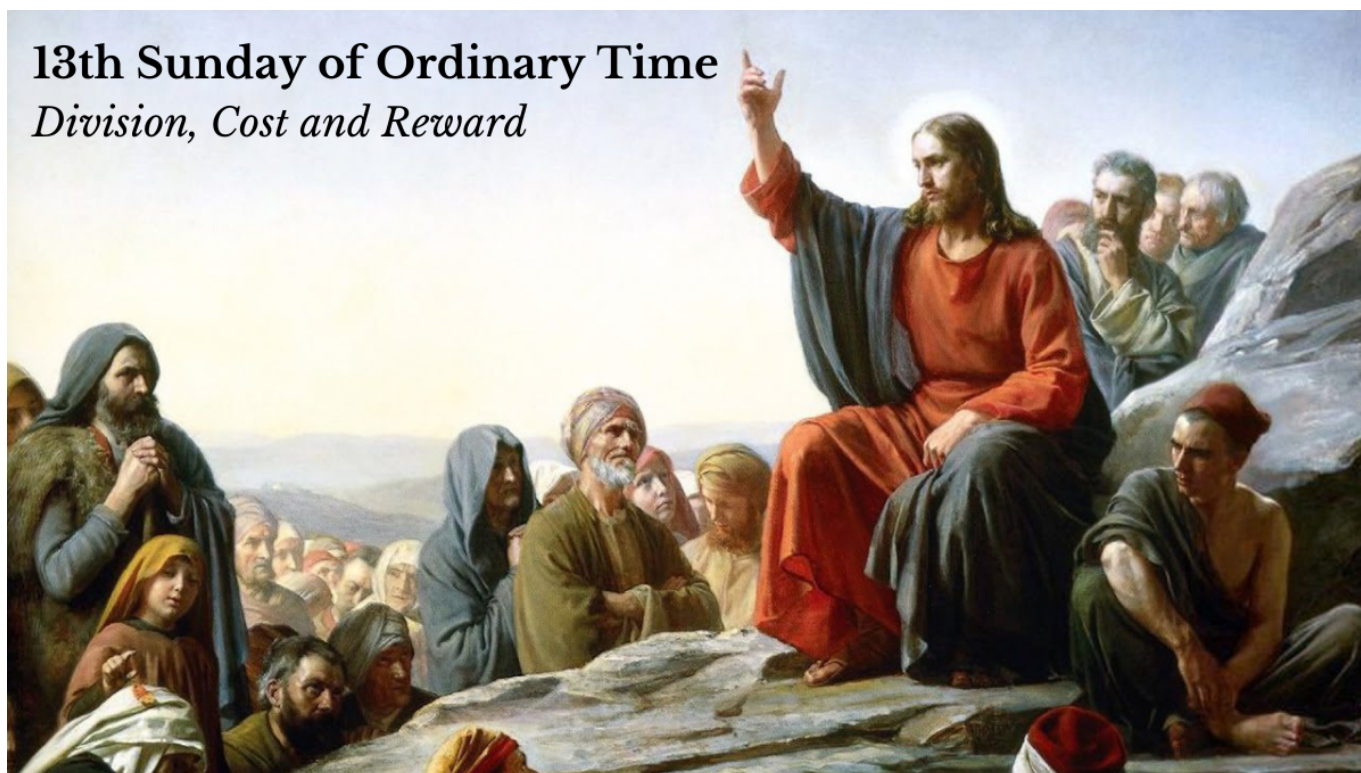


13th Sunday, Ordinary Time, A

³⁷ “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;”³⁸ and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after 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 “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”⁴¹ Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever receives a righteous man because he is righteous will receive a righteous man’s reward.⁴² And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple—amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward.” (Mt 10:37-42)



Context.

By this passage, we are well into the “Missionary Discourse” of Matthew’s gospel. Last week, in discussing the 12th Sunday passage (Mt 10:26-33) we noted that Jesus had sent the disciples on mission: we learn the names of the Twelve, hear of their commission (vv. 5-15), and, also, we hear warnings of the persecutions they will face (vv.16-25). It is after this warning that last week’s gospel, ominously opens with: “*Therefore do not be afraid of them.*” Yes, as Jesus warns, they will share in the life, mission, and suffering as will their Teacher. But, they are to trust the One who cares for the even smallest of creatures. The sparrows, which can be purchased for a pittance, are cared for by God (v.31) during their lifetime alive, but even their death is within the Creator’s care. All happens with “*your Father’s knowledge*” – and so the disciples are to trust.

The gospel for the 12th Sunday ends with a promise of salvation on the last day for those who acknowledge Jesus. The gospel for the 13th Sunday is almost like a “pep talk” encouraging the Twelve (who are still the audience for this discourse). Between the 12th and 13th Sundays, we do not cover several verses, important to the context of the reading:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword. For I have come to set a man ‘against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a

daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's enemies will be those of his household.”
(Mt 10:34-36)

While Jesus is often referred to as the Prince of Peace and his teachings promote peace and reconciliation, he clarifies that his arrival and message may have a disruptive impact on societal and familial relationships. Jesus is simply stating a reality that may occur as a result of his message and the choices individuals make in response to it.

These verses also add a new dimension. The hostilities the Twelve will face is not some byproduct of the mission, it seems to be an intention of the mission. The purpose of Jesus' coming, in part, is *“not peace but the sword.”* We should not be surprised. When a new kingdom is announced, the “old” kingdom does not go quietly into the night. It was the experience of the OT prophets and these NT apostles should not expect a different reception.

All this is asking for a radical loyalty – not just obedience to the teachings, but to witness to Him before the world. The text reflects a real situation in Matthew's church, where people sometimes had to choose between their family and their faith. In some apocalyptic views, the breakdown of family structures is part of the terrors preceding the eschaton. Matthew finds this a meaningful framework within which to interpret the experience of his own church.

The gospels have already introduced the idea of the “true family” of Jesus, those who are already members of *“his household”* in v.25. There Jesus had alluded to the community of disciples as Christ's true family against the charge of possession by Beelzebul and the disruptions of the ties of natural kinship. It is Jesus' affirmation of the Christian community as the family of God where ties are closer and more demanding than natural family ties

Divisions

³⁷ *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;”*³⁸ *and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after 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.*

Jesus is emphasizing that the love and devotion his followers have for him should surpass even the strongest familial bonds. In Jewish culture, family relationships were highly valued and held significant importance. However, Jesus is asserting that his disciples' commitment to him must take precedence over their love for their parents - even above their own children.

The verse does not mean that Jesus disregards the importance of familial relationships or discourages love for family members. Rather, it serves to emphasize the primacy of commitment to Jesus and his teachings. Jesus is calling for a radical reordering of priorities, where disciples should be willing to let go of any attachment that could hinder their complete devotion to him and his mission.

By stating that those who prioritize family relationships over their loyalty to him are *“not worthy of me,”* Jesus sets a high standard for discipleship. He emphasizes that true discipleship requires a wholehearted commitment and a willingness to let go of any competing loyalties.

It is important to note that Jesus' words in this verse are intended to provoke self-examination and challenge his followers to consider the depth of their commitment to him as it points to a recurring theme in Jesus' teachings, where he asks his followers to let go of earthly attachments and prioritize their relationship with God and the kingdom of heaven.

France notes, “Because of the division which Jesus provokes within families (vv. 34–36), true discipleship may bring a conflict of loyalties, and in that case, following Jesus must take precedence over the natural love of family (the Greek word is *phileō*, natural affection, not *agapaō*, the loving commitment which is a Christian characteristic). The Christian may even have to leave his family (19:29). The Lucan parallel (Luke 14:26) calls for ‘hatred’ of the family, but Matthew's version correctly interprets this Semitic idiom

(cf. Gen. 29:31; Deut. 21:15; Mal. 1:2–3) as an expression of prior loyalty or of choice rather than of actual dislike. Jesus calls not for an unloving attitude, but for a willingness to put him first in the concrete situation where the calls of Jesus and of family conflict.”

The “loss” of family is bad enough, but there is also another cost that might be required of the disciples. What is interesting is that all the while Jesus is warning the disciples of the rough times that lay ahead, much of Matthew 9 described the mission of Jesus as a spectacular success. It is natural to think that the disciples expected their mission, in His Name, to be as spectacular. It is as though from “left field” that Jesus then introduces the imagery of the cross. There is no soothing image or metaphor for the cross. The cross is the sign of Roman domination and the power over an occupied people. To take up one’s cross is the description of a death sentence being implemented.

The disciple is asked to place aside his or her own inclinations and interests, as well as those of the natural family, in order to truly follow Jesus. To give up the life one once held (even unto death) is the path to find the life that is truly worth living.

Taking up the Cross

Jesus uses the expression “*take up his cross*” here and more famously in Mt 16:24: “*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*” What is Matthew’s intent in using this expression? Undoubtedly writing some 40 years after the Crucifixion, it echoes the Roman execution methods broadly and the death of Jesus specifically. The cross, in this context, represents the suffering, rejection, and ultimately, the crucifixion that Jesus himself would endure. Taking up one’s cross, therefore, implies a willingness to bear the hardships and challenges associated with following Jesus, even if it leads to personal sacrifice or persecution.

Matthew’s use of the expression “take up his cross” conveys several important messages:

1. **Self-Denial:** To take up one’s cross means to deny oneself, to relinquish personal desires, ambitions, and comforts in order to fully commit to following Jesus. It implies a surrendering of one’s own will to align with God’s purposes.
2. **Identification with Christ:** Taking up the cross signifies an identification with Jesus in his suffering and rejection. It means embracing the path that Jesus walked, even if it entails hardship or persecution. It is a call to imitate his sacrificial love and obedience to God.
3. **Counting the Cost:** By using the image of the cross, Jesus underscores the seriousness and commitment required in discipleship. It is a call to count the cost and understand that following Jesus may involve personal sacrifice, including the possibility of enduring suffering or opposition.
4. **Radical Allegiance:** Taking up the cross signifies a radical allegiance and loyalty to Jesus above all else. It requires placing Jesus at the center of one’s life and being willing to prioritize him over personal comforts, ambitions, or even the expectations of others.

Receiving the one sent

⁴⁰ “*Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.*”

The dialog shifts from a focus on the disciples on a mission, to those they encounter on the way. No doubt they have already met people along the way who enthusiastically greeted Jesus, and were willing to offer support and shelter to the disciples. They are perhaps not committed to the more rigorous demands of discipleship, but there is a positive attitude to the disciples and their mission. Jesus is happy to recognize this less committed level of following him as good and true, and which deserves and will receive its reward.

These verses are not simply a commentary on hospitality. Underlying such sayings, with their repeated implied reference to receiving the one being “sent”, is the principle later enshrined in the Jewish legal

institution of the šālīḥ, the “one sent,” an ambassador or representative who was understood to have the full authority of the one who sent them. It is important to note that the appointment of a šālīḥ must adhere to certain legal requirements and principles within Jewish law. The principal must give explicit authorization to the šālīḥ, specifying the scope and limits of their agency. Additionally, the šālīḥ must act faithfully and in the best interests of the principal, avoiding any conflicts of interest or unauthorized actions. This underpins the commissioning of the Twelve and the instructions Jesus has been giving them in Matthew’s Missionary Discourse.

It is those who recognize such authority in the disciples who will welcome them, just as it is those who recognize Jesus as God’s representative who will welcome him. The unspoken corollary (but spelled out in Luke 10:16) is that those who reject the disciples on their mission are guilty of a far graver fault than merely lack of hospitality to a fellow human being; they are rejecting God. (France, 413)

Prophets and the Righteous

⁴¹ *Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever receives a righteous man because he is righteous will receive a righteous man’s reward.*

In this verse, Jesus outlines the significance and benefits of receiving and supporting individuals who are considered prophets and righteous men. The term "prophet" refers to someone who receives divine revelations and communicates God's messages to the people. In 5:11-12, Jesus has already connected the disciples in their suffering and persecution to “*the prophets who were before you.*”

A "righteous man" denotes a person who lives in accordance with God's commands and exhibits moral uprightness. In Mt 13:17; 23:29 “prophets” and “righteous people” will again be paired as a way of speaking of the godly, there with reference to the period before Jesus’ coming.

The significance goes beyond simple hospitality; it encompasses a genuine acceptance and recognition of the prophet or righteous person and their message. By embracing and supporting them, individuals align themselves with the divine truth and purpose that these individuals represent. This act of reception is an acknowledgment of their authority and righteousness. The benefit is that the reception results in a reward associated with the prophet (or righteous man). Similarly, "*whoever receives a righteous man because he is righteous*" indicates that those who receive and support a righteous individual will be rewarded in accordance with the righteousness of that person. The nature of this reward is not explicitly defined in the verse, but it signifies a spiritual or divine recompense. It implies that by honoring and supporting individuals who have a close relationship with God and embody righteousness, one becomes a participant in their spiritual blessings and receives a share in the rewards associated with their mission.

The Little Ones

⁴² *And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple—amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward.*”

Jesus emphasizes the importance of even the smallest act of compassion by mentioning the offering of a cup of cold water. Water is essential for sustenance and refreshment, especially in a hot climate, and providing a cup of cold water to someone in need can alleviate their discomfort and signify care and concern. By using this example, Jesus highlights that even the most seemingly insignificant act of kindness can have profound significance in the eyes of God.

The expression “*because he is a disciple*” indicates that the act of providing assistance is specifically tied to the discipleship of Jesus. It implies that when individuals extend support to those who are followers of Christ, they are not only aiding their physical needs but also affirming and supporting their commitment to Jesus and his teachings.

Jesus follows the statement with the phrase “*he will surely not lose his reward,*” suggesting that God will not overlook or forget the kindness shown to those who are considered “little ones.” It implies that such acts will be rewarded, either in this life or in the life to come. This verse affirms the belief that God acknowledges and values acts of compassion and generosity, promising a spiritual or divine recompense for those who engage in them.

There is sometimes a tendency to read “little ones” as to imagine children. But this is (apart from 18:6-14) a manner in which Jesus identified the disciples. France (415-6) writes: “Compare also the designation of true disciples as ‘little children’ in contrast with the ‘wise and intelligent’ in 11:25. So here there is no indication of a reference to children as such (though the saying would of course be applicable to a child no less than to an adult) or to any special sub-group; all disciples are ‘little ones.’ Those who go out to represent Jesus in a hostile society have no status, and may easily be pushed aside. It is only when people recognize the special significance of these ‘little ones’ through their relationship to Jesus and to ‘the one who sent him’ that they are willing to take them seriously, and so to welcome them with acts of basic hospitality. The cup of cold water is an essential though inexpensive provision in a hot climate, an act of expected hospitality as well as of kindness. It is not much, but even that little (‘just one,’ representing *monon*, ‘only,’ emphasizes how little it is), because of the attitude it represents, is enough to bring the reward.”

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