

## Jesus Divides the Earth (Matt. 10:34–42)

*By Jacob D. Gerber*

So far in Matthew 10, Jesus has instructed his disciples about their mission to reach the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:6) and warned them of the great dangers that they will face (Matt. 10:16–25). In the previous section, Jesus drew one surprising conclusion to inform their reaction to these dangers: “So have no fear of them” (Matt. 10:26). Now, Jesus draws another surprising conclusion: this mission will effectively divide the whole earth between those who receive Jesus, and those who reject Jesus. Therefore, *Jesus defines the right side of history*.

### The Sword Dividing the Earth (Matt. 10:34–36)

In v. 34, Jesus levels with his disciples about the extraordinary effects of their mission: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” If the disciples were still clinging to any hope of escaping discomfort, trouble, and trials in following Jesus, their Lord here puts that hope to rest. As R. T. France writes, “To agree to follow Jesus is to sign away all rights to a quiet life of self-determination.”<sup>1</sup> The disciple of Jesus cannot expect a life of tranquility, but must grapple from the beginning with the fact that following Jesus will mean charging directly into conflict and combat with the world.

This warning carries with it two extraordinary implications. First, by stating that Jesus has “come” for a specific purpose, he implies his pre-existence before birth.<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ mission is not one that he developed gradually during his youth and adolescence, under his own impulse, but one that had been planned from before his birth—and even from eternity past. Second, Jesus makes a breathtaking claim to his own importance in this verse. Very few people become a true dividing line in a culture in their own time, and fewer still become a dividing line after their death. Jesus here insists that the whole of human history will be defined by everyone’s relationship to *him*, whether as his follower or as his enemy. There are no other options, and there is no way to make peace between the two camps. Many will convert from Jesus’ enemies into his followers, and some ostensible followers will fall away and harden to become his enemies. Jesus, however, is an antithesis who exists at absolute enmity with the desires, values, and pursuits of this world.

Still, this idea carries with it an important implication for the success of Jesus’ mission in the world. Lenski writes this:

The idea is this: if Christ had not come, the earth would have gone on undisturbed in its sin and its guilt until the day of its doom. Now Christ came to take away that sin and that guilt.

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<sup>1</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 408.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 265–66.

At once war resulted, for in their perversion men clung to their sin, fought Christ and the gospel, and thus produced two hostile camps. Christ foresaw this effect and willed it. Emphatically he declared that he came to throw a sword on the earth. Better the war and the division, saving as many as possible, than to let all perish in their sin.<sup>3</sup>

The enmity in the world around the battle line centered upon Jesus is not ultimately bad. Certainly, opposition to Jesus is bad, but while sin remains in the world, people will oppose Jesus. Instead, the enmity in the world is a result of Jesus' work to rescue the world from sin—a sign that the cure is working.

Nevertheless, Jesus does not want us to underestimate the pain we will experience in this opposition: “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 a person's enemies will be those of his own household” (vv. 35–36). This passage echoes the prophetic curse declared to David because of his sin with Bathsheba: “Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house” (2 Sam. 12:10). In David's life, this curse of the sword never departing from his house eventually led to one of his daughters raped by one of his sons; to the murder of that son by another son; to a coup against his life and his kingdom led by that murdering son; and to another attempted coup by a different son to displace Solomon, David's beloved son, as the king to succeed David to the throne. Throughout church history, Christians who have experienced the sword within their own household have been betrayed, disowned, beaten, raped, and murdered by family members because they have converted to faith in Jesus.

## The Side of the World (Matt. 10:37–39)

If Jesus has come to divide the earth, then there every person faces two possible choices: either we will side with the world, or we will side with Jesus. In vv. 37–39, Jesus warns us against siding with the world. Once again, he draws on intimate family relationships to underscore the cost of allegiance to Jesus: “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” (v. 37). The point is not that we should now sever all family relationships. Rather, the point is that we must love Jesus even more than we love our most beloved family members. As difficult as these words are for us to hear, we should keep in mind that these would have been even more offensive to the original audience: “He assumes that there will be love between parents and children, but claims for himself a higher place in his disciples' affection than that which they accord to their nearest and dearest on earth, and that in a society that held it a dreadful thing to put anyone higher than one's parents.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, to be “worthy” of Jesus is not to earn something from Jesus, but suffer for his sake.

Next, Jesus makes his point even sharper: “And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (v. 38). Crucifixion was a horrifying fate that left a deep stigma not only on its victims, but also on the family and friends of the victim. Carrying one's cross was only the beginning

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<sup>3</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 415.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 267.

of such torture: “that public disgrace, as well as physical suffering, began not when the condemned man was fixed to the cross, but with the equally public procession through the streets in which the victim had to carry the heavy cross-piece of his own gibbet, among the jeers and insults of the crowd.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus is saying that we must die to ourselves in order to be associated with him. Furthermore, although Jesus has not said much about the cross yet, he is here foreshadowing the way in which we must be humiliated in the eyes of the world through our association with him. Simon of Cyrene knew the weightiness of this worldly shame—and the glory of this heavenly honor—firsthand, when he was drafted by a Roman soldier to carry Jesus’ cross (Mark 15:21).

Jesus then summarizes the great paradox of his division of the earth: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (v. 39). By clinging to our lives in this world, we will lose the life that we cherish. On the other hand, by losing our lives for Christ’s sake, we will find true life. Yes, one may choose to reject Jesus from a desire to preserve his or her life from persecutors; however, this road ultimately will lead nowhere except to destruction.

### **The Side of Jesus (Matt. 10:40–42)**

While Jesus has dire warnings for those who would side against him, he extends generous grace to those who side with him, even in the smallest ways. So, those who receive Jesus’ disciples will be credited as having received Jesus (v. 40a). Furthermore, those who receive Jesus (even by receiving Jesus’ disciples) will be credited as receiving “him who sent me”—that is, as receiving God the Father (v. 40b). Furthermore, this *receiving* will be rewarded: “The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward” (v. 41). Jesus’ disciples would have believed that prophets and righteous men would be rewarded greatly; however, it would have been surprising to hear that anyone who *received* the prophets and the righteous men would share in that same kind of reward.

Jesus extends this logic even further to encompass not those who are great in the kingdom of heaven, but those who are seemingly insignificant:<sup>6</sup> “And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (v. 42). These little ones, then, are ordinary disciples, and Jesus promises that anyone who receives even the most insignificant of his disciples will certainly be rewarded.<sup>7</sup> Why should such a small kindness as extending a cup of cold water to a Christian receive such an ample reward? The answer is clear when we remember the whole context of this passage: every individual exists on one of two sides in this conflict that Jesus will spark on the earth. Therefore, those who bless disciples as disciples of Jesus will do so only because they too are disciples of Jesus. As his disciples, Jesus will lavishly bless them.

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<sup>5</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 410.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 271.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 300.

## Discussion Questions

1. How do we make sense of the Prince of Peace telling us that he did not come to bring peace, but to cast a sword upon the earth (v. 34)? What is the nature of the sword that Jesus came to bring? Where does this sword divide the earth? Where have you experienced division because of following Christ? What do you know of church history and the persecuted church around the world, and their experience of this warfare?
2. What does Jesus say about our relationships with our families in comparison to our relationship with him (v. 37)? What does this tell us about how we should approach our day-to-day family relationships? What does Jesus mean when he speaks of people who are not “worthy” of him (vv. 37–38)? In what sense do we lose our life by finding it, and find our life by losing it for Jesus’ sake?
3. How does Jesus’ extraordinary grace and kindness show by the way he treats those who relate positively to him in the most minimal ways (vv. 40–42)? How does he reward those who show kindness to his people? How does even the smallest act of kindness to the least of his disciples receive Christ’s reward? What is Jesus telling us about the nature of siding with him and, therefore, against the world?
4. What happens when Christians are unprepared for persecution? Why do Christians still struggle when they experience persecution, as though they were unfamiliar with passages like this? What makes persecution so hard for us to endure? How does Jesus work to bolster our faith in him for the trials we will face? What part of this section most encourages you in the difficulties that you are facing?