

Commentary Resource
Matthew 10:34-42
The New American Commentary
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(b) *Putting God above Family (10:34–39)*

³⁴ “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn

“ ‘a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—³⁶ a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’

³⁷ “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and anyone who does not take 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.

10:34–36 The inferior text of Luke 2:14 in the KJV has led generations of people celebrating Christmas to promote the false notion that Christ brings “peace on earth, good will to men.” Instead, Jesus promises *peace on earth to men of good will*, namely, to “those on whom his favor rests.” To those who welcome him, he offers *eirēnē* (“peace”—from the Hebrew concept of *shālôm*). Such peace brings the wholeness of restored relationships with God (Rom 5:1) and interpersonal reconciliation within the community of believers (Eph 4:3). Jesus’ peace does not preclude wars between nations, conflicts among unbelievers, or the persecution of Christians which Jesus has already predicted.³⁸ In fact, not only does Jesus not come to eradicate all human conflict but he actually promises hostility (v. 34). His ministry proved so confrontational that he either attracted people to himself or visibly repelled them. The “sword” of v. 34 is therefore metaphorical.³⁹

Hostility against Christians results not from their making themselves obnoxious but from the sad fact that, despite the peacemaking principles of 1 Pet 2:12–3:22, sometimes the gospel so alienates unbelievers that they lash out against those who would love them for Christ’s sake. “Turn ... against” (v. 35) is a bit mild for a verb (*dichazō*) that refers to incitement to revolt and rejection of authority (i.e., *to sow discord*). The family members of vv. 35–36 represent the closest of human relationships. In each case Jesus implies that an unbeliever is initiating the hostility against a believing family member. Verse 36 generalizes to make plain that the hostility is not necessarily limited to the three pairs of relationships chosen. Verses 35–36 reiterate the language of v. 21 and allude even more extensively to Mic 7:6, a text that was applied to the messianic age in at least some Jewish circles (*b. Sanh.* 97a).

10:37–39 Human relationships in this age may thus prove life threatening, but even at best they remain fallible and inconsistent. Hence, even what should be the best and closest of human relationships, in the family, ought never stand in the way of serving God (v. 37).⁴⁰ “Worthy” here carries more the traditional sense of *deserving* and refers in context to those whom Jesus will accept. Theological syntheses must balance Eph 6:1–4 and 1 Tim 5:8 with teachings like these. Devotion to family is a cardinal Christian duty but must never become absolute to the extent that devotion to God is compromised.

³⁸ Cf. Schweizer (*Matthew*, 251): “God’s Kingdom has never been the peace of the false prophets who cry, ‘Peace, peace!’ while avarice and meanness lay waste the earth and transform God’s good creation into its opposite (Jer. 6:14; etc.); neither, however, is it the ‘holy war’ of the devout who take the field to conquer their oppressors with the mighty support of God.”

³⁹ Hence, L. Sabourin (*L’Évangile selon saint Matthieu et ses principaux parallèles* [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978], 143) rightly notes that this text cannot be used “to conclude that Jesus supported the political movement of the Zealots.”

b. Sanh. Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*

⁴⁰ Luke 14:26 has a parallel saying that puts the issue more starkly but is explained by Matt 10:37 (the Semitic “hate X and love Y” = “love Y more than X”).

Verse 38 offers a parallel statement about those not worthy of Jesus. The reference to the “cross” surprises us since these are early days in Jesus’ ministry, and he has not yet predicted or explained what will happen to him. Yet Jews under Roman rule well understood the practice of carrying a cross en route to crucifixion. At this stage in his ministry, Jesus may be using the phrase “take his cross” as simply implying a willingness to sacrifice one’s life, if necessary, for him.

Verse 39 restates the two options of vv. 32–33. In the first half of each clause, finding and losing one’s life means *saving and losing one’s physical life*. In the second half of each clause, “lose” and “find” refer to eternal death and life. The importance of this verse made it the most frequently quoted saying of Jesus in the New Testament (cf. 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25). The immediate context of finding or losing one’s physical life refers to the prospect of martyrdom, but the principle enunciated here may be applied to many situations in which people seek only prosperity or pleasure rather than less glamorous discipleship. “For my sake” is “a claim which is monstrous if He who makes it is not conscious of being Divine.”⁴¹

(c) *Receiving God’s Messengers (10:40–42)*

40 “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. 41 Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. 42 And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”

10:40–42 In closing this sermon, Jesus describes the proper response to him in yet a third way. Receiving Jesus is equivalent to receiving God, but not all will meet Jesus in the flesh. Others must respond to him as they see him in his disciples. In the context of persecution, the hospitality described here could involve harboring those wanted by authorities at considerable risk to the hosts.⁴² The true prophets contrast with the false ones of 7:15–23, and, as there, refer to all who proclaim God’s Word. “Righteous” people, as consistently in Matthew, are those who obey God’s will by following Jesus (see comments under 5:17–20). “Little ones” in Matthew also regularly refer to disciples (see comments under 18:6). It is also possible that each successive term highlights a slightly larger group of Christians. “Prophets” would then be restricted to certain leaders; “the righteous,” to a broader category of relatively mature believers; and the “little ones” would include all the ordinary, unobtrusive, and even marginalized members of the community of faith.⁴³

Jesus is saying in three roughly equivalent ways that those who receive his followers, because they accept what those individuals stand for, will in turn be received by God. “Because he is” is literally *in the name of* and refers to recognizing the prophet, righteous person, or “little one” for who he or she is. The “he” in each of these cases (vv. 41a, 41b, 42a) thus refers to the disciple and not to the one offering hospitality. The person receiving the disciple is thus becoming a believer. “Receiving” or “not losing” a reward in v. 42b must therefore imply receiving or not receiving eternal life, not some specific status in heaven. Offering a cup of cold water, a very small gesture of help, ties back in with vv. 11–15 and implies the kind of hospitality that included acceptance of the message as well as the messenger (v. 14a). Verses 40–42 comprise the only one of the three subsections of vv. 32–42 in which the negative alternative is not given by way of contrast. The focus in each case is on the right choice; Jesus’ missionary discourse closes on an optimistic note in hopes of a positive response.¹

⁴¹ Plummer, *Matthew*, 157.

⁴² R. H. Mounce, *Matthew*, GNC (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 98.

⁴³ See E. Schweizer, “Matthew’s Church,” in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, ed. G. Stanton (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 129–55.

¹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 179–182.