made new in Christ.

*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me... Matthew 10:37*

What's the point of what Jesus is saying here? It is that next to our love for God and for the Kingdom that God offers, all other loves are far less by comparison. If we are to follow Jesus – truly follow him – our greatest love must be our love for him.

*... and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*  
Matthew 10: 38

Now, what does that mean to us, a few years into the twenty-first century? Not too many of us will be asked literally to turn ourselves over to a process that results in a brutal form of capital punishment. There may be exceptional circumstances in which following Jesus will lead to physical pain and even death, but those cases would be extremely rare for people like us who live in the culture in which we live here in Central Florida in the United States of America.

The greater likelihood for us – and perhaps at heart just as difficult a challenge in its own way – still involves the same principle: the challenge of giving up total control of our lives, the challenge to surrender control of the full gamut of decision making about our conduct and our actions, and to turn it over to a higher authority – twelve step programs use the term “higher power” – we give that higher power the name Jesus – to let go of our need to push for whatever we want, to embrace God’s call through Jesus Christ for his will and the welfare of others to come first.

That Olympic athlete – was it in 1992? – I’m not sure, and I don’t remember her name. I think she may have been a speed skater. At any rate, she contributed one of her kidneys to her brother because there was a match and if he didn’t get a kidney he would die. Just a couple of weeks before the Olympic Games were to start, she gave him one of her kidneys even though it meant she would have no chance for a medal at Lillehammer.

Have you ever heard the old story about the praying hands? You’ve seen the painting, I’m sure – Albrecht Dürer’s masterpiece of those gnarled, rough, coarse hands, covered with callousness from years of heavy work, but nevertheless somehow sensitive and beautiful, touching together in an attitude of prayer.

They are the hands of Dürer’s brother, who paid for Albrecht Dürer’s art education. He started out as an artist too, but sacrificed his own career to allow Dürer to continue his when there wasn’t enough money for both of them to go to art school. He worked as a miner so his brother could go on with his studies. The hard work took its toll, but Dürer saw him praying one night, saw those hands that had made his own training possible, and in gratitude he immortalized them for the inspiration of succeeding generations.

When the power of self-denial reaches large enough proportions, its amazing impact is indescribable. For a number of years Dr. Ernest Gordon was Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University. He also had been a prisoner of the Japanese during World War II, assigned to the infamous prison camp at Chungkai, Thailand, made famous by the novel and movie, *Bridge over the River Kwai*.

In his book, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, Dr. Gordon tells of an incident that took place just outside the camp one evening at the close of the work day. The prisoners were lined up and the tools were being counted. Just as the work party was about to be dismissed, a Japanese guard shouted out that a shovel was missing. He insisted that someone had stolen it.

The guard marched up and down in front of the men, shouting loudly at them and calling them all kinds of demeaning names. He demanded to know who the guilty party was, and when no one responded he became enraged. In broken English he began to scream, "All die, all die!" And to show that he meant what he was saying, he picked up his rifle and aimed it at the first man who came into his vision.

At that moment, a lanky Scottish soldier stepped forward, stood stiffly at attention, and said, "I did it."

To this confession, the guard unleashed all his anger and rage. He kicked the prisoner and beat him with his fists. Then he held his rifle by the barrel, lifted it high over his head, and brought the butt of the rifle down onto the skull of the Scottish soldier, whose body sank limply to the ground. Even though the prisoner already was dead, the guard continued beating and kicking the body until he himself was exhausted.

Others among the prisoners picked up their comrade's body and their tools and marched back to the compound where they were housed. When the tools were counted again at the guardhouse, it was noted that no shovel had been missing.

Dr. Gordon comments in his book that when the story of what happened was told and retold throughout the camp, admiration for the Scottish soldier became so strong that it outweighed even the hatred felt for the guard.

The power of self-denial. Is it costly? Yes. But isn't just about anything that truly is worthwhile in life costly? Isn't raising a child effectively costly? Isn't developing and maintaining a good marriage costly? Isn't it costly to hang onto our integrity in the face of all the temptations that rage around us in our world? Isn't keeping our priorities in perspective a costly challenge?

How can we even begin to think that realizing genuine spiritual maturity and living a vital relationship with history's most alive, most influential personality can happen without having it cost us something? It requires a drastic commitment. Whatever the price to be paid in denying ourselves, in losing ourselves to something bigger than we are, in looking out for number one when number one is not ourselves – whatever the price to be paid in giving up personal control of the reins of our lives so that the real driver can come in and set us free – whatever the price, *it really is worth it.*

Christian author W.M. Horton once said, "I am disturbed by an uneasy sense that we sophisticated modern folk, with our pitiful timidity and our persistent self-seeking are living in darkness and misery when we might [instead] follow Christ through suffering into light and joy."

I have a sneaking suspicion that Horton was right. More important, I have an overwhelmingly undeniable feeling that Jesus was right: *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

Quite frankly, sometimes I wish that Jesus hadn't said those words. But he did.