

# HATING OUR FAMILY: NECESSARY FOR CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

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## Introduction

In Luke 14:25-35, Jesus sets forth His uncompromising requirements for a disciple: “If any man come to me, and hate not ... he cannot be my disciple” (v. 26). “And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (v. 27). “So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (v. 33).

Perhaps Christ’s words shock you. They should and they must; Christ designed them that way. But, shocking or not, they must be heard: we must heed these words.

Jesus speaks about two things in verse 26.

First, “if any man come to me.” To come to Jesus is to *believe* in Him. We come to Jesus by faith. Jesus does not require admirers: He requires believers.

Second, discipleship: “he cannot be my disciple” (v. 26). A disciple is one who learns from a master or a teacher. A disciple is an apprentice. Jesus is, in the words of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, “our chief Prophet and Teacher” (A. 31). As such, He demands exclusive devotion from all of His disciples. To be a disciple of Jesus is to learn from Him, to submit to His teachings, to obey His will, to be under His lordship and authority, and to follow Him wherever He leads us, even if it means suffering and death for us.

One thing that every disciple of Jesus must do is to *hate his family*. “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

## The Meaning of Hating Our Family

If I asked you, the reader, whether you hate your family, I expect that for

most of you the answer is “No.” You love your parents, you love your spouse, you love your children and you love your siblings. And you tell your family that often and you show your love to them often.

And—let me be clear—that is good; that is exactly how it must be.

Nevertheless, Christ commands us to *hate* our family members.

How can that be so? Does Christ really mean that?

The hatred here must be clearly understood.

First, the hatred here is a holy, righteous, godly hatred. There is, actually, such a thing! Godly hatred is not a spiteful, malicious, nasty, mean-spirited hatred. Such wicked hatred, unlike godly hatred, manifests itself in cruel, cutting, bitter words or in harmful deeds, even in murder. The explanation of the sixth commandment given in the *Heidelberg Catechism* is as follows:

What doth God require in the sixth commandment?

That neither in thoughts, nor words, nor gestures, much less in deeds, I dishonor, hate, wound, or kill my neighbor ... (Q. & A. 105).

[God] abhors ... envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge (A. 106).

He commands us to show patience, peace, meekness, mercy, and all kindness towards him (A. 107).

A text such as Luke 14:26 is *never* a justification for sinful behaviour toward our family. A child may not quote this text to justify impertinence toward his parents; a husband may not quote this text to justify cruelty or abuse of his wife; a wife may not quote this text to justify insubordination or disrespect for her husband; and siblings may not quote this text to justify their petty squabbles and fights.

Holy hatred for family does not exclude seeking our family's good, especially our family's salvation. Holy hatred does not exclude prayer for our family, kindness to them and serving them in humility. Holy hatred does not exclude rebuking our family members when they sin and calling them to repentance and faith.

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I hope that you can understand the difference between holy and unholy hatred.

Second, the hatred of verse 26 includes two main actions: it requires (1) the forsaking of our family in certain situations and it requires (2) the cutting off of fellowship from our family under certain conditions. Jesus explains the meaning in verse 33: “So likewise, whosoever he be of you that *forsaketh* not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.”

First, when we hate our family, we forsake them for the sake of Christ.

To forsake is the decisive, deliberate rejection of something or someone. It is to separate oneself from something or someone; it is to put away something or someone from oneself. Hatred of family, therefore, is to reject our family’s influence, our family’s ideas, our family’s opinions and our family’s beliefs, if or when they conflict with the Word of Christ. The forsaking of family does not necessarily mean a physical separation from family but it does mean a spiritual rejection of family in certain circumstances.

Second, we hate our family when we withdraw fellowship from them.

Hatred of earthly family is to refuse to have fellowship with them. Be careful—it is not to be unfriendly or to shun family, but it is to refuse spiritual fellowship when they do not share our Christian faith and when they do not help us to live a holy life; or worse when they oppose our Christian faith and when they actively hinder us in living a holy life.

For the sake of Christ, a disciple must oppose his family members, reject them and refuse to have fellowship with them. He may have social discourse with them but he may not *fellowship* with them.

To be clear: Christ is *not* calling a believer to cut off fellowship from his believing spouse. He does *not* command believing parents to cut off fellowship from their covenant children. He does *not* demand that believing siblings cut off fellowship from one another. In fact, believers *must* fellowship together in the home and in the church. But where fellowship with anyone—including family—conflicts with devotion to Christ, then family must be forsaken and fellowship must be cut off.

That is the meaning of hatred in another important passage:

Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men. For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain. Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies (Ps. 139:19-22).

David hated God's enemies, who were "the wicked" and "bloody men." Some of those enemies of God were members of his family. How did his hatred manifest itself? He refused fellowship with them: "depart from me" (v. 19), he said. Notice, David does not say, "*I* will slay the wicked," but "*thou* wilt slay the wicked." Notice, David does not say, "Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate *me*?" but "that hate *thee*." He does not say, "am not I grieved with those that rise up against *me*?" but "against *thee*."

One who loves God must not fellowship with those who show that they hate God. If our family shows enmity toward God, we must respond by saying to our father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters, "Depart from me. I cannot have fellowship with you. We do not share a like precious faith."

That is hatred for our family.

To make Christ's command clear, I give some illustrations of how this works in practice.

First, a Muslim or a Hindu is converted to Christ, and his family threatens to disown him, disinherit him and even to kill him. He must forsake his family and follow Christ, even if all the members of his family become his enemies. This happens often in foreign lands; it also occurs in the UK and in European nations.

Second, a husband is converted and starts to follow Christ. His unbelieving wife opposes his conversion. "If you loved me," she says, "you would forsake Christ for me. If you loved me, you would stop praying, reading the Bible and going to church—do it for me!" Such a Christian husband must hate his wife in this sense: he must reject her, oppose her, refuse to listen to her and follow Christ despite her vehement opposition, even when she makes his life a misery.

Third, a young lady begins to date a young man. "If you loved me," he says, "you would stop going to that church and come to a liberal church to please

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me!” That young lady should hate her boyfriend in this sense: she should break off her relationship with him as soon as she sees that he is a hindrance to her Christian walk. Such a young man is not a suitable person for a godly young lady to marry or even to date.

Fourth, a family member calls you on the Lord’s day and invites you to a recreational event. He does this in order to tempt you away from the worship of God. You tell your family member, “Today is the Lord’s day. I will be at church today. You are welcome to come along with me but I will not neglect the worship of God to please you.”

Do not think, though, that this applies only when an unbelieving family member attempts to persuade a believer to be unfaithful to Christ. The same principle applies even within Christian homes and families. If a husband tries foolishly to lead his wife into sin (think of Abraham encouraging his wife to lie), she must oppose him. If a wife tries foolishly to lead her husband into sin (think of Job’s wife encouraging her husband to curse God and die), he must oppose her. If parents try to lead children into sin (think of Jacob’s mother urging him to deceive his blind father), they must refuse. If siblings try to lead one another into sin (think of Joseph’s brothers plotting to sell Joseph into slavery), they must resist. In that sense, Christ requires hatred for the family member.

This often happens with respect to church membership. Often one spouse, who is spiritually stronger, desires to attend a faithful church but the spiritually weaker spouse or the spiritually weaker children oppose the idea. They are content to remain in a less faithful church or even in a false church. They have no desire to worship Christ in a faithful church or at least their desire never moves them to seek out a join a faithful church. Christ says that we must seek to please Him and not our family.

Oppose, forsake, reject and hate your family for Christ’s sake!

### **The Cost of Discipleship**

This is simply part of the cost of discipleship. Jesus summarizes the cost in Luke 14:27: “And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.” To bear one’s cross is to undergo painful self-denial

for the sake of Christ. It is to crucify your desires, preferences, ambitions and plans in order to follow Jesus Christ, whose will becomes your will.

But in following Jesus Christ, there will be opposition and often the greatest opposition will be at home from our family. Then we say, “Jesus is Lord. We are not Lord; our family is not Lord. Only Jesus is Lord.”

When a person hears the gospel and when he understands the demands of Christ, one of his first questions that he asks is this, “If I believe this, if I become a Christian, what will my family say?” Christ answers, “It does not matter what your family says—follow Me! Your family might be highly displeased, your parents might disown you, your spouse might divorce you, your children might hate you and the other members of your family might oppose you—follow Me!”

Notice that this instruction is not only for a certain class of disciple but for *all* disciples of Jesus. There are not two categories of Christian: the entrance-level, middle-class Christian with a comfortable, carefree lifestyle and the serious, committed, self-denying, cross-bearing Christian. *All* Christians practice self-denial, *all* Christians carry the cross and *all* Christians hate their family in the sense described in Luke 14: “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (v. 26).

## **The Reasons for the Difficulty**

This is a difficult calling because we naturally love our family and that natural love for our family is good. Nevertheless, Jesus says about His mission: “Think not that am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). That sword cuts even though families. Christ divides families. For example, He saves one family member but He does not save another. The result is enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent *in our families*. That happened in the first human family, when ungodly Cain murdered his godly brother Abel.

Moreover, when God regenerates us, He does not immediately deliver us from the old man of sin. The result is enmity between our old man and our new man. The result is also enmity between the old man of our father, mother, children and siblings, and our new man. And that is very painful!

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If your spouse or children or parents or brother or sister (God forbid!) were guilty of sin, refused to repent and were placed under discipline, would you take the side of your family or Christ's side (assuming the discipline is lawful and correct)? Or would you leave the church with them in order to protect them? If your wife threatened to divorce you and take the children, unless you followed her into sin, would you follow her or follow Christ? Do not say that these things never happen, for they happen often in the church!

The calling is painful not only because of our natural affection for our family but also because scorned family members can make life very difficult for the faithful disciple of Christ. A scorned wife can vex her husband; a disappointed husband can vex his wife. The Christian has to live with the scorned spouse! Although Samson and Delilah were not married, the principle is similar: "And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death" (Judg. 16:16). How easy to surrender to sin for the sake of a quiet life! The same is true of our relationship to our other family members. We pay a real cost when we oppose the wishes of our family for the sake of Jesus Christ. The result is painful, sometimes even violent, arguments and threats around the family table!

And remember, too, the calling for consistency. Hatred for family is a lifelong calling. It is not enough to refuse your family once but you must continue to oppose them. They are waiting for you to capitulate to their wishes and, if you compromise once, they will find it easier to persuade you to compromise further and further, until your Christian testimony is all but ruined. There must be self-denial every day; there must be the daily bearing of the cross; there must be holy hatred for our family every day, until we exchange the cross for a crown of glory.

### **The Motivation for Obedience**

What motivates a believer to do this? How can we have strength for this? The answer is the Spirit of Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus Christ enables us to love Jesus. Love for Jesus enables us to hate our family, where love for family would otherwise interfere with our love for Jesus.

Remember the One who is speaking here: it is Jesus, the Son of God. The Son of God is worthy of the strictest demands on your life. If anyone else made

such demands, you would view him as an egotistical megalomaniac. But Jesus, the Lord, the Son of God, He is worthy of this.

Moreover, believing reader, Jesus gave His life on the cross for you. Your spouse did not; your children did not; your brothers and sisters did not; your parents did not. *Only Jesus did.* Therefore, your whole allegiance belongs to Him and must belong to Him. You are purchased with a price. Therefore, He requires your exclusive allegiance, loyalty and obedience, even when your family and the whole world object.

And remember that Jesus leads by example. When Jesus was twelve years old, respectfully, kindly, submissively, but firmly and clearly, He told Mary and Joseph, “I must be about my Father’s business” (Luke 2:49). When Mary interfered with His Father’s business at the wedding in Cana, Jesus rejected His mother’s interference, “Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come” (John 2:4). When His mother and siblings tried to interrupt His public ministry, He rejected them, “Who is my mother? and who are my brethren?” He said. And, pointing to His disciples (and not His earthly relatives), He said, “Behold my mother and my brethren” (Matt. 12:48-50). Jesus was never guilty of sinful hatred. Nevertheless, nothing came between Him and His faithful love for His heavenly Father.

Therefore, *only one thing* can drive out misplaced love and loyalty for family, and give us a holy hatred for them: love for Jesus Christ. Hatred is never good for its own sake. Holy hatred is hatred for the sake of love for Jesus.

Christ renounced His own will in order to do His Father’s will, even though doing His Father’s will upset His mother, His brethren and His closest friends. And even though His Father’s will brought Him to the cross. So love your family and be kind to them, but be prepared to hate them if they oppose Christ. That is true Christian discipleship.