

Our gospel began with one of Jesus' more disturbing statements: in order to follow him we have to "hate" our families and our very lives. Such hatred would violate the fourth commandment to honor our parents and it would violate the second great commandment (found in Leviticus) to love our neighbors as ourselves—if we hate ourselves, are we not also going to hate our neighbors? It would violate the commandment given to the apostles at the Last Supper which was to love one another. Paul's teachings about community and family harmony don't make sense if Jesus' words were to be understood literally. There are two things which will help us understand the deeper meaning of Jesus' words: the cultural context and the relationship of the first part of the teaching to what Jesus said at the end of the teaching.

Culturally, this teaching could be considered idiomatic. An idiom is a phrase or expression whose meaning cannot be understood from the literal meanings of its individual words. We use idioms all the time. "My algebra exam was a piece of cake but I crashed and burned in Latin." Translation: I did well on my algebra test but I failed in Latin." Jesus was also speaking in a less than literal way. In the cultural context and in the exaggerated way in which Jesus was teaching, "hatred" is an expression of preference for one thing over another. The more literal expression could be "in order to follow me, you must love me more than you love anyone or anything else." This does line up with the rest of scripture, including both of the two great commandments: love God with your entire being and love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus used this exaggerated language to warn us about the challenges of discipleship which is what the second half of the teaching is about. Jesus is warning us that following him will not be a nice stroll along the sea of Galilee or through an idyllic mountain meadow. It is more like a run through a zombie-infested jungleland where those who lose their way will wind up wounded, not even dead. To follow Jesus means we will be walking the way of the cross and he wants us to understand that before we make the commitment. What is the way of the cross? It is the way of self-sacrifice. It is the way of self-sacrifice because Jesus himself gave his life in exchange for ours. Because of his sacrifice he was glorified by his Father and now sits at his Father's right hand in heaven. If we can walk the way of the cross in Jesus footsteps, we also will be glorified and share in the glories of heaven.

Practically speaking, how do we love Jesus with our entire being AND love our neighbors as ourselves? The saints might have something to teach us about that. We celebrated Mother Teresa on Friday. She gave her heart to the poor of

the world and in doing so gave everything to Jesus. How? By—as she said—serving Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor. She loved God by loving her neighbor; she saw the presence of Jesus in all people, regardless of their faith, race, culture, or socio-political-economic standing.

Someone else who loved God through his neighbors was our newest saint, Pier Giorgio Frassati. He fiercely loved Jesus, but that love did not diminish his love for his family and friends. In fact, one of the reasons Saint John Paul II instructed us to “get to know” Pier Giorgio was that, as he said, “The life of this “normal” young man shows that we can be holy by living our friendships, studies, sports and service to the poor in a constant relationship with God.” How did Pier Giorgio do this? First, like Mother Teresa, he looked for the presence of Christ in all people, especially the poor and served Jesus by serving them. Second he always tried to lead people closer to Jesus by being a good influence on those he encountered, especially his friends and family. If there was a mountain climbing excursion planned for a Sunday, he always made sure he and his friends could go to Mass; if Mass wasn’t possible, he wouldn’t go. God came first. Within his family, he always tried to put the good of the family above his own desires, meaning he gave up many of his dreams because he believed doing so would be the best thing for his family. Sometimes he made sacrifices directly for God—giving up those climbing trips if he couldn’t go to Mass; other times he sacrificed to God through his friends and family by putting their needs ahead of his own.

This gospel isn’t about hatred; it is about love. Who and what do we love the most? If material things are our top priority, then we have things upside down. However, if we use those things—including money and power—to serve others, then it is possible to serve God and show our love for him through our love for our friends and family. Finally, that love comes from God. We are capable of love because God first loved us. When we directly give our love to God or when we love him through our neighbors, friends, and family—and, yes, our enemies too—we are only returning to God what he first gave to us. The beautiful thing with this type of love, though, is that the more we give it away, the more we get back in return.

Saints Mother Teresa, Carlo Acutis, and Pier Giorgio Frassati, pray for us.