

“Haters... by God’s grace” Luke 14:25-33

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

We can whine and complain about today’s world, where people are so selfish, where no one wants to take on any responsibility or to commit to anything, where everything seems to be about me and myself, about me feeling good. I think sometimes we enjoy whining about others. It makes us feel better about ourselves.

But we shouldn’t go that far, we shouldn’t be criticizing the unbelieving world. We should at first take a good look at ourselves. Are we immune to this plague of self-centeredness, where we think that everything has to happen according to our preferences?

How often we can hear self-identifying Christians complaining about the very idea that being a Christian could actually mean that we need to take up certain commitments and responsibilities, to do certain things and also avoid doing others.

That it should mean real changes in our lives. That being a Christian is not about me and what I prefer, that it is about committing ourselves to Jesus and to our congregations, about committing to listening and learning the Gospel message.

That to be a Christian means that we commit ourselves to prayer and leading a holy life, avoiding anything that may displease our Father in heaven. That we commit to supporting the sharing of the Gospel by all means possible, by doing it ourselves, supporting it with our giving, and praying for those who try to bring others into this wonderful fellowship with the Father and the Son.

How does it sound? Too many requirements... We would like to pick and choose what we prefer. Isn’t Christianity simply about caring for people and making them feel good? Shouldn’t we be less demanding and more loving, more like Jesus?

Perhaps people who think that way haven't actually read the Bible. Anyhow, here comes the cold shower from our loving and gracious Jesus Himself. Buckle up, dear fellow saints, for it is going to get bumpy!

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." "Thank you, Jesus, for these encouraging words!

What a great advertisement for Christianity! Can we quote you to our relatives and friends?" What can we do with what Jesus says? Can we somehow explain it away showing that it actually means something very different?

Perhaps Jesus was just like us, saying what He didn't actually mean? What do you think? But perhaps this is what He said, and this is what He meant and we just need to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to understand what it means for us today?

That will be the focus of our today's meditations. So, what is Jesus demanding from us? The answer is one word – allegiance. Ultimate allegiance. The ultimate allegiance to Jesus from Nazareth, the Son of the Almighty. Or simply, it is about the 1st Commandment.

That we should fear, love and trust in this God above all things. Let's take a closer look at our today's Gospel reading, for it helps to make sense of how the 1st Commandment works practically.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Matthew puts it differently, more mildly. "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." So, which one of those is it?

Do we need to hate our relatives, or do we need to love them less than Jesus? It is both actually. Jesus speaks in these verses about the 1st Commandment, about loving the Triune God above all things and above all people.

It is very helpful to think about what Jesus demands in terms of allegiance. To love God above all things is to have the highest, the ultimate allegiance to Him. Not to our fathers or mothers, or wives or children, or anyone else, but to our God.

And thinking in terms of allegiance helps also to understand what Jesus means by the demand to hate everyone. Not to hate people as such, especially our closest God-given family, but to hate anything that would stand between us and our God.

If your parents demand higher allegiance than your allegiance to Jesus, then you should reject this request. If your wife or husband demands higher allegiance to them than to Jesus, you need to reject it. The same goes with everyone else.

The point is this. That we need to hate anything that would stand between us and Jesus, and to turn away from it towards Jesus. Parents, spouses, children, siblings are wonderful gifts of our gracious Creator, but if they try to turn you away from Jesus, then what they do comes from Satan, and then we wholeheartedly hate it.

What Jesus asks from us is nothing else but to imitate Him. Jesus loved and obeyed His parents, but He never allowed anyone to stand between or to turn Him away from His Father in heaven. This is what He expects from us as well.

Very practically it means that whenever any of our loved ones or friends ask us to make a choice between them and Jesus, between being with Jesus, listening to Jesus and acting and living according to His will and doing something against is, we are to choose Jesus. That simple.

But... that may not be that easy. That leads to the next saying of Jesus. “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” Having the highest allegiance to Jesus will inevitably come with a cost.

That is what Jesus calls our cross. It is not about general hardship in our lives. We all have plenty of that. It is about what you will have to sacrifice, to suffer, to lose, not to gain, etc. by choosing to follow Jesus.

It may put you against your own family members. It may complicate your relationships. It may set you at odds with the expectations of society. It may mean to suffer at workplace, or among peers. It may mean that people will think that you are a hater, a backward person, a religious fanatic, etc. It will mean some very tangible price to pay if you want to be Jesus’ disciple.

This is what Jesus expects from us. As we can see He is not so much interested to please us and to give us what we want and to allow us to determine what kind of Christians we would prefer to be. He demands our highest allegiance.

It is either or. Either the Triune God is your God, or something or someone else. You can’t serve two masters. Jesus is not our hobby. Jesus is not a name of our social group. Jesus is not our way of feeling good about ourselves. He is our God.

And He claims our entire life, our highest allegiance to Himself. Otherwise, we can’t be His disciple. How does this sound? Does it sound too hard? Sure, it is the narrow gate. But, just listen to this... for it makes so much sense.

Why would you accept such a deal? Because of what Jesus actually offers you. Jesus doesn’t simply say “give everything up!” Not at all! He says: “I gave everything up for you, so that now I could offer you something you could never have on your own.”

What He offers is life. True life. Everlasting life. He has true life in Himself and He invites you into this joyful and exciting divine fellowship with Himself and the Father through His Spirit.

Meaning, Jesus gives you His Spirit, the source of eternal life, the Spirit of truth and peace and wisdom, He sends His Spirit to dwell in us, to give us this new life, to create in us new hearts, new pure desires and longings, where we long to love and trust in God above all things. His Spirit dwells with us and helps us to get through all temptations, He protects you from all evil, and keeps you in the true faith.

And that is just a beginning. The final destination and the true fulfillment for the disciples of Jesus is yet to come. We can't see it with our eyes. Not yet. We can only see it with our ears. Jesus' promise to us, that we will see Him again.

This time in His divine glory. But this time we too will be made to be like Him, in beautiful glorified bodies, to reign with Him and the Father and to rejoice inhabiting the fully restored Earth.

Then Jesus uses two images to illustrate that to be His disciples is something truly great and majestic. He uses the image of an architect or a city builder and that of a king who is waging war.

With these two images Jesus challenges us to rethink how magnificent and great an undertaking it is to be His disciples. It requires all our undivided attention and commitment. But even then ... that is not enough.

Who can build the tower that Jesus is referring to on their own? Who can triumph over the army that is twice stronger than we? The obvious answer is that we can't do it on our own. We can't succeed being Jesus' disciple in our own power.

The point, as Jesus puts it, is this: "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." Meaning, we need to realize that nothing and no one can help us to succeed as Jesus' disciple, except – Jesus Himself.

No one and nothing can help us to obtain the eternal, divine treasures that Jesus offers to us on our own. The task of building the tower is too immense. The battle with the much stronger adversary is beyond our capabilities.

We can't manage it on our own. And we don't have to. And this is where we can see how giving up everything for Jesus makes so much sense. If we are looking for someone to trust, for someone who would help us to navigate the stormy waters of this life, for someone who really can make a difference?

Who would we be looking for? Surely often we look at our relatives, our family network, our friends. And that's okay. But ultimately, isn't the wisest thing to trust in someone, who has the greatest power, the greatest authority?

How about trusting in someone who has shown the greatest commitment to us, sacrificing Himself fully for our sake? How about someone who has promised that He will never ever abandon us? How about someone who is faithful to you till death and even beyond it?

How about someone whom no one and nothing can hinder? Who is in charge of the history? Who can foretell what He will do in hundreds of years from now, and then fulfill what He has foretold? Isn't that the wisest thing to trust this Person?

To whom else should we go, but to you, Jesus! For you have the words of eternal life. On our own we can do nothing, but with you – all things are possible. Walking together with you, when you accompany us, as your Spirit indwells in us, every day learning how to hate anything that stands between us and you.

Only that way we can succeed as your disciples. Living by your grace day by day. Thus, every day with you is like one more brick built into this gigantic tower. Every day with you is like one more little battle won waging this war against the powers of darkness.

And one day with your help, our tower will be completed. One day, with your help the final victory will be won. Then we will receive the prize and praise from our Lord, – our eternal home, the New Heavens and New Earth.

Then and only then there will be no need, no room for hate. For everything that stands between us and our God will be gone. As will all suffering, and pain, and crying, even death. Then there will be only fullness of joy in the presence of Jesus.

As for now, I pray that we would be, indeed, good haters by God's grace, according to the words of Jesus. Amen.