

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP:  
UNDERSTANDING ONE OF JESUS' ANTI-FAMILY SAYINGS IN CONTEXT  
MATTHEW 10:34–39

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“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”<sup>1</sup> These words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, point to the radical, cost-counting nature of ultimately following in the way of Jesus. This cost of discipleship is articulated with particular vividness by Jesus Himself in Matthew 10:34–39, near the conclusion of Jesus’ Missionary Discourse to His disciples. In this short passage, we find that following Jesus will lead to division in the family, taking up one’s cross, and even loss of life for those who like Peter, Andrew, James, and John respond to Jesus’ call to leave their nets and “follow Me.”<sup>2</sup>

Of particular interest for this paper in the context of this year’s conference theme, is the radical “anti–family” sayings of Jesus in this pericope. The general thesis I am proposing is this: Jesus’ words here present not a diminishment of loyalty to the family in the life of the follower of Jesus, but rather a reprioritization of that loyalty. Taken within their broader biblical-theological and social contexts, Jesus’ radical anti-family statements in Matthew 10:34-39 are best understood as presenting a new priority structure in the life of the disciple. In this priority structure, the previously ultimate kinship loyalty to the family is rendered secondary (and sometimes in conflict) to the ultimate loyalty of the follower to Jesus and his or her new kinship in the family of God.

To demonstrate this thesis, this paper will first, and primarily, perform an exegetical exposition of the passage at hand with special attention to its literary context in Matthew’s gospel and its broader biblical–theological context. This paper will propose that the literary context and the biblical-theological context (particularly Jesus’ use of Micah 7:6) present a

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4:19.

reality in which families are now divided along the lines of their belief or rejection of the Messiah at His coming. This division is a prophetically fulfilled result of the climactic appearing of the Messiah, prophesied in Micah 7:6. Further, this division is a persistent, necessary conflict in the life of the disciple due to the relativization of loyalty to kinship family to the disciples' new and greater loyalty to the family of their greater brother Jesus.

To flesh this reality out further, this paper will secondly place this passage within its social context by building upon the work of Joseph Hellerman in *Jesus and the People of God* (2013). As Hellerman has argued, Jesus' anti-family sayings are best understood in light of the widespread ultimate loyalty to kinship family in the first-century Mediterranean world. Taken within these twin contexts (biblical–theological and social), Jesus presents the conflict of loyalties introduced by his coming and the ultimate commitments of all who would be His disciples.

### **The Division of Family at Jesus' Coming: An Exegetical Exposition of Matt 10:34–39**

#### Literary Context of Matt 10:34–39

Before engaging in a literary and biblical–theological exegetical exposition of the text, let us take some time to sketch generally the literary context of this passage in Matthew's gospel. The passage at hand falls within the second major discourse of Matthew's gospel, the so-called “Missionary Discourse” of Matt 10. While the content of the discourse is to be found in 10:6–42, the context for the discourse is found in 9:35–10:5.<sup>3</sup> The discourse comes on the heels of Matt

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<sup>3</sup> Outline of the Missionary Discourse (9:35–11:1): 1) The Context of the Mission (9:35–38); 2) The Mission of the Twelve (10:1–4); 3) Instructions for the Mission (10:5–15); 4) The Expectation of Persecution (10:16–23); 5) How to Respond to Persecution (10:22–33); 6) The Radical Effects of Jesus' Mission (10:34–39); 7) Supporters (10:40–42); 8) Jesus Resumes His Mission (11:1). Taken from R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 371–415.

8–9, where Matthew presents what Dorothy Weaver has called, a “‘slice of life’ view of Jesus’ overall ministry,” a ministry that Jesus would call His disciples to continue.<sup>4</sup> In 9:35, Matthew in essence summarizes Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry at this point: “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.”<sup>5</sup>

More generally, 9:35–38 can helpfully be understood as a transitional paragraph that both summarizes Jesus’ ministry (“teaching,” “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom,” and “healing”) to the “lost sheep of Israel” (9:36; 10:6) thus far and foreshadows the commissioning the Twelve in their similar ministry following in the pattern of their Master (proclaiming the message of the kingdom, healing the sick, and casting out demons). 10:1–4 details Jesus calling and commissioning of the Twelve, listing each of them by name. In 10:5–15, Jesus details specific instructions on where the disciples were to go, what message they were to proclaim, and how they were to rely on the people and places they were traveling to for provision and shelter.

10:16–23 marks a shift in the discourse as Jesus counsels the Twelve to expect persecution “because of me” (v. 18). In 10:24–33 (and the rest of the discourse for that matter), Jesus directs the disciples in their response to the persecution. He directs them first to be encouraged that in persecution they follow in the way of their master (vv. 24–25). Second, he exhorts them not to fear men, but rather fear God, resting in His provision for them in this life and vindication in the next (vv. 26–33), a theme taken up again in the present pericope. In 10:34–39, Jesus details in greater depth an aspect of the promised persecution (division between families) in response to his (and the disciple’s) mission (34–36) and brings into clear focus the

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothy J. Weaver, *Matthew’s Missionary Discourse: A Literary Critical Analysis*, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 67.

<sup>5</sup> ESV.

ultimate cost and reward of following after Jesus (37–39). In 10:40–42, Jesus concludes the content of the discourse by highlighting the reward of all who would receive the disciples and their mission for whoever “receives you receives me” (v. 40).

11:1 concludes the context of the discourse as Jesus finished “instructing” his disciples for their mission and returns to his own, that of “teaching and preaching” in their towns. Strikingly, Matthew’ gospel contains no report of the Twelve’s mission or even that they went at all.<sup>6</sup>

Contextually relevant to the current pericope is Jesus’ reference to familial division because of the mission in v. 21. A number of commentators justly detect an early echo here of Mic 7:6, the very verse quoted/alluded to in 10:35–36. In v. 21, Jesus’ refers to the rising up of children against parents, potentially a collective description of the individual familial divisions detailed in Mic 7:6.<sup>7</sup> Whether this allusion is intentional or not, v. 21 introduces the theme of familial division that 10:34–36 again takes up and connects with the overall purpose and results of Jesus’ coming.

Twin themes within Matt 10:34–39 are the division within families at the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, and the crisis of decision for all who would desire to follow Him, each of which has been already hinted at in the discourse. O. Lamar Cope notes that the pericope is set in an immediate context which is generally reassuring to the disciples after 10:26–32 “reminds the faithful that in spite of difficulty they will be favorably remembered at the judgment.”<sup>8</sup> Further,

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<sup>6</sup> France notes here that, “clearly Matthew is more interested in the principles underlying the disciples’ mission (and therefore that of his readers) than in any contribution it makes to the narrative of Jesus’ Galilean period...The mission, which has been that of Jesus from the beginning, continues in the same vein despite its theoretical extension to the disciples in ch. 10. It will be only after Jesus’ resurrection (28:19–20) that Matthew’s narrative will envisage the disciples actually going out on their own.” France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 416.

<sup>7</sup> The only direct verbal echo of the LXX is in the verb ἐπαναστήσονται ἐπὶ which interestingly is not included in the explicit quotation in 10:35–36.

<sup>8</sup> O. Lamar Cope, *Matthew: A Scribe Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976), 78.

the positive exhortation of 10:40–42 demonstrates how the acceptance of the disciples bearing Jesus’ message will result in reward from God at the judgment (and implicationally, rejection resulting in punishment). Cope notes that “the overall tone of the whole discourse is one of encouragement against adversity.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus’ sayings here are hard, but they are set within the overall security of God’s vindication and reward of all who will “take up their cross and follow Him.”

#### Structure of Matthew 10:34–39

Ulrich Luz notes of the structure of this passage that “vv. 34–36 deal with the sending of Jesus, vv. 37–39 with that of the followers.”<sup>10</sup> The first half of the passage is declarative, speaking to the phenomenon and purpose of Jesus’ coming. The second half of the passage is paraenetic, speaking to the implications of Jesus’ coming for those who must decide whether to “follow after” Him or not. Looking at this structure of the passage, several distinct triads are apparent, each highlighting a distinct emphasis to Jesus’ discourse here and providing a rhetorically effective flourish to his teaching. The first half (vv. 34–36) contains three sentences centered upon the phrase “I came” (ἦλθον) which together provide the substructure for Jesus’ words in the section. The first “I came” of the triad introduces Jesus’ main point in the section and the second and third serve to explain how the first is true.

The one long sentence of vv. 35–36 also contains three pairs of family members who are set (διχάσαι) against (κατὰ) each other at Jesus’ coming. This triadic repetition (itself taken by Jesus/Matthew from the original OT text of Mic 7:6 rhetorically demonstrates the comprehensive

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<sup>9</sup> Cope, *Matthew*, 78.

<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, (Translated by James E. Crouch, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 107.

division between family members (those who follow after Jesus and those who do not) at His coming.

The second half of the passage (vv. 37–39) also contains two distinct triads. First, the grammatical construction of a first person substantive participle serves to introduce each major sentence of the section, creating a parallelism that is hard to miss.<sup>11</sup> Further, the phrase “he is not worthy of me” is found three times in vv. 37–38. This triad serves to illustrate the ultimate fate of those who do not follow after Jesus. Finally, v. 39 seems to serve as a summary statement of the pericope, underlining the paradoxical nature of follow the self-denying and life-giving way of Jesus. Those who “find” their lives apart from Jesus will “lose” it and those who “lose” their lives for His sake, will find it.

#### Exposition of Matthew 10:34-36

The structure of the Greek text divides this passage most naturally into two major sections: vv. 34–36 and vv. 37–39. V. 34 begins this passage ominously as Jesus declares, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”<sup>12</sup> As Michael Black points out, “Quoted out of context—as they often are – these verses seem more appropriate to the Qur’an than to the Gospels; they sound like a cry of Muhammad proclaiming a Jihad or holy war, rather than a genuine utterance of the Prince of Peace.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the first verbal phrase of the pericope, introduced by the negative command *Μὴ νομίσητε*, sets the stage for a reversal of expectation. What Jesus is about to say is meant to shock His hearers. As France notes, “Not only is peace a basic human aspiration, but it was understood to be the purpose of the

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<sup>11</sup> W. D. Davies, and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. II: Commentary on Matthew VIII–XVIII, The International Critical Commentary, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 217.

<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations of Scripture will be taken from the *ESV*.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Black, “‘Not peace but a sword’: Matt 10:34ff; Luke 12:51ff.,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*. (ed. Ernst Bammel and C.F.D. Moule; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 287–294, 287.

Messiah's coming (Isa 9:6–7; Zech 9:10) and the defining characteristic of God's eschatological rule (Isa 11:6–9).<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus' coming is proclaimed as the dawn of "peace on earth" (Luke 2:14). Further, Jesus Himself had taught clearly in the Sermon on the Mount that "blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt 5:9) and within the direct context of this missionary discourse, sends his disciples out to offer "peace" to whomever would receive it (10:13). But here Jesus proclaims that the coming of the Messiah would "not bring peace, but a sword." Carson notes, "Prince of peace though he is, the world will so violently reject him and his reign that men and women will divide over him."<sup>15</sup>

Within this passage, three "I have come" statements drive this first section of the text and echo other similar statements in Matthew concerning the purpose of Jesus' coming.<sup>16</sup> Although while in Matt 5:17, "Jesus asserts that *his coming* conforms to traditional expectations (though a superficial impression might be that he does not)," here "he asserts that *his coming* does not conform to (a superficial form of) traditional expectations (though in many respects he does seem to)."<sup>17</sup> He has not come to bring "peace," but rather a "sword," a sword which will metaphorically divide whole families. While the eschatological peace hoped for at the coming of the Messiah will one day come, His coming will not immediately usher it in. As Turner notes, "His ministry will not bring instant universal serendipity to the world. Jesus' purpose is division before harmony."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 408.

<sup>15</sup> D.A. Carson, *Matthew*, EBC 9, (Rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 298.

<sup>16</sup> In particular, mimicking the exact verbiage behind Jesus' statement in Matt. 5:17. Cf. Matt 9:13; 20:28.

<sup>17</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 440.

<sup>18</sup> David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 281.



While “It is on the strength of sayings like this that Jesus of Nazareth has, not infrequently, been cast in the role of political revolutionary,”<sup>19</sup> from a contextual perspective of Matt 10:34, this interpretation is unlikely. Jesus’ coming will bring division, but not between the people of God and the Roman state. Rather, the division is between those who in the vein of Matt 16:13–16 recognize His identity as the Son of God and follow Him and those who do not. This division stretches to all aspects of life. In particular focus here, is the divisive effect Jesus’ coming will have on the family.

When taken within the greater context of the Missionary Discourse, Jesus’ words are not so surprising. Hagner notes, “In this discourse, which focuses on hostility, persecution, and suffering for the sake of the gospel, Matthew now turns to an especially painful reality: the division and hostility within single households.”<sup>20</sup> As we have already noted, the subject has already been broached in passing in v. 21 in a potential allusion to Mic 7:6, a passage that Jesus now quotes in v. 35 to explain his provocative statement: “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.”

In order to understand Jesus’ use of the OT here, we must first consider the quotation in its OT context. When Micah 7 describes the godlessness in Israel prior to its defeat and exile to Assyria in 722 BC. The sins of the people include murder (7:2b), bribery and injustice (7:3), and betrayal, even of one’s most intimate friends and family (7:5–6).<sup>21</sup> The direction of hostility in Mic 7:6 goes from the younger generation to the older probably “intended to indicate failure to fulfil the commandment to honor one’s parents.”<sup>22</sup> Taken as a whole, the context of Micah 7:1–7

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<sup>19</sup> Black, “Not peace but a sword,” 289. Black cites the early example of H.S. Reimarus who “represented him (Jesus) as secretly working and preparing for a national uprising” and the more recent theory of S.G.F. Brandon who understand this pronouncement of Jesus here in 10:34 as “clearly indicative of a zealous attitude and mission.” *Ibid.*, 289–290.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*. Word Biblical Commentary 33A, (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 290.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 441. Cf. Matt 10:21 which also alludes to Mic 7:6.

“alludes to all types of guilty parties within Israelite society, thereby indicating the comprehensive nature of the nation’s transgression.”<sup>23</sup>

In response to this bleak appraisal of the state of the Israelite nation, Micah declares in Mic 7:8: “But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation...” The rest of the chapter (and book) accordingly turns from the previous theme of judgment and looks forward to the promised salvation of the Lord. In the OT context of the passage, Micah the prophet awaits the coming of the Lord to bring peace and justice where hostility and evil are rampant. This hostility in Israel had extended to the point that even family members within the nuclear family turned upon one another, in particular the younger generation against the older.

In this OT context, Micah awaits the coming of the Messiah to bring peace where there is now hostility and division in the Israelite nation and the individual families from which it is composed. Contrastingly, the Matthean context presupposes the escalation of hostility and division between families at the coming of Jesus. In other words, it is Jesus’ very coming that produces the division within families that Jesus’ speaks of. While this particular aspect is contrastive, the overall expectation of the Micah passage and Jesus’ missionary discourse share the same focus. Mark Rooker notes, “Micah’s prayer looks forward to the establishment of God’s kingdom for the remnant.”<sup>24</sup> It is this kingdom, though perhaps taking different shape than Micah anticipated, that Jesus’ “coming” was beginning to usher in.

In order to understand the use of Mic 7:6 here we must also ask if the Jewish interpretive tradition of the day would have influenced Matthew’s understanding of the passage. Davies and Allison think so, declaring flatly that “the meaning of 10.35 is *determined* by the Jewish

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Rooker, Eugene H. Merrill, Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 456.

<sup>24</sup> Rooker, *The World and the Word*, 457.

parallels.”<sup>25</sup> In short, Mic 7:6 was drawn upon in Jewish interpretative parallels “to describe the discord of the latter days.”<sup>26</sup> Davies and Allison note,

“The conviction that the great tribulation would turn those of the same household against one another was clearly widespread. It follows that 10.35, like 10.34, comprehend the ministry of Jesus and the time of the church in terms of the eschatological woes....So the eschatological trial, the time of fulfillment of Mic. 7:6, has broken in with the appearance of Jesus; and before the messianic age of peace establishes itself, all must pass through affliction and suffer pain. As chaos and darkness came before the first creation (Gen 1:2), so division and strife must come before the second creation; the last things are as the first. Thus, for the present, conflict not concord reigns.”<sup>27</sup>

When Micah 7:6 is understood within this context of eschatological Messianic expectation, it takes on a clear prophetic significance.

How then hermeneutically was Jesus/Matthew using this quotation of Mic 7:6 in the discourse? Because of the lack of a clear citation formula and the widely divergent contexts of the two referents, at first glance it would seem unlikely that Jesus considered this some sort of fulfillment of prophecy. In this vein, Blomberg posits that “the hermeneutic employed is to cite biblical language that is appropriate to a specific context that contains certain parallels to its original context...”<sup>28</sup> To him, it seems strained to suggest any sort of prophetic fulfillment reference to the divisions of families at Jesus’ coming. Instead, he sees Jesus employing verbiage from Micah (commonly known by his listeners) to support his overall warning to the disciples of the challenges they would face in the pursuit of following after Him.

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<sup>25</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2: 219. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* They list as support: “*M. Sota* 9:15 reads as follows: with the footprints of the Messiah, ‘children shall shame the elders, and the elders shall rise up before the children, for the son dishonoureth the father, the daughter riseth up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law: a man’s enemies are the men of his own house.’ Similar statements are to be found in Jub. 23:16, 19; 1 En. 56.7; 100.1–2; Mk 13.12; 4 Ezra 5.9; 6.24; 2 Bar. 70.3,7; LAB 6.1; *b. Sanh.* 97a.” *Ibid.*, 219–220.

<sup>27</sup> Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 2:220.

<sup>28</sup> Craig Blomberg, “Matthew,” Pages 1–110 in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 37. Blomberg continues, “Just as we might today try to encourage an oppressed fellow-Christian by saying, ‘The first shall be last and the last shall be first.’”

While Blomberg's hermeneutical restraint is to be lauded, it seems best to side with Davies and Allison in understanding Matthew's usage of Mic 7:6 through the lens of the Jewish parallels already noted. When understood in this way, the quotation takes on prophetic fulfillment qualities. The division between families is a sign that the Messiah and the dawning eschatological age have come. In this light, it can be added to the long list of passages in which Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.<sup>29</sup>

While Matthew's use of the OT here seems to have a particular significance of prophetic fulfillment, it also uses OT language to articulate a paradigmatic pattern of the purpose and effects of Jesus' (and later the church's) mission. As Grant Osborne notes of this passage, "Jesus believes this is typologically fulfilled in the church's mission."<sup>30</sup>

While the original context of Mic 7:6 paints a picture of division initiated by the younger generation against the older, in Matt 10:35–37, "Matthew extends the nature of the hostilities expressed in Mic 7:6 by allowing for the reverse case: that is, father and mother may also be set over against son or daughter because of allegiance to Jesus."<sup>31</sup> The placement of the summary statement of v. 36: "And a person's enemies will be those of his own household" at the conclusion of the section underscores the scope of the significance of Jesus' words. Jesus and the call to follow Him creates a division between those who will follow and those who will not, separating families along the same lines. Because of Jesus' coming, for some followers their closest family will become their enemy. Hagner avers, "The experience of the disciples and those who come to believe their message will be not only that they will be widely hated (cf. 10:22) but

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<sup>29</sup> For a helpful list see Charles L. Quarles, *A Theology of Matthew: Jesus Revealed as Deliverer, King, and Incarnate Creator*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2013), 28.

<sup>30</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 404.

<sup>31</sup> Cope, *Matthew: A Scribe*, 79

that they will be rejected even by their own family members. This is part of the reality of the proclamation of the good news.”<sup>32</sup>

As France points out, though Jesus’ coming will ultimately bring peace, the “way to peace is not the way of avoidance of conflict.”<sup>33</sup> In fact in Jesus’ own life and ministry, “Jesus will be continuously engaged in robust controversy especially in chs. 21-23, while his whole experience will be the opposite of a “peaceful” way of life.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, any disciple who follows Jesus in experiencing these divisions in family life can rest assured that they are following in the pattern of their Master Himself (Matt 10:24). As Osborne notes, “Peace is the result of the salvation he is bringing, but the mission to the lost world will not result in peace for those who take the gospel to the world.”<sup>35</sup> Jesus’ teaching in vv. 34–36 comes to its conclusion: “The kingdom message of repentance is confrontational (cf. 11:12), and conflicting responses to this message can fracture even the dearest human relationships.”<sup>36</sup>

Jesus’ words are forceful and jolting. Tannehill observes, “The forceful language...is directed not toward making discipleship more appealing but toward making it more difficult...It would be much easier to accept a Jesus who conforms with our desires and supports our family ties.”<sup>37</sup> Further, Tannehill avers, “The goal of these words is not acceptance but change, not agreement that Jesus fits with our established values but a basic reordering of those values. The tension in the text awakens an internal tension which points to necessary decision.”<sup>38</sup> Osborne

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<sup>32</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 292.

<sup>33</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 408.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>35</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 404.

<sup>36</sup> Turner, *Matthew*, 281.

<sup>37</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *The Sword of His Mouth*, The Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Supplements 1, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 143.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

articulates the specific result in the life of the follower of Jesus: “There is a critical tension here, as the believer finds peace with God but opposition from the world.”<sup>39</sup>

#### Exposition of Matthew 10:37–39

In 10:37–39 Jesus now turns his focus to the proper specific response by the disciples to the division created within the family and the ultimate response of he who would “take up His cross and follow Him.” First, in verse 37, Jesus warns his disciples of the danger of placing ultimate loyalty in the family: “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.” Nolland avers that this final statement “both interprets and generalizes the preceding two, and with its fresh image of suffering to be faced integrates the material here with that in vv. 34–36.”<sup>40</sup> In statement form, Jesus challenges the disciples with the reality that “To love one’s family more than Jesus is to be unworthy of him.”<sup>41</sup> Hagner notes further, “The division described in the preceding verses must not be allowed to divert a disciple from loyalty to Jesus.”<sup>42</sup> An ultimate loyalty to Jesus will mean at times forsaking loyalty to family when it is found to be competing. While this statement is abrasive to normal sentiments toward family, Jesus direct His disciples to find ultimate assurance in the reality that the reverse statement of his actual statement in v. 37 is true: that those who love Him more than family will be counted “worthy of me” both in this life and the next. In Matt 19:29, Jesus tells his disciples that this loss of family loyalty in this life will not go uncompensated in the life to come: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name’s sake, will receive *a hundredfold and will*

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<sup>39</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 404.

<sup>40</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 441.

<sup>41</sup> Turner, *Matthew*, 281.

<sup>42</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 292.

*inherit eternal life.*” And as already hinted at, the disciples would see this relegation of family loyalty to secondary status played out in Jesus’ own life in Matt 12:46-50 when Jesus is approached by his mother and brothers and rebuffs their call for preferential treatment based on their familial ties to Jesus. He declares to the man sent to fetch him: “Who is my mother and who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matt 12:48b–50).

In vv. 38–39, Jesus moves from the tension between allegiance to family and allegiance to Jesus to the tension between living for self and this life on the one hand and Jesus and the next life on the other. He declares: “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.” Hagner rightly observes the escalation found in the statements of vv. 38–39: “The radical statement of v. 37, with its stress on uncompromising loyalty to Jesus, is now exceeded by two remarkable descriptions of the nature of discipleship in absolute terms.”<sup>43</sup>

Jesus’ exhortation to the disciple “to take up his cross” in this verse is often taken as anachronistic, since Jesus has not yet given his prediction of the passion (where He Himself would “take up His cross”), but the significance of these future events must not be chalked up as “unknown” to the divine God-man Jesus. Even in this passage’s articulation of Jesus’ self-declared mission and its effect, we see the intentionality of Jesus’ words here. Even now, he is preparing his disciples for the path of discipleship, a path of persecution and trial in the pattern of their Master.

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<sup>43</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 292.

Clearly, Jesus' words would have been again jarring to the initial hearers. Plutarch reports that under Roman Law, "Every criminal who is executed carries his own cross."<sup>44</sup> To bear the cross meant not only to bear the ultimate cost of execution itself, but also the shame connected with it. 2,000 years after Christ's crucifixion, it is commonplace to revel in the Christian cross, leaving the modern interpreter struggling to understand the level of repulsion that must have gripped the disciples when they first heard the call to "take up your cross and follow me."<sup>45</sup> Further difficulty is found in the reality that outside of this saying of Jesus to his disciples (wherever it is found in the gospels), the only other reference to "taking up the cross," is referring to the actual crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>46</sup> Taking up one's cross brought to the disciples the prospect of death and shame for the sake of Jesus, but again the opposite assertion of Jesus' words here must be counted true as well, He who *does* take up His cross and follow Jesus will be found "worthy of me." This positive assertion is borne out in Jesus' concluding word in v. 39.

As Witherington notes, "The saying in v. 39 is something of an exposition of v. 38—the person who affirms and seeks after his own life, his own priorities, his own self-centered lifestyle, will in the end lose his life, but the person who gives up his life, both his life priorities and his life itself for the sake of Jesus and the good news, will discover that he has entered into the Dominion, into eternal life."<sup>47</sup> V. 39 restates the ultimate result of the two options of vv. 32–33: confession of Christ before men resulting in finding life or denial of Christ before men

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Nolland, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 442. Nolland suggests that this saying would have similar rhetorical effect to contemporary statements such as "'Place yourself in the firing line,' 'put your neck in the noose,' and 'put your head on the chopping block.'" *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Derrett comments, "Some attempt to deprive the saying of any real force...by the eighteenth century it meant hardly more than 'bear with an irksome burden,' whatever that may be." Derrett, J. Duncan M. "Taking Up the Cross and Turning the Cheek." Pages 61–78 in *Alternative Approaches to New Testament Study*, ed. A.E. Harvey; (London: SPCK Publishers, 1985), 61. In a footnote, Derrett references a letter from John Wesley written "to ask his correspondent to 'take up a cross for him,' namely writing to a colleague to whom he did not care to write (again) for himself!" *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> J. Gwyn Griffiths. "The Disciple's Cross." *NTS* XVI (1969–1970): 358–364, 358.

<sup>47</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, SHBC. (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 2006), 226.



resulting in losing it. The significance of this teaching cannot be overestimated. As Blomberg notes, “the importance of this verse made it the most frequently quoted saying of Jesus in the New Testament.”<sup>48</sup>

### **The Division of Family at Jesus’ Coming: The Social Context**

Jesus’ pronouncement of division among families at his coming, a division that would provide particular pain in the lives of His followers must also be considered in its social context for us as twenty-first century Western readers to understand its full effect. Joseph Hellerman paints a helpful picture of the familial bond found in the first-century Mediterranean:

“In the New Testament world, a person viewed as family those persons with whom he shared a common patriline – a bloodline traced from generation to generation solely through the male line....A male therefore regarded as immediate family (a) his father (from whom he had received his blood), (b) his brothers and sisters (with whom he shared his blood), and offspring of both genders (to whom he passed on his blood).... “As is now generally recognized by students of ancient family systems, the tightest unit of loyalty and affection in the New Testament world was the cosanguine group of brothers and sisters. The emotional bonding modern Westerners expect as a mark of a healthy husband-and-wife relationship was ideally to characterize relations between siblings. As one Jewish writer exclaimed, ‘If I do not love my brother, whom shall I love?’ (*Jub.* 35.22).”<sup>49</sup>

It is within this context of Mediterranean family values that Jesus’ words of division within the household at his coming take even sharper focus. In many ways, Jesus’ coming brings devastating division to the family. At the same time, we also see in Matthew’s gospel a particular focus on the constitution in Jesus of a new family comprised of His disciples. As Blomberg notes, “Requirements for discipleship and the constitution of the community of Jesus’ followers that became the church dominate Matthew’s gospel as they do no other.”<sup>50</sup> Hellerman observes,

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<sup>48</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22, (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 1992), 181. Matt 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *Jesus and the People of God: Reconfiguring Ethnic Identity*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 266–267.

<sup>50</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 32–33.

“Matthew, more than any of the other evangelists, exhibits a noticeable preoccupation with the contours of the community that Jesus began to establish during his three-year ministry in Roman Palestine. And for Matthew’s Jesus, that community is constituted as a kinship group of surrogate siblings with God as Father of the family.”<sup>51</sup> As already noted in Matt 12:50: It is whoever does the will of Jesus’ Father in heaven *that* is now Jesus’ (and his disciples) brother and sister and mother. Further, those who have lost family to follow Jesus are given a promise of provision that takes special focus in Jesus’ interchange with Peter in Mark 10:28–30: “Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.” When taken on the whole, Matthew and the gospel writers as a whole present a Jesus who counters the anguish wrought at the division between families at His coming with the comfort of abundant restoration of familial blessing in the newly forming “family of God.”

Hellerman again notes, “Jesus would not have chosen ‘family as the central metaphor for his community had he not consciously intended to elicit a profound degree of tension in his followers’ minds between loyalty to their natural families, on the one hand, and loyalty to the newfound family of surrogate siblings on the other. Conceptions of kinship solidarity in Mediterranean antiquity assure us that this was the case. The surrogate family texts and the passage predicting division in the natural family thus go hand-in-hand.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Hellerman, *Jesus and the People of God*, 277.

<sup>52</sup> Hellerman, *Jesus and the People of God*, 286.

Finally, we must at least, in a cursory manner, ask the question of whether this vision of a new constitution of familial bond in the “family of God” decreases a loyalty to one’s ethnic family of origin. While considerably more could be explored, I find Hellerman’s assessment especially cogent considering the Biblical data: “Surrogate family loyalty and natural family loyalty were not necessarily mutually exclusive expressions of relational solidarity for those who belonged to the Jesus movement...Where conflict arose, however, the faith family was to become the primary locus of relational solidarity. The positioning of natural family solidarity under the overachieving rubric of loyalty to the surrogate church family in fact characterized the Jesus movement well out into the first two centuries of the common era, and it provides the best explanation for the apparently conflicting strains of family traditions in the Gospels.”<sup>53</sup> The coming of Jesus thus creates a new priority structure in the life of the follower of Jesus. The follower of Jesus is to remain loyal to the physical family and in the vein of Deuteronomy 6, raise their family to know, love, and worship the one true God. But the reality that not all family will choose to follow Jesus renders loyalty to the physical family secondary to ultimate loyalty to the new family of God. Some will experience this tension more than others, but all can rest in the assurance of their new identity in the family of God.

### **Conclusion: Matthew 10:34–39 and the Family**

Osborne notes that in this passage, “we are at the heart of discipleship, counting the cost and placing Christ above everything in our lives.”<sup>54</sup> Even here as Jesus prepares His disciples to go out on mission to Galilean towns, He prepares them for engaging in their part in extending His

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<sup>53</sup> Hellerman, *The People of God*, 286.

<sup>54</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 405.

mission “to the nations” after His passion.<sup>55</sup> He knows that in this mission they will experience great adversity and conflict. They will experience division in their physical family, but they will also experience the abundant blessing of the newly constituted family of God through the blood of their new “blood brother” Jesus. As Williamson notes, this pericope teaches that “Christians, like Jesus, will experience conflict, rejection by those nearest them, and sometimes even death. They are to bear this, however, and not resist it, since this is their way of taking the cross, following Jesus, and finding life.”<sup>56</sup> Though following Jesus will prove costly, for some costing them their very lives, it will prove ultimately rewarding as they are counted worthy of Jesus, the one in whose way they follow. In giving up on their lives (and for some their families) for the sake of ultimate allegiance to Jesus, they will find life and family far greater than they have ever known.

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<sup>55</sup> As already noted, the significance of Matthew’s inclusion of the entire Missionary Discourse within the Matthean narrative is inherently extended beyond the purview of the particular mission to Israel he explicitly commissions them in it. For no report or evaluation of the actual undertaking of this mission is included in the gospel at all. Therefore, it seems to best, like the rest of the book, be understood as part of a general “manual of discipleship” preparing the reader for a correct understanding of what it means to follow Jesus both in His Lordship and in His mission to reach the lost.

<sup>56</sup> Lamar Williamson Jr., “Jesus of the Gospels and the Christian Vision of Shalom,” *HBT* 6:2 (1984): 49–66, 54.

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