

³⁴ *“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.*
³⁵ *For I have come to turn*

*“ ‘a man against his father,
 a daughter against her mother,
 a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—
³⁶ a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’*

³⁷ *“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

⁴⁰ *“He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. ⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” (Matthew 10:34-42)*

There are Pluses and Minuses to Faith

There are pluses and minuses to everything. I’ve said that many times in my life, usually after I’ve had to make some big change. For example, last March, we started livestreaming our church services and for a while, that was the only service we offered during the week. How did you feel about that? Most people could see certain pluses to it: you weren’t running the risk of infection and if we had to be closed, at least we could still hear God’s word every Sunday. And let’s be honest: you didn’t have to get up quite as early. You could come to church in your jammies if you wanted to. If your kids acted up, you weren’t disturbing anybody else. But I think that most of us recognized the minuses, too: you didn’t get to see family and friends at church. If you were tired of your house and you might have just wished you could be here in God’s house. It might not have really felt like church when you were sitting on the couch in your own living room, so it might’ve been hard to pay attention and to get your kids to pay attention. You could probably think of more pluses and minuses if I gave you a little time. That’s true about most of the changes we have to make in life. It even applies to living as Christians in this sinful world. When we look at Jesus’ words in our gospel lesson this morning, we see that **there are pluses and minuses to faith.**

I.

Does it surprise you to hear me say that there are *minuses* to faith? Well, there are. Jesus is always very honest with us about the cost of following him here in this world. That cost constitutes the minuses, the things we lose because we cling to him. **So what do we lose?** In a word: peace. Jesus said, **“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”** That’s hard to hear. We might immediately protest: what about the song the angels sang at Bethlehem, “Peace on earth; good will to men”? What about Isaiah’s prophecy of peace like a river? What about Jesus’ own words after he rose, when he appeared to his disciples twice and said, “Peace be with you.” How can he say that he has not come to bring peace?

It all depends on what we mean by peace. Jesus did not come to bring the kind of peace that so many people think he stands for: the end of war and conflict. Now, Jesus will put an end to all conflict between people and nations but not until he comes again. Between his first and second comings, Jesus gives a completely different kind of peace: our hearts are quiet because we know our sins are forgiven. Jesus enables us to rest secure in his love, even as the world spirals down into ever more evil and conflict.

But until he returns, Jesus himself says that he brings a sword. He brings conflict between people – even between people who should be close to each other. He says, **“A man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”** Why? Because the gospel divides people. I’m sorry, but it’s true. In God’s eyes, there are two kinds of people: those who trust in Jesus and those who don’t. Everyone who rejects the gospel also

rejects people who believe it. And it absolutely does divide families. Parents are disappointed by children who don't go to church and who don't live according to the faith. Siblings don't recognize the person their brother or sister has become since they got involved in that church. Kids who grew up in the church but don't take it seriously make fun of siblings and cousins who do.

Jesus says, **“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”** God has to come first in our lives, even if our family doesn't like it. But how often aren't we tempted to try to find some compromise? We'll go along with what the family wants, because we don't want to have a big fight over it. We just won't tell anybody at church. Parents even tell their kids, “Don't tell the pastor” about some sin that they don't consider to be a big deal. But you can't compromise with sin. Every human being is on one side or the other. You stand with God or you don't.

It's not just about family. Jesus said, **“Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”** What does it mean to take up our cross? It means enduring everything that's hard about being a Christian. It means going through sufferings we could escape, if we'd just think and act more like the world around us. It means changing our goals in life: we live to serve Jesus, not to make the most money or have the most friends or go on the best vacations. Whoever finds his life – whoever devotes his whole life to happiness here – will lose his real life. If our career or our family or our standard of living are the goal of our lives, those things become idols that take the place of God. In the end, we will die and go to hell with all the other idol worshippers.

But whoever loses their life for Jesus – literally, in the sense of dying for him or figuratively, in the sense of putting their faith first in their lives, even if it costs them opportunities for happiness – those people will live with Jesus forever. So, which are we? Are we ready to give up family and friends if they make us choose between Jesus and them? Are we ready to lose opportunities, to make less money, to sacrifice all kinds of things that people love to do because those things get in the way of our faith? My friends, are we ready to give up peace? If you are at peace with this world, you are at war with Jesus. If you are at peace with Jesus, you have to be at war with this world. Are we ready to suffer all that it means to be at war with the world?

I don't know about you, but I'm not, at least not as often as I should be. I love my comfort. I love feeling like people like me. I think of the middle-class American dream as a successful life. How about you? Don't we all have to admit that there is a little idol worshipper in our hearts who wants all those things? Who wants Jesus to wait his turn? Who thinks that we're smart enough and, more importantly, good enough that we can do both, make our dreams our priority in life and still be pretty good Christians? Don't you see? That way of thinking about it would make us idol worshippers. It would put God in second place, a position he never accepts. For every moment of idol worship, we all deserve God's punishment in hell forever.

But Jesus came to give us real peace – peace with God, the peace of knowing our sins are forgiven, no matter how much the world rages against us. Jesus lived a life of perfect commitment to his Father. He sacrificed wealth and comfort and even his own life, so that God can point at us and say we lived the way Jesus did. Jesus died and took all our sins away. He rose, and God has forgiven us for every moment of idol worship. He has forgiven us for loving our families more than we love him. He has forgiven us for trying to compromise instead of simply standing with him. He has forgiven us for pursuing this life and putting our eternal life in danger. And we will live with him forever, no matter what we lose here. And in heaven, we will be certain that it was all worth it.

II.

So, the pluses are better than the minuses. The gains are bigger than the losses. That is what Jesus teaches in our gospel lesson for today. So, **what do we gain?** Again, in a word, a reward. That's what Jesus says. Now, when we think of a reward, we probably think of something someone gives us because we did something good, right? So it would be easy to make this reward something we earned because we did better than anybody else. That's never the Bible's take on it. If you think about it, most of the time, even in this life, a reward is something that someone chooses to give. When I was in college, I lost my wallet at a festival in Milwaukee. The next day, someone called me and told me they had found it. I went to that person's home. It belonged to a family of Asian immigrants who barely spoke English. They lived in a very poor part of town. The dad worked as a janitor and he found my wallet while he was sweeping up. And all the money was still in it. Now, legally, what did I owe him? Nothing. But I chose to give him a reward – the cash that was in my

wallet. I was so happy to have my credit cards and my driver's license back. God doesn't owe us anything. Yet, he chooses to give us a reward in heaven. But it will all be because of his grace and love for us.

That reward is God himself. Jesus said, **"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me."** This is the tale end of the account we've been looking at for the last two weeks. Jesus was sending the twelve out to preach and teach. Those who received them were the people who believed their message. But those disciples didn't decide to go out and preach on their own. Jesus sent them. Receiving them and the gospel meant that they had Jesus himself. With Jesus, came the Father who sent him. Is there any greater reward than eternal life with God?

But Jesus had made a big deal about how much we lose to follow him, so he wanted us to see what we gain, too. So he went on, **"Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward."** A prophet here is a preacher. Rightly understood, I am your prophet here at Peace. Why should you receive me? Because you like me? Because you think I'm interesting? Because I have a nice wife? Those are all natural reasons why people might accept their pastors. But Jesus gives a better reason: because I am a prophet, a preacher. Because God called me to proclaim the gospel to you. When you receive a gospel preacher because Jesus sent him, you receive that preacher's reward. Again, life with Jesus and the Father.

Jesus makes it about more than just receiving pastors and teachers. He says, **"Anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward."** What makes anyone righteous in God's eyes? Faith in Christ. So Jesus is talking about our fellowship here. When we receive each other in his name, we receive the reward of grace he has planned for all of us in heaven. Jesus makes it even more pointed. He says, **"And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."** So every day, as we bring the gospel to each other, as we serve one another in love, as we rejoice in the fellowship that we have in Christ, we renew our reward in heaven. So what does faith gain us? It gains us heaven and eternal life with Jesus. It gains us a lifetime of hearing his word and being strengthened and comforted and renewed while we face the sorrows of this life. It gains us a fellowship of believers who encourage us and love us and stand with us until we all stand together with Jesus. So yes, we gain so much more than we lose.

There are pluses and minuses to everything. I'll be honest, one plus that I enjoyed about the time when we were only livestreaming was the fact that I was done by 9:30 every Sunday. But the minuses were so much greater. Seeing this church empty and missing all of you was hard. Now that we're doing this hybrid thing, where some are still at home and some are here, there are other pluses and minuses. That will be true even when we're back to whatever normal is going to be. In this life, there are pluses and minuses to everything. Thank God the minuses of faith are all the results of sin, so they all will pass away. But the pluses are eternal gifts of God that we will enjoy for endless ages with Jesus. The pluses far outweigh the minuses. Amen.