

“Do you want to suffer?” Matthew 10:24-39

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household. “So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And 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. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. 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 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.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

This is an amazing text that we have for our today’s meditation. This is one of these so called “hard sayings” of Jesus. These words Jesus said as He was sending out His disciples to proclaim the Good News.

It may sound hard at first, if we don’t understand what Jesus is saying, but as the Holy Spirit enlightens us and opens Jesus’ words for us, this text become for us a source of wonderful divine truth and of great encouragement.

I invite you to reflect on three questions today. First, what are our expectations when we become, or when we choose to continue as Jesus’ disciples? What do we hope for? Second, what Jesus warns us about?

Third, why would anyone want to follow this Jesus? What are our expectations and hopes? What are Jesus’ warnings? And why would anyone choose to follow this Jesus from Nazareth? Let’s begin with our hopes.

I am not suggestion that this is the only thing that majority of Christians expect from following Jesus, but just imagine if before Jesus ascended to the Father, He would have left us this sort of a promise:

“If you will follow me, then all the world will like you and appreciate you, they will think of you highly and will value you. They will look for your advice and will cherish your wisdom. If you follow me there will be no harm done to you ever.

Nothing wrong or painful will ever happen with you. No one will reject you or hurt you, and all your loved ones will embrace the Good News that you bring them and will rally around you to support you. It’s going to be pure joy and peace. You are going to be happy and satisfied with yourself and your life.”

How does that sound? Wouldn’t that be great? All our dreams come true. I, for one, would love it to go this way. And I am quite sure that most of Christians can relate to such sweet promises. Isn’t this what we desire in our hearts?

Unfortunately, there are many who still want to bear the name of Christians, and who indeed teach and proclaim something along these lines: “If you trust in Jesus, everything is going to be great. All your problems will disappear.

Everything will be fine in your life. Don’t you believe that this is what Jesus desires for you? And if these promises don’t come true in your life, then blame yourself, probably you haven’t prayed enough, or maybe your faith is too weak.”

Whatever sweet the above-mentioned promises may sound, there is a big problem with them. Can you guess what it is? It is the shared problem of entire humanity. We make everything about us. This explains why there are so many religious people.

We realize that we are not in control of our lives, we are too limited, so we are looking for someone stronger and more influential to make our dreams come true. All the many religions with multitude of different gods serve this very purpose.

To get me what I want. And if this is what we expect from the Triune God and if this is why we are members of the Church, then we are nothing more, but self-centered and self-interested pagans who bear Christian name.

Then it means that we have no clue of what it means to be a Christian. It is good to examine what our expectations and hopes are, what motivates us to be members of the Church, and we may find that we need to repent of our selfishness and to pray the Holy Spirit to renew our hearts and minds.

This brings us to our second question – what Jesus foretells, what will happen with those who try to follow Him faithfully? And suddenly there is a very different picture. We may not want to hear this, but there is no escape, no way around.

Looking at our today’s Gospel text we could summarize that faithful followers of Jesus may expect four things to happen with them. Not the ones that we mentioned earlier. Not at all. Here they come.

First, if you a follower of Jesus then you should expect from the world the same attitude and the same treatment as Jesus received. We will elaborate on this. Second, you may expect to face not only rejection, but also your very life to be threatened.

Third, you may expect that even your very closest, even your own family may become your enemies, and if you want to continue as Jesus' disciple, deep divisions may ravage your family.

Finally, not only everything around you, but even your very self will fight against you, or put is differently, the struggle will be not only external – against the circumstances around you, but also internal – with your own very self.

So, what do you think about these prospects? Let's dig a little deeper and see how they all are, indeed, true in Christian life, if you try to faithfully follow your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

First, about the attitude and treatment from the world. Isn't this so true? Remember how it was with Jesus. Did people like Him? Or did people hate Him? Both are true. When Jesus was giving people what they longed for – food and health and encouragement, He was adored and praised, they even wanted to make Him a king.

But what happened when He turned to the very reason why He had come, to call people to turn away from their idols and to return to the true God, put Him back in the centre of their lives and to hear the Good News that through Jesus they can receive the forgiveness of all their sins, and be reconciled with God.

As a free and unconditional gift, just come and receive it! Suddenly everything changed. Their favourite became their annoyance and their enemy. Who can listen, who wants to listen to such heavy words?! Who wants to remove themselves from the throne of their hearts and let the Triune God sit there? No one...

The same attitudes we can see today. As long as we as Christians care for others, serve them, bless them, we receive our share of compliments and acknowledgments. Attitudes change dramatically once we get to our main message:

“Repent and believe in the Gospel!” Then the same indifference, rejection and hatred that Jesus experienced, is turned towards us. I guess this is why so many prefer just to help and serve others, that pays, but are hesitant to speak the life-giving words of Jesus, the true reason why we are here.

For then our lives may be in danger. Countless number of God's saints have been murdered just because they tried to faithfully follow Jesus. It hasn't stopped today. Literary every day someone loses their life being guilty of one “deadly crime”, confessing that Jesus Christ is the Lord. In the West it is still much safer.

Our lives are not threatened yet, but our living most certainly is. It becomes more and more difficult to be confessing, faithful Christian. There are professions which

may be closed for Christians and careers which are hindered or made unavailable if we want to remain faithful to Jesus. If we believe our God the Creator, if we believe the sacredness of human life, if we believe God's good design for our relationships, if we stand for what is good and just and beautiful.

Christians may lose their jobs and their income or at least be blackmailed and portrayed as backward and evil if they want to remain faithful to Jesus. This all is happening in our society and many of you would know vivid illustrations of this.

The same goes with deep divisions in families. Is there anyone who haven't experienced it? Then blessed you are, I envy you. Most of us have experienced this first hand, and therefore we know how much it hurts.

Our families are the closest to our heart. The more we love someone, the more it hurts when there are divisions. So, we try to do our best to keep good relationships, avoiding to bring up what is the most important for us – our life with God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We don't want our loved ones to be our enemies, but when we do mention the only name that brings us salvation, is it like cold breeze cooling down our conversations, as if someone had said something inappropriate. We can feel that if we press on, it won't take long until our own family members become our enemies.

It is a heavy burden to carry. But perhaps even more difficult is to wrestle against our old selfish self. We don't want all of this. Hostility and rejection, problems and inconvenience, obstacles in relationships with our loved ones...

We would love to gain all the things that we mentioned in the beginning. If Jesus helped to get all of those, that would be great. Thus, we may get tired and bitter and cynical, longing for peace and acceptance and willing to give up the precious task entrusted to us – to speak the life-changing and life-giving words of our God.

Let someone else do it, let pastors do it, or missionaries. And pastors may think – let these parishioners do it, what is wrong with them... If you recognize some of this happening in your life, you are not alone, this is the cross that Jesus mentioned.

Here we come to the third, our main question – why would anyone choose to pick up such cross and follow this Jesus? The answer to this question is amazing. What Jesus says is amazing. Jesus reveals to us His divine perspective.

When Jesus speaks, it is like we are looking at the same realities with totally different eyes, from totally different perspective. The difficulties that we just reflected on is how we see it from where we sit, from our limited and self-centred perspective.

We often assume – if God is in control, then nothing bad should happen in our lives. Sure, look at Jesus! No! But here comes God's perspective. The big picture. The true and all-embracing story of what is going on. This age is coming to an end.

The day is close when everything will be revealed. Everyone will be brought to God's throne of judgement. No injustice, no evil deed, no lie, no secret sin, nothing will remain hidden. The Son of God, Jesus, comes to rescue us from this day.

He left the divine glory and He came as one of us, He took our place, and He received what we deserve. He was rejected, His family turned away from Him, at the cross even the Father had forsaken Him, His life was taken, and He did it for us. For you.

If you accept Jesus' invitation, there is no more judgment for you. It is already done. Jesus received it in full. What awaits you is the resurrection in new and glorified body, just like Jesus, and the life everlasting. But what about following Jesus now?

The thing is that Jesus doesn't simply instruct us to do something for Him. It is so much more... First, He welcomes you into the divine fellowship with Himself, His Father and the Holy Spirit. Already now! The whole Trinity embraces you.

Jesus invites you to share in His journey. To deny ourselves and to follow Him. To participate in His mission. He gives you the opportunity to take part in God's work of redemption and restoration of the entire creation. To be His body here on earth.

He offers you to be His hands who feed the hungry. His feet who walk with the suffering. And the most importantly – His mouth who speaks the truth and calls back to the Father those who are lost. He allows us to take part in the greatest rescue mission ever – saving the lost humanity from eternal death.

As members of the body of Christ, we are not only united with the Triune God by Him indwelling in us, we are privileged to relive what our Lord Jesus experienced, and to be little Christs for others, to deny ourselves and live for others.

To suffer hostility and rejection, as Jesus did, and to do it with joyful hearts, thus showing that we don't seek our glory and our good, but that we gladly sacrifice ourselves so that others could receive the same divine gifts that we have received.

And we do this knowing that the eyes of our Father in heaven are always fixed on us, He knows everything that happens with us, good and bad, and even your hairs are numbered, and we are always in His hand, and as long as we desire to be with Him, He will bring us to share in His heavenly glory. This is why we gladly take up our crosses and follow this Jesus despite all the trials and tribulations.

See, this isn't a hard saying. It may seem hard as long as we live for ourselves. But as soon as we turn to our God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, to whom we owe everything, the hard saying become the Good News and the source of greatest encouragement.

Amen.