

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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I CAME TO BRING A SWORD

Matthew 10:34-36

The Lord Jesus has said many times that much persecution is to be encountered by those who choose to follow Him. This is how He describes the object of His mission on earth.

Matthew 10:34. "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.

35 "For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law';

36 "and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.'

A puzzling statement

At first sight, a passage like this can be somewhat puzzling and perhaps embarrassing to Christians. If Jesus had said, 'I came into the world to bring peace,' then there would be no problem. We prefer to say that Jesus came to bring peace on earth. It is more 'logical' and it sounds better. But when we read the sentence a second time, we realize that it is not what Jesus says. Rather He says, 'I did not come to bring peace. I came to bring a sword.' What kind of declaration is this? Is Jesus saying that the purpose of His coming is to produce discord and contention? That doesn't sound like a religious leader speaking. Religion is supposed to talk about peace, not about conflict.

And to make things more complicated, it seems that elsewhere the Lord Jesus does talk about peace. In Luke 10:6, when Jesus sent out His disciples, He said to them, 'Bring this gospel to the man of peace.' The man of peace is the person whose heart is open to the gospel. This kind of person will receive the gospel. So there it says that the gospel is to come to the man of peace and here we read that Jesus did not come to bring peace.

Or we can look at John 14:27. *Peace I leave with you.* 'I give you peace in My special way, not as the world gives to you.' Jesus did give peace to His disciples and to us as well. Therefore how can it be said that He did not come to bring peace?

Paul says in Ephesians 6:15 that the gospel is a gospel of peace. Now if that is the case, how can Jesus say that He did not bring peace? He came to bring the gospel to a lost world and the gospel is a gospel of peace. There seems to be a contradiction in Jesus' teaching.

Not a civil peace

Well, let's look at His words carefully and we will see that there is no problem. Often problems arise when we try to understand the word of God in a superficially way. The Lord Jesus did not say, 'I did not come to bring peace.' But what He did say is this: *Do not think that I came to bring peace **on earth**.* He did not come to bring peace on this earth. That is to say, He did not come to change the social structure of this world. He did not come to bring a social peace to a world that is living in sin and in disobedience to God.

The Jews believed that when the Messiah comes, there would be a time of world peace. Perhaps their conviction was based on passages like Isaiah 9:5-7 or Zechariah 9:9-10. It says in Isaiah, *For unto us a Child is born... Of the increase of His government and **peace** there will be no end.* Zechariah speaks of the Messiah in this way: *Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation ...He shall speak **peace** to the nations; His dominion shall be from sea to sea.*

Not that long ago, some Christians talked about a 'social gospel.' They believed that by teaching the right thing, they could change the social structure of our world. 'If we teach the gospel to man,' they thought, 'then he can become a better person.' They were basically trying to use the gospel as a means of education with the belief that it would change the human nature. But this kind of thinking misunderstands the problem of sin. Our human nature is corrupted by sin and you cannot change it by some Christian education. You cannot use Christian teaching to change a man. It just doesn't work. You need something much deeper than that. The OT says, *There is no peace for the wicked* (Isaiah 48:22). The world, this earth, is wicked. It is living in sin. How can it have peace? It cannot have peace. If sin does not disappear completely there will always be wars.

Jesus cannot bring peace to the world as it is now. But He does bring peace to those who come in repentance to the Lord for their sins. It is to this kind of people, not to the world generally, that Jesus brings peace. It is the peace between you and God, and one with the other. One with the other in the sense of all those who, in Christ, have repented of their sins. Every time the Bible speaks about offering peace to humans (Luke 2:14; 7:50; 8:48; 10:5-6; Acts 10:36; Ephesians 2:13-17), we have to understand that peace comes only to those who have responded to God's salvation. And because some do not respond favorably, the peace that Jesus brings in His first coming to earth cannot be universal.

There will be no peace in this world until man's heart is changed. And how can man's heart ever be changed? It is changed when the cross comes into his life, when the sword of Jesus pierces through his heart.

The cross divides

'I came to bring, not peace, but a sword.' Think carefully about those words. Take a sword and stick into the ground. What do you see? I tell you what I see. I see a cross. A sword that you stick into the ground looks like a cross. And not only are they similar in shape, but they are also similar in their function. They are two instruments of death. You see, the more you meditate about the meaning of this sword, the more it leads you to the cross.

Now let's reflect on this sword. What does a sword do? Well, the blade of a sword cuts and divides. And Jesus says that this is exactly what happens when He comes. The effect and the consequence of His coming into the world is division, which is called a sword. The message of the cross divides. It cuts. That is to say, it separates. It separates the righteous from the unrighteous. It separates the unrighteous from their sins. The parallel to Matthew 10:34 is Luke 12:51 where instead of a sword we have the word 'division' because the sword divides. Jesus says, *Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather **division**.*

This division will affect the most intimate family relationships. *For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law (Matthew 10:35).'* This passage is taken from Micah 7:6. We notice that the sword will come between generations, between the younger and the older generation - the son, the daughter, the daughter-in-law against the father, the mother and the mother-in-law. This shows how the sword Jesus brings severs the closest family ties. From my experience, it seems that in a non-Christian family, the older generation is usually more resistant to the message of the cross than the younger generation. It is more often the younger people who come under the opposition of their parents when they come to the Lord.

We see then that this division is a division in man's personal response to Jesus. It is about our reaction to the gospel and to the cross. Jesus' coming brings a division between those who respond to His message and those who reject it. 'The effect of my teaching will be,' the Lord Jesus says, 'not to unite those who confess and those who deny Me, but to divide them, even though they belong to the same family.' Why is there such a division? Because Jesus' message compels people to take sides and members of the same family may be in opposite camps. A few will believe the truth of Christ, but generally speaking most will oppose it.

When someone seriously decides to be a disciple, his trouble very often starts with his family because true discipleship immediately brings a conflict of loyalties. In this respect, Jesus' teaching is very clear. *He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me (Matthew 10:37).* If commitment to Jesus conflicts with family loyalty, following Jesus must take precedence over the natural love of family. It has been the experience of many believers to be disowned by their families because of their faith.

The cross exposes

So a sword divides. What else does it do? A sword exposes what is underneath. I am thinking of the surgeon's scalpel that cuts through the abdomen, exposing the intestines, in order to remove the inflamed appendix. Similarly the cross has a way of piercing your heart and showing you what you really are. Its action is such that the thoughts of your heart are exposed, revealed, laid bare before God. These are the words of Luke 2:35. Speaking to Mary, Simeon said, *A sword will pierce through your own soul also, that **the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.*** The thoughts of many will be revealed by the cross. Simeon is speaking about the thoughts of many being made manifest by Jesus' preaching. You see, the cross is like a spiritual X-ray. It looks into your heart and shows you what you are spiritually. You are a sinner. You will not know how sinful you are until the cross penetrates your heart.

You know, many people cannot accept the gospel because they believe that they are pretty good people. They don't kill. They don't cheat. They don't do any harm to anybody. And they say, 'Why do you need to be saved? Saved from what?' It is because of this worldly righteousness that many live in illusion that they are good people. And if you think that you are good, why would you ever want to change? There is no need to change!

'I came to bring a cross.' We thank God for the cross! Do you see the glory of the cross? It is the instrument that cuts through our hearts, revealing what we are like. It is like the physician's knife that cuts through the abscess until all the pus, i.e. all the filth, comes out. And then we understand what the OT says. It says in Jeremiah 17:9 that the heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked. In the eyes of God, every man is sinful. We wouldn't have believed that until the cross pierces our heart. As this cross cuts into my heart, I discover with great sadness and shame all the dirt, all the sinfulness that is in my heart. The path to holiness is painful because we discover just how bad we are. If you look honestly at yourself and if you allow the message of the cross to speak to your heart, all your self-righteousness disappears. Never again will you dare to attack other people about their sinfulness. You can only say, like the tax-collector, 'Lord, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Be merciful to me a sinner.' That is the glory of the cross.

The cross kills

But the sword does more than that and this takes us to our third point. Not only does it separate people. Not only does it cut us open and reveal our spiritual condition. A sword kills. The cross kills. The cross will go right through your soul and kill you. Let's go back to this passage in Luke 2:35. *A sword will pierce through your own soul.* Here Simeon tells Mary that her child will cause a sword to pass through her own soul.

This image shows that Jesus will bring extreme emotional pain to His mother. But what does it refer to? 'A sword shall pierce through your soul.' Think again. What was the sword that pierced Mary's soul? When did the sword pierce her soul? At the cross. It was very hard for Mary to see Jesus frequently exposed to danger among people who despised Him but never more than when she stood at His cross. She saw her Son hanging on the cross, bleeding, gasping, and slowly dying. The agony that she felt was like a sword piercing her soul. The cross was going right through her soul. That was the sword that Simeon had prophesied. We can see that even here the cross is spoken of in terms of the sword.

What happens when a sword goes through your soul? Your soul dies. You die. The sword kills. The cross kills also. The cross is going to pierce your soul and kill you. Because the person who wants to follow Jesus will have to accept to give up his life by taking up the cross. He does not cling to this life anymore. Instead he acknowledges Jesus' claim over his destiny. *He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it* (Matthew 10:39). If you try to save your life by distancing yourself from the cross, you will lose your life because you will prove yourself to be unworthy of Jesus. That is why Jesus says in this passage, *He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me* (Matthew 10:38). To take up the cross means death, the death of the self, the denial of self. Following Christ requires the denial of self because Jesus demands loyalty over every part of our life.

So the sword kills. The cross kills our old way of life. When God changes a person, He does it thoroughly. He does not renew us by patching up our old sinful character. God is not satisfied with a patchwork. God is interested in a total revolution of the person. He wants to make a new person out of everyone who comes to Him. But the new life cannot come unless the old life dies. The sword has to kill our old life before we can have a new life. This is what baptism is about. In baptism, we are buried with Christ. We die with Him and we rise to a new life. Notice. We do not rise again until we die. If we don't die, neither will we live. We have to die before we can live. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit* (John 12:24). It is only when the grain dies that it can have life. And we die when we have the cross in our heart because it is the cross that kills our old nature.

The cross makes alive

Do you now see the beautiful relationship between the sword and the cross? They are both instruments of death. They both kill. But it doesn't stop there. The Lord Jesus can take an instrument of death and He turns it into an instrument of life. In that sense, Jesus uses the cross to kill in order to make alive. This is something that we read about in the OT. Take for example Deuteronomy 32:39. There God speaks of Himself and says, *I kill and I make alive.* The Lord kills and He makes alive. He kills in order to make alive. Similar words appear in 1Samuel 2:6 where Hannah says, *The Lord kills and makes alive.* Now this is exactly what God does through the cross. He kills and He makes alive.

So the 3rd point is that the cross kills. And the 4th point is that the cross makes alive. The same point is made in the NT in Luke 2:34 where Simeon says these remarkable words. *This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel.* 'This child (i.e. by His cross) is set for the

falling (the killing) and the rising (the resurrection) of many in Israel.’ This is a beautiful sentence. Both the division and the killing, and the making of life are expressed in the same sentence. Christ will divide the nation. The message of the cross will not be accepted by everyone. Some will rise. Others will not. Here salvation is expressed by the term ‘rising.’ In Greek, it literally means ‘to stand up again, to stand up on your feet once more.’ This is the word in the Bible for the resurrection. In fact, elsewhere in the NT, this word ‘rising’ is always used of the resurrection. You see, there is no resurrection without first dying. There is no resurrection without falling. That’s exactly what Simeon prophesized. Some will fall never to rise again. They will be condemned. Some will fall in order to rise to a newness of life. They will enter into salvation.

Paul says that the cross is the power of God unto salvation (1Corinthians 1:18). We are saved by the power of God through the cross. Then at the end of Galatians, Paul also says, *But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world* (Galatians 6:14). Here again we see that the cross kills and that the cross makes alive. ‘I have been crucified by the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ. I have been killed to the world. But also I have been made alive by God with the same cross.’

The cross, like the sword, separates. The cross, like the sword, exposes. The cross, like the sword, kills. The cross, like the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17), makes alive because it sets us free from sin. Now we understand what the Lord Jesus means when He says, ‘I came to bring a sword.’ That sword is the cross. Jesus brought the cross into the world in order to reconcile all men to God. Paul writes in Colossians 1:20 that He has *made peace by the blood of His cross*. It is through His cross, and more specifically through the blood of His cross that we can have our salvation.