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**Claimed by Christ**

A baptismal sermon delivered at the Calvary Baptist Church of New Haven**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

April 20, 2019

**Matthew 10:34-39:** Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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. 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. And whoever 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.

**Introduction:**

In a short while, we will witness four baptisms. And what better day to witness and celebrate this miraculous event than on Easter Sunday, the day when Christ rose again from the empty tomb? As a reminder for the church, baptism is the believers’ response to Christ’s call: to come and follow him. This response comes in the sacramental form of being plunged beneath the waters and then being raised above it. And what we are witnessing in that moment is the dramatic, physical representation of the spiritual reality that one is now dying to sin and now being raised to new life in Christ, that is, his resurrection life.

However, as we sit here today, it is crucial for us to remember that this response is never something that is self-initiated. In other words, it is not a *human* response. For the invitation to new life is solely given by Christ himself; therefore, one can only be moved to respond only if one has been given the power to do so by *God’s grace*. And so, because our baptismal candidates have chosen to take this exciting next step in their faith, that can only then mean that God has truly bestowed his grace upon them.

Now because this is a *baptismal* sermon, this is obviously directed towards those who are about to be baptized. Nonetheless, this sermon is also for the church, because while we remember that baptism is not solely a human response, we also remember what is just as important: that baptism is not solely an *individual* response. You all have played an incalculable role in bringing them here, and it’s because of your faithfulness to them that they have received and experienced the grace of the gospel, and are now about to be baptized. But even after today, please remember that they will continue to need you for strength, support, encouragement, prayer, and guidance, and they will need you to hold them accountable to the commitments they’re about to make.

**Address to the Catechumen:**

So, now speaking to the baptismal candidates: You must know that having received and experienced the grace of God *means* that he has made an extraordinary claim upon you and your life. And so, by receiving baptism, what you are doing is you are submitting to that claim. In this short time that we have, I want to help you understand more fully the nature of that divine claim, so that way you are better able to understand the significance, as well as the weightiness, of what you’re about to do.

This claim is most pronounced at the end of our text (in v.39), where Jesus says, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” In the context of this passage, and Matthew’s gospel more broadly, what Jesus is saying is that if you want to be his disciple and follow him you have to renounce *everything* you once built your identity and life upon. All of your hopes, all of your dreams, all of your wishes and desires. All of these things you must deny if you are to follow him.

So, practically speaking, what this means is you will literally no longer be able to choose for yourself the college you’ll go to, the career you’ll end up in, the amount of money you’ll make, the person you’ll marry, the people you’ll spend your time with, the way you’ll make use of your gifts, talents, and resources, and so forth. All of these things are surrendered over to Christ, and from here on out you go wherever he leads you. *You must lose your life for his sake*. Therefore, Christ is the Lord and Master over your life, not you. Christ is the Ruler of your heart, not you. And besides him there is no other.[[2]](#footnote-2) In Christ, you have now been claimed as one who submits to the fact and the reality of his Lordship. That is the claim made upon you.

However, this self-denial is a good thing, because Jesus says by losing your life for his sake you will actually find it. Let me put it to you another way. If you were to go about your previous life, living the way you wanted to, Jesus says you would indeed lose your life, because you would not be what God created you to be. Only by fully entrusting yourself to Jesus, and by allowing *him* to direct your path, he says will you find your life, because only in Christ has God revealed to you your true meaning and destiny. And the fact that you are here today means you already know this, and it means you already know that he is worthy and that he can be trusted. And should you ever doubt this, remember to look to the cross, the place where Jesus has most clearly demonstrated his love for you.

Having said that, let’s be clear about one thing. Your commitment to following Jesus does not guarantee safety, prosperity, health, order, or stability.[[3]](#footnote-3) In fact, Jesus says your life, to some degree or another, will be constituted by suffering, for unless you carry your cross you are not worthy of him. To be sure, the cross is not an emblem of the American dream, and if anyone tells you otherwise you can be sure you are speaking to an idolater. Rather, the cross is an emblem of persecution for those who choose to live for God in a world that has rejected him.[[4]](#footnote-4) So, you should expect suffering to come, because what you’re doing in baptism is you are entering into your Lord’s sufferings as well. In this, we see that Christ does not guarantee his disciples earthly happiness nor the fulfillment of their worldly desires. He only guarantees one thing, and that one thing being far better than anything else: himself. This is his promise to you: that he will be with you always no matter where he leads you and no matter what you go through in life.

I now want to state explicitly what has only been implied thus far. When you proclaim throughout your life that ‘Jesus Christ is Lord,’ don’t ever think you are spewing out some kind of sentimental, religious platitude. By saying this, you are acknowledging that Christ is the *only* one who has the *ultimate* claim and authority upon your life, and in so doing you, again, submit yourself to the reality of his Lordship. Because of this, Jesus says you will inevitably create enemies by choosing to follow him, since there are others who will want to make similar sorts of claims on your life, whether it be friends, teachers, or broader society. In this particular passage, though, Jesus specifically points to parents. No doubt, your parents have within their hearts a vision for what it looks like for you to live a good, happy, and successful life – and oftentimes it comes from a good and sincere place. But even if their visions are good and sincere – or even religious – their visions will sometimes compete with the vision that Christ has for you.

But Jesus says, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me…” In Luke 14:26, he puts it more bluntly. There Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not *hate* his own father and mother… he cannot be my disciple.” Now we, of course, know that Jesus is not being literal in this passage. For one, he tells us elsewhere to honor our mother and father, and for another we know that Jesus often speaks in hyperbole. So, Jesus is not saying you should literally hate mother and father; rather, what he is saying is that your love for him should be so intense and so great that to those looking in from the outside it would *seem* as if you hate your mother and father. Thus, discipleship is not blindly doing the bidding of your parents, and following their visions for your life. That is not what it means to honor them according to scripture. Discipleship means that you obey your parents insofar as their vision for your life comes underneath and matches the vision that Christ has for your life. Should it not, Jesus says you can still honor them, but only by following him first.

**Address to Parents/Loved Ones:**

For the parents in this room, I suspect upon hearing this some of you have become unsettled. But the Lord has a word for you too. He says, “Whoever loves… son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” So, for you as well, the love you have for Jesus ought to outweigh the love you have for your child, so that the love you have for your child pales in comparison. I know this is a hard thing to hear, especially for parents who are immigrants. Not because I myself am a parent or an immigrant, but because I have immigrant parents who have had to give up their wishes and their dreams for their child so that I could respond to God’s call on my life and the claim he’s made upon me.

When I told my parents that God was calling me to pursue theology and pastoral ministry, it was incredibly hard for them, and as my parents they had to go through the painful process of learning to let go of their son. Surely, when they gave me permission to become baptized, they never suspected that it would’ve led to this. But we worked through it together as a family, and in that process I had to gently remind them that such is the cost of following Christ, and I asked them to ask themselves who they love more: me or Jesus. And I am grateful that they said Jesus.

I am deeply grateful that God has gifted me with parents who have made it easier for me to follow him, because I know not everyone who is being baptized, or will be baptized, has it this easy. And this is why Jesus says enemies will be created even within households because some parents, or even some children, will not make it easy for the other to follow Christ. So, to the parents and loved ones, I hope you understand what it is you’re allowing your child to do by becoming baptized today. You are entrusting your son and daughter to the Lord, and you are now relinquishing your hopes and dreams for their life now for the hopes and dreams of Christ. Which means that you might have to forgo your good desires to see them go off to prestigious schools, pursue lucrative salaries, or live lives that are free from harm.

Thus, as parents, you will constantly be confronted by this question: Will you make it easier for your child to follow Christ, or will you make it harder for them? But the real question is: Will you entrust your child to Jesus, who though he doesn’t promise safety for them does promise that he is worthy and good? Do you trust that Jesus’ love for your child is far greater, far purer, and far more consistent than your love is for them?

**Exhortation:**

This is why baptism is not a sole endeavor, and why baptism has implications that reach far beyond those who are being baptized. Indeed, there is great reward and immense joy in following Christ, but it comes at the cost of our selfish hopes and our selfish dreams.

Candidates, you have been claimed by Christ, and your baptism today is your acknowledgement of that. In a short while, you will publicly declare to your friends, to your family, to this church, and to the universal body of Christ, that Jesus is your only Lord and Savior, and that you will live for him and serve him alone. As you lose your life for his sake, know that we, too, will lose our lives with you, so that the glory of God would be manifest throughout your life. And by conferring upon you this sacrament, the church is now making a promise to you as well: that to the best of our ability, and by God’s sheer grace, we will help carry you home. On this joyous day, we express to God our utmost gratitude that we now get the privilege to run this race alongside you.

But as you proceed in life, you will no doubt encounter moments of discouragement, doubt, despair, and hardship. In such moments, though, I hope you will look back on this day, and remember your baptism and what it represents. Your baptism is first and foremost not about you. It is about Christ. And he now gives to you the gift of baptism, to invite you into his kingdom, to embrace you in his arms, and to seal for you his promises: that though you are faithless he will be faithful still. To the end of the age.

1. This sermon is dedicated to Sijin Ren, Connie Xiao, Daniel Xiao, and Allen Liu, who are living testimonies of the power of the resurrection, the hope of Christ. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Isaiah 44:6-8: “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last; *besides me there is no [other]*. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen. Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.’” Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 109. See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Being Awakened to Life,” from *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* Vol. 2, ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 220-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)