

Proper 8 Sermon
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The past two weeks we have been talking about the kinds of things that Christ asks us to do and the kind of lives he asks us to live if we choose to follow him. We talked about Christ commanding his followers to spread the Gospel throughout the world, treating each new encounter with a community or individual with an open mind. We spoke of Christ commanding us to approach each person in peace, and if they do not return that peace to us, to simply walking away and move on to the next place or person—putting aside our preconceived notions of what each new place or person is like, and not allowing ourselves to become jaded towards people. Last week Christ spoke of our responsibility to own our faith—to be willing to share our faith and not be ashamed of it, even in the presence of people who disagree with us.

What was especially powerful about Jesus asking us to do these things is that he explained to us what we could expect if we did. Had we not heard these readings over the past few weeks and were asked to guess what outcomes we could expect if we were to follow Christ in these ways, we'd probably say something like, "Well if we treat others with an open mind, they'll probably treat us with an open mind as well." Or, "if we are willing to share our faith with others then more people will turn to Christ and follow him." But as those of us who have heard these readings know, those are not the types of reactions Christ told us we could expect. Instead, Christ told his disciples that if they were to go out and preach the Gospel, greeting everyone in peace, that, "they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me...Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name." After urging us to speak the truth and share our faith with others, Christ tells us, "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; and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

These words sound shocking at first. Why is Christ telling us these seemingly terrible things will happen to us if we try to follow Christ in our lives? Some people misunderstand what Christ is trying to tell us here, convinced that Christ is advocating for these things—that Christ is trying to tell us that the persecution and strife among family members that he predicts are good things, but that is not at all the case. Christ, above all else, commanded everyone to love God and love their neighbor. Christ does not seek to spread violence or animosity. However, Christ also was not one to sugarcoat the truth or lie to his followers. Christ knew that if his followers were to spread the gospel and share their faith, they would inevitably come across people, sometimes even their own family members, who would disagree, become angry, or even hateful towards those trying to follow Christ's commands. Christ does not want this to happen, but knows that it certainly will. So he warns his followers of the consequences involved in these commandments, but at the same time is firm that even if others will resort to violence, the work of spreading the Gospel must be done. Though we certainly won't be asked to literally sacrifice a family member for our faith as Abraham was, we very well may be asked to sacrifice our relationship with a family member or other loved one who may not agree with our faith.

After hearing these warnings for the past few weeks, we may begin to feel as if following Christ will end lead to a whole lot of pain and suffering. And Christ has certainly taught us that those are real possible consequences of following him. But today we are reminded that following Christ doesn't always lead to negative consequences. First off, Christ reminds us why it is that we are to treat others with open minds and open hearts. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." In Jesus' eyes, how we treat others is a reflection of what we believe about God. If we treat others with peace, and grace, and mercy, even if they don't deserve it or

disagree with us or don't even like us—that is a testament to the fact that we believe in a God who treats us with peace, and grace, and mercy, even if we don't deserve it or we disagree about our faith or sometimes don't even like others who may think differently about faith. And not only is treating others in the ways Christ asks us to a testament to what we believe about God, it is a way that we live out the truth in which we've come to believe.

In today's Gospel Jesus reminds us of the reward that his followers can expect to receive. As we've been discussing the last few weeks, that reward is not that people will treat us well when we follow Christ's commands or that we will get along with others or even that we will be safe. In fact, we risk all of those things by trying to live into our faith. And we do that because we believe in the Truth that Jesus Christ has taught us, and we are assured of the reward Christ has promised to us.

What is this reward, if it's not easy living or peace or safety? In his letter to the Romans, Paul explains the gift we have been given by the grace of God—the gift of new life in Christ. Before we received this gift we were enslaved to sin—our wrong desires and actions. But Paul explains to us that “The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification.” And what does sanctification lead to? It saves us from the powers of sin and death and opens to us the way of everlasting life. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So we try to live our lives as Christ asks us to live—reaching out to others with open hearts and minds no matter what their background—not forcing our faith on others, but being willing to share our faith and speak the truth of the gospel that we have learned from Christ. And even though Christ warns us that we can expect that strangers and even those whom we love may react to our faithfulness with scorn or anger or even violence, we continue to seek to follow Christ. Because Christ tells us, in spite of all these things, “Do not be afraid.” Living this way acts as an affirmation of our faith, a reflection of what we believe about God, and our assurance of the promises Christ has made for us. Let us challenge ourselves to follow the commandments of Christ, in spite of the difficulties we may face, trusting in the promise of the reward that we will receive. Amen.