

These are tough words, especially coming from our Prince of Peace, Jesus, the one we look to, to find peace in our hearts and minds; peace in our soul. Yet they're here; not to soften; not to explain away. They're here for every disciple of his to read and to understand that a relationship with him runs the deepest; demands the most; underlies every other relationship, commitment, goal, intention. They're here for every disciple of his to understand that a relationship with him frames every outcome; every consequence; everything that life can dish up for us. Being a disciple of Christ sets the bar—the bar of life, the highest it can be.

Some say that religion is for sissies; that it gives us the easy way out; that it is the pill in the cupboard we reach for when things get tough; when life becomes overbearing and we need to find relief. Some say that religion pumps us full of false hope; let's us off too easily when what we really need is just "buck up;" face the reality that looms like a mountain before us and "get over it!" And maybe there is a "religion" out there that fills that bill, but if you study any of the major religions of the world, you will not find that they are Pollyanna's easy way out of reality. They all call for discipline and commitment in life. They bring a standard to life that seeks to draw out the best in us. That is so, for Muslims; for Hindus; for Christians; for Jews. Religion is not for sissies. Following Christ is not for the faint hearted. So what strength can we find for the journey? How do we begin to bring God's "best" to life and have any chance of success?

Jesus came and lived the life that we live and never found the road to be easy; never found a detour that took him safely around the hazards. He lived the life described by the Psalmist—the one who experienced God in his life as a hand that guided him and steadied him and cared for him; a hand that led him through the darkest valleys not in fear, but with a sense of comfort—with a sense of loyal companionship that would see him through to the other side. Jesus told his disciples that they could expect in their lives what they saw in his and as Jesus' life unfolded before them, we all know he was called upon to endure the worst. Yet the story did not end there for him. God never abandoned him, and every believer; every disciple since his walk on this earth, knows that the end of Jesus' life was only the beginning; that his resurrection was the assurance that life's final enemy, death, was conquered once and for all by the everlasting power of God Almighty. Whatever we experience in this life; and there will be good times for joy and there will be hard times that will test us; with Jesus' example before us, we can know that God will never abandon us; God will always be there to guide us through—steady our way; that death may sadden our hearts, but it is never has the final say—it is not the end; that God is the victor over death; our hope for life eternal.

Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God near. Jesus' mission became the mission of his disciples. Jesus' mission has become our own. We live and labor to bring God's kingdom near and to help us keep the standards of that kingdom fresh in our minds and purpose, maybe we could remember 3 stories Jesus told us. First, remember the story of the Prodigal Son—the patient and unconditional love of a parent for a child. And then remember the story of a hole dug through the roof of a house where Jesus was staying—and the persistence and courage of friends for a down-and-out buddy. And finally, remember the story of the Good Samaritan—the care and the compassion extended by a stranger for a stranger. The work of God's kingdom is the work of caring for one another—whether we have a natural sense of care or step out and help a stranger. That work takes patience and sacrificial love; it takes persistence and courage; that work takes

compassion—feeds on a desire for mercy and justice to be a defining force in life. You bring God’s kingdom near—God’s presence right into the life situations and circumstances you live. The bar is set at its highest, urging your best response.

Jesus came, he said in our text, not to bring peace but a sword. That doesn’t sound good to us especially here as we talk about all the “caring” that the kingdom of God is about. What Jesus made clear was that the first Commandment is the governing rule in our lives. Remember he repeated that when asked what the greatest commandment of life was and he responded that it was to love God. Love God first and above all others and things and self. Love God first, and all other matters in our lives will fall into order. And yet we will find that it is a challenge to love God first and foremost and never waver in our loyalty. Again, the bar is set the highest and requires every bit of our resolve and even more to meet. The “even more” comes as we acknowledge God first and ask for God’s help. We cannot do it on our own. We can only begin as we rely upon God Almighty to keep us on this disciplined quest; only as we rely upon God for the grace to live each day as a follower of Christ; as one bringing God’s own love near in our lives and our responses to life and our responses to others. It is a struggle. It is a battle. It is not an easy road we choose to travel, when we choose to follow Christ; choose to be his disciple in this life we have.

There was a picture of Bizzy in the paper a few days ago that is now hanging on the poster board down stairs. She’s jumping a hurdle—all action frozen as she clears the barrier. And you look at her face and see her eyes riveted ahead; and it is in the focus those eyes have that her whole body is focused; carried ahead to the next jump. That single picture tells the truth every disciple will live by. This bar is set high—this standard in a disciple’s life—in the life we live ourselves as we seek to follow Christ; in the life we share with others as we bring the response of God’s hope and goodness to life. That bar is high; remember, it is God’s own call upon us. As we respond, it is our own chosen way and tough as it may be, God intends for us to meet with success. We can, as we keep our focus; set our attention upon God. It’s there in the focus—ours always upon God; that fulfills the task at hand—that carries us on to the next. It is there that we will find our way—over every challenge; every struggle we will meet. It’s there in that picture, worth a thousand words, as we seek to define our lives as God’s own. Amen.

“Focus for the journey” Matthew 10:24-39 062208 MkJH