

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 5
July 2, 2023
Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft
Christian: One who loves God above all
—Matthew 10:34-42

³⁴ “Do not think that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ A man’s enemies will be the members of his own household. 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 Whoever does not take up 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 “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward. Whoever receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. ⁴² Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink because he is my disciple—Amen I tell you—he will never lose his reward.”

A woman at this year’s Super Bowl wore a split jersey. One side of her jersey was for the Philadelphia Eagles. The other side was for the Kansas City Chiefs. Typically, this would be a ‘no-no.’ No one wants a fence-sitter in sports. Choose a team. Then, root for that team. People did not have a problem with this woman ‘sitting on the fence’ though. This is because she had a son on each team. Donna Kelce, the mother of Travis and Jason Kelce, stole the show in many ways. Although she was ‘sitting on the fence,’ people liked to follow her. Her sons were accomplishing something great, so people understood her inability to choose a side.

Are you familiar with the term fence-sitter? A fence-sitter is a person that stays toward the middle in a dispute. The fence-sitter does not choose a side. It was okay for Donna Kelce to be a fence-sitter during the Super Bowl. Usually, it is not okay to sit on the fence during a sporting event. Certainly, though, a Christian cannot be a fence-sitter.

Our new sermon series, ‘Define: Christian,’ considers what it means to be a Christian. Today, we see that a Christian is not a fence-sitter. A **Christian is one who loves God above all things**. Loving God above all things is not always easy, but it is worth it.

Although we are in a new sermon series, we continue in the same section of Scripture that we were in last two weeks. Jesus spoke to his disciples as he was about to send them out to preach the gospel.

Here, Jesus said something shocking. He said that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword. Jesus’ statement is a dialectical negation. Much like how a Christian might say, “Christmas is about Jesus, not presents,” and then have many presents under a Christmas tree. Jesus did not mean that he did not bring any peace. The proclamation of the angels at Jesus’ birth was true. There was peace on earth. The force of what Jesus said here was that he did not come to bring only peace, but even more, he came to bring a sword. The sword was the divisive truth about who Jesus was and what he came to do.

Here, Jesus spoke the truth about what it means to be a Christian. A **Christian is one who loves God above all things** which is not always easy. Jesus spoke about how those who follow him would face division in their families; father against son... daughter against mother... daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. People in the same household would become enemies.

Why would it be this way for Christians? Because people won’t put up with sound doctrine. People hated Jesus. They would hate his followers too. This division would even happen within families. According to Jesus, a Christian is not a fence-sitter, who just wants to go along to get along. No, a Christian is a person who is willing to lose relationships with parents and children because of her dedication to the Lord. **A Christian loves God above all** even though it is not always easy.

Jesus spoke about how Christians would bear a cross. This is striking for us who know that Jesus died on the cross. When the disciples first heard this, they would not have had that first thought. Instead, they would have heard Jesus say that his followers were to take up the instrument for torturous, reached, shameful death. **Being a Christian, namely loving God above all**, is not always easy.

I started by mentioning the Super Bowl in this sermon. Think of those who have success in football. Being a football player is not always easy. In a couple of months, ask your boys about their practices. They need to do hard work. They need to hit the weights. They need to do the sprints. They need to practice outside in the heat wearing full pads. Football is not always easy, but if they want to have the fun and glory of Friday Night or even a Super Bowl, they need to do the hard work. Being a football player is not always easy.

Similarly, **the nature of being a Christian, which is loving God above all**, is not always easy. Football players must do hard things. Christians must do hard things.

Christians, are you willing to embrace the pain? Are you willing to do hard work? Are you willing to be a Christian even when it is not easy? I bet you are familiar with the division that Jesus spoke about. If you love God above all, you must be willing to go through the pain of doing that, even in family situations.

Are you willing to love God more than your children? Your child is grown now. You know that she is living a sinful life. Your child is living with her fiancée. This is an abomination of God's order. This is a mockery of God's institution of marriage. Are you ready to love God above all? Are you ready to call out sin? Too often, it seems that people just want to keep the 'peace' with these loved ones.

Consider also, Jesus said a Christian should be willing to lose his life because of his love for God above all things. Are you willing to lose your life? Maybe you can say that in the hypothetical. Let's get real though. Are you willing to lose your life? How about your job? How about your reputation? With pronouns behind names, ESG scores, and cultural pressure to affirm and accept, are you ready to take a stand for your faith that could lead to a lost job? Are you ready to take a stand for your faith that could lead to a tarnished reputation? A Christian is called to love God above all, which is not always easy. Are you ready to go through difficult times?

Ultimately, these are first commandment issues. Have you failed to fear, love, and trust in God above all things? Have you loved your child, life, job, or comfortability more than you love God? If so, you must repent of this sin.

Then, look to Jesus. He faced difficulties for you. During Jesus' earthly ministry, many people left him. In the last hours before his crucifixion, many of his disciples abandoned him. Jesus faced tremendous difficulty for you. Jesus was mocked. Jesus was scorned. Jesus was beaten. Jesus took up his cross for you. Jesus did all this as your substitute. He truly upheld the first commandment in your place. Then, he gave his life on the cross as a sacrifice for your sins. In Jesus, you are forgiven. You are forgiven for failing to love God above all things. You are forgiven for all your sins.

Moved by Jesus' love, let's now do the hard things. Living a life that reflects our love for God will not always be easy. There will not always be peace, but we are moved by the eternal peace that comes from Jesus. As Christians, let's do what Christians are called to do and carry our crosses. As Christians, we are willing to lose relationships. As Christians, we are willing to lose social status. As Christians, we are willing to lose jobs. As Christians, we are willing to lose our lives. We are willing to do this because we have eternal peace in Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus told the disciples that **being a Christian, who loves God above all**, would not always be easy. That is true. **Being a Christian, one who loves God above all** is worth it.

As Jesus sent his disciples out, he said whoever receives you receives me. Those who received the disciples' word and supported them were receiving and supporting Jesus. Whoever received Jesus received the Father who sent him. This is as Jesus said, "*I and the Father are one.*" (John 10:30 EHV)

Here Jesus talked about three divisions. These were prophets, righteous men, and little ones. These are three names for the same group, the disciples. Those who received and supported the disciples would receive a reward. Now, this wasn't because of their amazing work. Hearing someone's word and giving someone water in all reality isn't that big of a deal. Instead, God's rewards are motivated by his grace.

Jesus was clear here. **Being a Christian** is worth it. Those who receive God's Word and believe it, that is those who are brought to faith by the Holy Spirit, receive a wonderful reward from God. This is an everlasting reward. Christians have the reward of eternal life in heaven. **Being a Christian, namely one who loves God above all**, is worth it.

Consider once again the football player, when he stands on the field with confetti falling... when he wears the championship ring... when raises the banner... all that initial hard work was worth it. He earned it.

This is where the football analogy fails. The football players earn their rewards. The championship, the ring, the banner: these are all earned on a field. A Christian does not earn his eternal reward. The reward of the Christian is a gift of God's grace. **Being a Christian may be hard at times**, but it is worth it.

Maybe you are tempted to look at life as a Christian and say this is not worth it. You see the success of the unbelievers. You see the hardships of Christians. Then, you think to yourself 'Is this worth it?' If you are tempted to think this way. Go read Psalm 73. Asaph, the Psalmist had the same temptation. Until he came to the house of the Lord. There, he remembered the peril of the unbeliever. He also remembered the blessedness of a believer. God's nearness was good for him. God was his portion forever.

Christian, this is true for you. God is with you. During these difficulties, remember that the Holy Spirit remains in your heart. During these difficulties, remember that Jesus promised to be with you always. During these difficulties,

remember that God fills all things. Also, remember the blessed promises that you have in Jesus. Because Jesus lived, died, and rose, you will live forever in paradise. God has the crown of life for you. "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10b EHV)

Let the gracious reward that Jesus gives, move you through this life. When things are hard, be comforted by true bliss. When life feels restless, be comforted by true peace. **Being a Christian, one who loves God above all is worth it!**

What does it mean to be a Christian? This means you are not a fence-sitter. You are one who loves God above all. It will not always be easy. There will be difficulties in family, work, and life. When you fail to stand for your love of God, Jesus grants forgiveness to you. Now, let the grace of Jesus move you forward to live as one who loves God above all. Amen