



FOLLOWING HIS WAY

**The paradox
of faith:
Losing to
truly gain.**

by DEACON JIM MCFADDEN

There is a passage in Luke's Gospel where Jesus—the one we associate with love fully incarnate—is telling the crowd, is telling us, that we must hate people. Not just anyone, but our family members!

This may be the most slap in your face challenge that he has proposed to His followers: "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." (Luke 14:26)

His devoted and unconditional love is a free gift given to all and meant for all.

These words stop us in our tracks, and we want to respond: “Jesus, did You really say that? Do you really mean what You just said?” Surely, if the Prince of Peace and the embodiment of love is telling someone to hate someone else, something has got to have been lost in translation.

But the original texts were written in Greek, and the word for hate (*miseo*) is right there. It’s the prefix for misogyny or misandry. There is no other connotation for this word. We are just stuck with it.

Privilege and Exclusion

The majority of parents love their children so much that they’d throw themselves under the bus if their child were endangered. And Jesus wants us to hate our children, along with our parents, if we are going to follow Him.

These words are troubling and seemingly scandalous, especially within the historical

and cultural context in which they were said. Family obligations were very serious stuff in Jesus’ time. One had a moral and religious duty to care for one’s family. Indeed, honoring one’s parents is the 4th Commandment, and one even risked death for disobeying one’s father. You are obligated to take your widowed mother in need into your home. So, in this Lucan passage, Jesus ostensibly undermines those family structures.

Jesus’ words run contrary to those who think entry into the Kingdom of God can be limited to bonds of blood or, by extension, to membership in a particular group, tribe, or nation. When family becomes the decisive criterion for what we consider to be right and good, we can end up justifying or even consecrating practices that lead to a culture of privilege and exclusion: we favor our in-group, whether it be family or nation, which leads to favoritism, patronage, and eventually corruption.

Radical Discipleship

Jesus is demanding that we see beyond these parochial concerns and see others as our brothers and sisters, being sensitive to their lives and

situations, regardless of their racial, cultural, social, or national background. If we don’t do this, we can’t be Jesus’ disciples. His devoted and unconditional love is a free gift given to all and meant for all. If we’re going to follow Jesus, then our hearts must be as expansive as His is.

If Jesus’ words on family are hard to take, He takes it further when He says that unless you hate your own life, you cannot be His disciple (cf. verses 26).

Oh, my, this is not a namby-pamby, kumbaya Jesus, but one who is turning our lives upside down. I wonder if we are ready for this kind of radical discipleship. I think what Jesus is getting at is our continual drive to self-justification because we really think that when push comes to shove, our lives are really about ourselves and everything we do depends exclusively on our efforts and resources. Instead, Jesus is saying that a commitment to follow Him must entail placing Him in the center of our lives and all other allegiances, including our lives, are secondary.

A prayer from Psalm 63, *Ardent Longing for God*, offers us insight into what Jesus may mean. We hear: “Lord, ... Your love is better than life (verses 4). Sit with that. Does it resonate with you? If so, everything in our lives has got to be kicked out of the central place—even our own life—so that Jesus’s love can occupy our very being.



Are you Ready?

Jesus must be loved first and last, and everything in our lives has to find its meaning in relation to Him. Are we ready for that kind of commitment? Are we ready for everything to give way for the Kingdom of God?

We cannot follow Jesus halfway, though we're tempted to do so. We cannot follow Him to some extent, and reserve other parts of our lives for our purposes and agendas. In doing so, we don't make that decisive step to total commitment; as a result, we don't take risks for being a Catholic Christian; we don't follow Jesus' example by helping others, by putting their needs ahead of our private interests. Jesus is getting in our face and challenging us: Live the Gospel and you will live your life, not halfway, but to the full. Live the Gospel, become a committed disciple with no compromise, and you will "give glory to God by being a human being fully alive" (Saint Irenaeus).



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When Blood Extinguished

FIRE

The Roman governor leaned forward, his voice almost pleading: "Just burn a little incense to the emperor's statue, Polycarp. Say 'Caesar is Lord'—just the words. You're eighty-six years old. Do you want to die for refusing to speak three simple words?"

Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna stood firm, chains binding his weathered hands. For more than half a century, he had shepherded Christ's flock, a living link to the apostles themselves. As a young man, he had sat at the feet of John the Beloved, learning directly from one who had walked with Jesus. Now, in 155 AD, the Roman Empire demanded he deny everything.

"Eighty-six years I have served Him," Polycarp replied, his voice steady despite his age, "and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

The governor sighed. The crowd in the amphitheater was already chanting for blood. Christians had become convenient scapegoats for Rome's troubles, and the mob wanted entertainment. "I have wild beasts," the governor warned. "I will throw you to them unless you recant."

"Call them," Polycarp answered simply.

"Then I will have you burned alive!"

Polycarp's eyes blazed with an inner fire stronger than any earthly flame: "You threaten me with fire that burns for an hour and then is



extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of coming judgment and eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why do you delay? Do what you wish."

The soldiers dragged him to the center of the arena. They bound him with ropes. As the flames were lit, the smell of baking bread or precious incense filled the arena instead of burning flesh. Frustrated, the executioner finally thrust a dagger into Polycarp's side, and so much blood poured out that it extinguished the flames.

Even in death, this faithful shepherd bore witness to Christ. The Christians gathered his bones "more precious than jewels" and celebrated the anniversary of his martyrdom as his "birthday"—his birth into eternal life.

Saint Polycarp reminds us that loyalty to Christ cannot be negotiated or compromised, no matter the cost. His final prayer before the flames still echoes: "I bless you for counting me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive a place among the martyrs in the cup of Christ."

