

# *The God We Want; The God We Get*

*Questions of the Congregation Series*

*I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about:*

Difficult Passages of Scripture

by

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Matthew 10:26-39

Jesus said, “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. <sup>27</sup> What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. <sup>28</sup> Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup> And even the hairs of your head are all counted. <sup>31</sup> So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

<sup>32</sup> “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; <sup>33</sup> but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

<sup>34</sup> “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

<sup>35</sup> 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;

<sup>36</sup> and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

<sup>37</sup> 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; <sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

The Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

Let us pray:

God you require much of us. Speak to us now, that your word may be carried to the deep protected corners of our hearts. We ask this in the name of the word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The God we get is often not the God we want.

God says things that make us uncomfortable. God asks us to do things that do not fit within our paradigm of appropriate, aspirational living. God says, “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 God means it. God says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” And God means it. The God we want affirms our choices and patterns of life as faithful. The God we get calls us to change.

Change. It’s not what we want. Especially if it means giving up what we find comfortable, reliable, certain. Change often means relinquishing the plans we’ve so carefully crafted for our own lives. Plans we’ve clenched our fists around until our muscles have ached with tension. Plans we thought would bring us life.

Yet the way to life, Jesus says, is through losing it for his sake. The call to follow Jesus, the German scholar and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, is the call to change. God persistently calls us to change, to loosen our grip on our plans so that we can receive a new way of being. The philosopher Dallas Willard said that a follower of Jesus Christ is someone who, “intent upon becoming Christlike...systematically and progressively rearranges their affairs to that end.”<sup>1</sup> Following in the footsteps of our savior leads to a different destination than our own plans. There is a gap between the God we want and the God we get, and we must decide if we desire to cross that gap.

At this moment, I invite you to sit in the tension of Jesus’ words. I invite you to join the long line of disciples who have been overwhelmed, confused, and unsure after hearing Jesus’ command. I invite you to delay the desire to dismiss Jesus words as outdated, outlandish, and unrelated to our modern day world. Surely he didn’t mean we are to be set against

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, “The Cost of Nondiscipleship,” in *Devotional Classics*, edited by Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith (HarperOne: New York, 1993), 15.

our father, our mother, our family. Surely Jesus didn't mean that he came to bring a sword, not peace. The human mind is endlessly resourceful in rejecting what it finds uncongenial, quipped a 20<sup>th</sup> century commentator. Instead, I invite you to stay here, to reject the impulse to push this text away, and to consider crossing the gap to God together.

Several years ago, Donald McCullough, then the president of San Francisco Theological Seminary wrote a book called *The Trivialization of God*.<sup>2</sup> The book argues that all of us are forever trivializing God into the god we want; we shrink Jesus down to our personal size. Conservatives, he said, make Jesus into a nice clean-cut personal Savior who you invite to live in your hearts, and often don't let him out. Liberals make him into an ancient Near-Eastern progressive Democrat, a champion of the political cause of the day. McCullough frames the book with section headings that name these trivial gods, the gods we want, they are "The God of my cause, the God of my understanding, the God of my experience, the God of my comfort, the God of my success, the God of my nation."

We want the God of America

Jesus proclaims a kingdom that is not of this world, that is for all people.

We want the God of Bryn Mawr

Jesus travels from town to town, often bypassing the privileged and powerful in favor of the outcast and rundown.

We want the God of budgets and planning

Jesus calls us not to worry about what we will eat, drink, or wear.

We want the God of family and friends.

Jesus says he has come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother.

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<sup>2</sup> Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* (Navpress: Colorado Springs, 1995).

The gap between the God we want and the God we get splits our souls and impoverishes our ideals. Crossing this gap, accepting the God we get instead of the God we want is Jesus' invitation to us. The reason we are hesitant to accept this invitation is because it will cost us something, maybe everything. It may cost us family, friends, convenience, and comfort.

If you don't know what I mean I invite you to think of a time you did something you knew to be the right thing, while also knowing that it would hurt someone you loved. Perhaps you took that job that paid less or even nothing at all but made a difference in your community, even though your parents wagered everything for you to be a high-income earner. Perhaps you confronted a close friend or family member after they used demeaning language to describe a particular person or people group. Perhaps you chose to believe in a God you can't see or haven't heard speak but know to be true, even though those closest to you think it is folly to follow such a superstition. Again, the reason we are hesitant to do these things, the reason we are hesitant to accept Jesus' invitation to follow him, is because it will cost us something...maybe everything, but it will gain us even more.

To encourage us in our journey, and to address our underlying uncertainty, Jesus offers the command "Do not fear" three times at the beginning of this passage. All three fears that he calls us to abandon separate us from faithfully following God. First, do not fear secrets, says Jesus. We are called to be the same in public as in private. What you hear in the dark, tell in the light. Evil comments made in the conspiratorial comfort of like-minded individuals will become known. Gossip, hidden actions, the parts of your life that you hope even God can't see, will come to the light. Do not let evil fester in the dark. Do not be afraid.

Second, do not fear those whose power is limited to the body. They might wreak havoc, but they cannot ultimately destroy. No human being can destroy your soul. Third, do not fear because God knows you and

cares about you, and will support you every step of the way. Jesus says you are loved more than many sparrows, which were common, cheap birds sold in the market. If God loves that which is common and cheap, how much more does God love you, who is precious and rare? Jesus is telling us that painful actions will happen: secrets will come out, your body may be hurt, but the God you get will always be your companion.

Choosing to abandon these fears will change you, but maybe not as you'd expect. Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." When you cease keeping secrets or avoiding pain, division will rise. When you choose to speak out, to stand up, to risk your relationship with another in order to faithfully follow Jesus, division may be the result.

If you call that relative of yours, the one who always goes one step too far in their comments at thanksgiving dinner, and engage them in conversation, to bring those words said in secret to the light, it may cause division. When you make a sign and march for the rights of individuals who have been oppressed because of the color of their skin, the person they love, or the neighborhood in which they were born, you may cause division. When you do this even if it results in arrest, confrontation, or a physical rebuke, you may cause division. Jesus makes it clear that there is no encounter between the truth of his coming kingdom and the power of this world that will not at some level be fraught with conflict, division, and pain. If we are to be the messengers of God's coming kingdom, then we will be deliverers of holy division.

Jesus challenges our deepest loyalties by singling out our family. It is in our families where conflict can rage most severely, and where we are most likely to throw in the towel. As uncomfortable as it may be, Jesus message does not provide a reinforcement of family cohesiveness. Instead, his words, "one's foes will be members of one's own household," call into question an idolatry of the family and warn that the gospel may divide rather than unite the home. If such language sounds

too scary to embrace, look to our Savior who was rejected by his hometown, his friends, his nation.

Choosing to uncover the painful secrets of your family may set a man against his father.

Standing up for the rights of other people may set daughter against her mother.

Following in the footsteps of our crucified Savior may divide your family.

The God we want says to accept the world as it is as blessed. The God we get calls us to something radically more. The paradox, though, is that Jesus assures us, that those who think they've found their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." When we're willing to lose the life we've known, the life we wanted, the life we've carefully crafted, then we will experience a life beyond our plans.

Following Jesus will cost us something, maybe everything. In return, though, we will find true life. We may lose our assurances, our comfort, our alliances, even our previous community, but Jesus says we will find a life that connects us to truth, to meaning, to neighbors who are on this journey with us, and to him.

When we are willing to let go of the God we want, then we can cling to the God we get.

We want a God who idolizes our family

We get a God who says all are welcome in my house.

We want a God who keeps secrets

We get a God who proclaims hidden truths from the housetops.

We want a God who will keep us from all danger and pain

We get a God who suffered, emotionally and physically, and died on a cross.

We want a God who can be added on to our crafted lives.  
We get a God who says we must lose our life entirely if we are to  
ever actually find true life.

The God we get is dying to love us, to embrace us, to walk with us  
across the gap we have dug into our lives. Today, my prayer for you, for  
me, for my family and for yours, is that none of us finds the God we  
want. I think we're ready for more.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.