

The Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

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| <i>First Reading</i> | Wisdom 9:13-18B |
| <i>Response</i> | In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge. |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14 AND 17 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | Philemon 9-10, 12-17 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Let your face shine upon your servant; and teach me your laws. |
| <i>Gospel</i> | Luke 14:25-33 |

The 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C continues our journey through the Gospel of Luke with another one of Jesus' hard sayings. There are certain sayings that are in the Gospel of Luke and are particularly tough; they're difficult. We looked, in an earlier video, at Jesus' statement about the number of the saved, will it many or few? And here we encounter what might be (at least in my experience with students in the classroom) the most scandalous or shocking or difficult of all of Jesus' teachings in the gospel for people to understand and to accept. It's his demand that if you want to be his disciple, you have to hate your mother, your father, your sisters, your brother, your wife, your children and even your own life, otherwise you can't be his disciple. Now in our day and time, the idea of hatred (hate crimes), is widely held up as one of the worst things a person can do (to be a hater, to be filled with hatred). And so it's shocking to see this kind of statement on the lips of Jesus. So what I want to do is I want to walk through it, and read it, and I'll try to put it in a Jewish 1st Century context, explain it, and also look at how the tradition has interpreted this, because I think this is one of those passages that even devout Christians are genuinely concerned about, or genuinely confused by. They don't know necessarily what to make of what Jesus is saying here. So let's look at Luke 14:25-33, the gospel for today:

Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, "If any one 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 to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel 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 an embassy and asks terms of peace. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.¹

Alright, end of the gospel. I don’t envy the homilists out there because this is a tough one to preach. I think this is one of Jesus’ hardest hard sayings. Well, unless you’re a teenager. Actually if you’re a teenager you might actually think this is one of Jesus’ easiest sayings. Think about it. Can’t stand my mom and dad? Check. Can’t stand my brothers and sisters? Check. Hate my life? Check. Maybe if you’re a teenager, this one’s easy. But for everybody else, this is a tough saying of Jesus.

So what’s going on here? What does Jesus mean? Alright, so the first thing we want to walk through here is, point number 1, he’s laying the conditions for being one of his disciples. That’s what the whole passage is about. It’s about the cost and the conditions of discipleship. And I’m sure I’ve mentioned elsewhere in earlier videos that the word disciple, *mathetes*, literally means “a student”. So if you want to be a student of Jesus, this is what you have to do. You have to hate your mother, father, sister, brother, wife, children, and even your own life, otherwise you can’t be his student. Now somebody might say, “Oh, Dr. Pitre, does the Greek word ‘hate’ mean something different?” We’ll see in a minute that there’s a nuance that can be had here, but I think that in its original context the ordinary meaning of the Greek word ‘hate’, *miseó*, is exactly what it means in English: hate. Think about the word “misogynist”, it’s from the Greek *miseó* (to hate), it’s somebody who hates women. That’s what a misogynist is. Or misanthrope (not that people say that anymore), a misanthrope is somebody who hates people, because *anthropos* means man (or person; human being), *mis* is from *miseo* (to hate). So the normal meaning of *miseo* does mean “to hate”, which would mean “to will evil to another”, and it’s usually the opposite of the word “love”, *agapao*, *agape*. So the question becomes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

(real quickly), “Why does Jesus say to hate your family (in the Gospel of Luke 14) when just seven chapters earlier, who’d he tell us to love? Do you remember? Luke 6:32:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

Skip down to v. 35:

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great...

So, how can Jesus tell his disciples to love their enemies in chapter 7 and to hate their family in chapter 14? Well, that apparent contradiction should already give you a clue that Jesus doesn’t mean this literally. It would be a contradiction for him to say “love your enemies, but hate your family.” However, we also know that one of Jesus’ favorite methods of teaching is what scholars call hyperbole, which would be to exaggerate something, to put something in a shocking way in order (number 1) to make a point, but also (number 2) for you to remember it. It’s a memorable saying. Like, “Did you hear what that guy said? He said, ‘If you don’t hate your father and mother and sister and brothers, you can’t be one of his students. You can’t be one of his disciples.’” Think about that. The shock value actually helps people remember it and then they’ll repeat it to others. They’ll say, “How could he say that, the Torah and the Commandments say ‘honor your mother and father’”? So there’s a shock value that’s involved. And teachers do this all the time. You exaggerate in order to make a point. Jesus’ most famous example of this is from Mark 9:45-47 when he says, “if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” That’s hyperbole. He doesn’t literally mean for us to cut our hands or cut our eyes out, but he’s exaggerating in order to make a point. And I think in this case he is exaggerating this as well. He doesn’t actually want his disciples to harbor ill will toward their father, or mother, or sister, or brother, or children, or wife, or themselves. He doesn’t want them to harm themselves (like, self-inflicted harm). What he is doing though is he is using the imagery of hate as a hyperbole in order to emphasize that you can prefer no one else to him. He is to be loved above all. And if you love your father, mother, sister, brothers, wife, children, or if you love your own life more than you love Jesus, you can’t be his disciple.

Now you might be thinking, “Ok, Dr. Pitre, how do I know that that’s what he means by ‘hate’? I mean, you just said hate means ‘to hate’ (literally in Greek), so how are you sure it can be used that way?” Well, there are examples of a situation in which the word “hate”, in context, clearly has this meaning of preferential love. I’ll give you an example from Genesis 29:30-31. There’s the famous story of Jacob, Rachel and Leah. If you remember, Jacob gets tricked into marrying Leah (the oldest daughter, whom he wasn’t attracted to) before Rachel who he was in love with (who he worked seven years for). So when he marries Leah, his father-in-law, Laban, ends up giving him Rachel as well, after seven more years of work. And then, Genesis 29 says this: “so Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb.” In the Septuagint, that’s the same words for love and hate that I just mentioned, and that Jesus uses here. *Miseo* for hate, *Agapao* for love; but in context it’s clear that Jacob does not harbor ill will toward Leah. He’s not trying to hurt Leah or kill her or harm her. When it says that “Leah was hated”, what it means was that he loved Rachel more than Leah; he preferred Rachel to Leah, and so God blessed Leah because she was hated. That, I would suggest to you, is the meaning of what Jesus says when he says “unless you hate your father and mother, sister and brother, wife and children more than me, you can’t be my disciple.”

And if you have any doubts about that — this is a good principle — if you want to interpret the saying of Jesus in one gospel (if it’s a little obscure), you can always look at the version in a different gospel. Sometimes it’ll be slightly different, but the substance will be the same. The meaning will be the same. And if you look in Matthew 10:37, Jesus actually says this similar teaching, but more explicitly and a little less hyperbolically. In v.37:

He who loves father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me. He who loves son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

So what’s Jesus saying there? Very clearly, you can’t love any member of your family, no matter who they are, more than you love him. If you do, then you’re not worthy of being his disciple. So Matthew 10 helps us understand Luke 14. So we want to make sure that although we interpret Jesus’ words literally (in other words, look at their meaning in context; what do the words mean?), we don’t want to be literalistic when it comes to an example of hyperbole — just like we wouldn’t want a bunch of one-hand, one-eyed Christians walking around. So he’s using hyperbole

to emphasize that they can't love anyone more than him, otherwise you can't be his disciple.

Now, before I go any further, I want you to understand, this doesn't necessarily lower the shock value of what Jesus would be saying to his initial Jewish audience, because what he's basically saying is, "You have to love me more than any other human being, including your wife, your children, or your parents." Now let me ask you a question, in 1st Century Judaism, who could you justifiably love more than your parents, or your spouse and children? Or, let me put it this way, who would have the right to demand that you love them more than your parents? I mean, after all, the first commandment in the second tablet of the Torah (of the Ten Commandments) is "honor your father and mother", literally, "glorify" your father and mother. What right does Jesus of Nazareth have to demand that you love and honor him more than your father and mother? Who can make that demand? Hmm, let's see. In the Old Testament, who demands that you love them with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength? Who demands that kind of exclusive, and absolute, and supreme love? Well, it's the Lord himself, God himself in Deuteronomy 6. This is the most famous passage in the Jewish Old Testament to this day, because it's recited to this day, three times a day. The *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

So notice, this is another perfect example of how, although Jesus doesn't go around the streets of Galilee saying, "Hey everybody, I'm God." He's not explicit like that, he's making implicit claims. He's teaching in riddles and parables and hyperboles that implicitly demand that the only reasonable explanation for how he could ask for such love is that he isn't just the Messiah, he isn't just the king of Israel or a prophet, or the new Moses, but he's the one God of Israel. He's the God of the *Shema* come in person, fully God, fully man. And that's how he can demand that absolute and exclusive love. So it's just another example of how this very difficult passage actually is one of the key texts in the gospels that shows, even in the gospels of Luke, and Matthew and Mark (the synoptics), Jesus is divine. He's making divine demands. He's making demands that only God himself could make of an Israelite audience. So just a little side note there on the divinity of Jesus.

In any case, you can see that the context gives the meaning because Jesus goes on to flesh out the teaching. If he just stopped with saying "you have to hate all these people in order to be my disciple", it would be a little more difficult to understand,

but he fleshes out what it means in the subsequent verses. So for example, after he makes this condition of discipleship, the first thing he says was, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, can’t be my disciple.” Ah, so there you go. What does Jesus mean when he says “hate your own life”? He doesn’t mean engage in self-hatred, what he means is be willing to give up your life, even to go to the cross for my sake. That’s what he means, be willing to subject yourself to the cruelty and punishment of a Roman execution if you want to be my disciple. Now for us, it’s so easy for us to spiritualize this. “I have to take up my cross today. I have these final exams I have to grade.” Or whatever it might be, “I have to go to work and do a good job at work or one of my kids are sick, or my spouse is sick.” Whatever suffering you might face, we can think “Oh, that’s what he means by ‘take up your cross’”, and that’s a perfectly legitimate application; absolutely correct. But in its original context, when Jesus was speaking to the disciples, when he’s speaking to the crowds, that’s not what they would have heard. Because for them, the word cross (*stauros*), is literally a reference to the way the Roman empire would execute people by suspension and asphyxiation, in public, usually stripped of all their clothing. It’s the most shameful, most painful, most humiliating form of death that the Romans would use for slaves. It’s the most terrifying thing you could imagine, to be crucified. And Jesus says, “You want to know what I mean by ‘hate your life’? If you don’t take up your cross and follow me, you can’t be my disciple.” If you’re not willing to go to the...I was going to say the electric chair, basically, I mean it’s like, “If you’re not willing to go to the guillotine or the electric chair, the cross (the gibbet of the cross, the scaffold for me), then you can’t be my disciple.

Wow. Imagine if you walk into a college course and that was the syllabus. “Alright, if you want to pass this class, you have to hate your father, hate your mother, hate your wife, hate your children, and you have to be willing to be executed for the sake of the professor.” Ok, I’m out of this class, right? That’s what Jesus is doing. He’s a rabbi, he’s a teacher, and he’s laying these shocking demands on his disciples in order to teach them the cost of what it means to be a follower of him. And notice, when does he do this? When great multitudes were accompanying him. So he has all these crowds of people, he’s starting to get really popular, right? Lots of people are starting to listen, and now he’s laying down the conditions. Do you really want to be my disciple? Or do you just want to listen to my sermons? You enjoy my sermons? Well, let me tell you what it actually takes to be a follower of mine. Let me tell you what it’s going to cost you. It’s going to cost you everything.

And that I think is what the two final analogies (which you can describe these as parables as well, they're kind of like short, parabolic, examples) are supposed to do. So he gives two examples, he gives the example of building a tower or of going to war. So he says, "Look, if you're going to build a tower, nobody's going to sit down and start building without first sitting down and counting the cost." Same thing, if you're going to build a house today, the first thing you're going to have to do is get an estimate. How much is this going to cost us to build a house? Can we afford it? Because you don't want to be there having laid a slab and then you have to stop the project. Maybe you get the studs up because you don't have...you ran out of money because you were foolish in your estimation of what you were actually able to accomplish. So he says, "Just like you count the cost before you build a tower, so count the cost before starting to follow me." Same thing, what king is going to go to war without taking out his map, looking at the number of soldiers he has, the number of supplies that he has, what time of year it is and say, "Can I actually win this war? If not, we'd better do some negotiating." So therefore, here's the *nimshal*, the upshot of the parables. Whoever of you doesn't renounce all that he has can't be my disciple.

We'll come back to this in just a little bit when we look at the living tradition, but you can see how this last line is also a difficult saying of Jesus too. You can understand why it would be reasonable to interpret that last line as saying, "I have to become a Franciscan monk. I have to give up all my property, all my possessions, otherwise I can't be a disciple of Jesus." The word there he uses, *apotassō*, well, it means "to give up" or "to renounce" all that he has. "He just told me to hate my father, mother, sisters, brothers, wife, children? So what do I need to do, I need to leave my family, I need to leave my wife, I need to leave my children, I need to give up all my possessions, and only then can I become Jesus' disciple." As you'll see when we get to the end in just a minute, the tradition has not interpreted it in that absolute way, because it looks at that last line in light of everything else Jesus says and everything else Jesus does in the gospels. It is true, he calls some people to renounce everything, to leave it, and to follow him and imitate him perfectly. Living a life of absolute poverty, chastity, and obedience, right; to live that life. But he doesn't (if you look at the gospels) call everyone to do that. Some people are going to be married, they're going to remain in a married state. Some people are going to follow him and live out this radical lifestyle of imitation of his way of life. So in a broader context we'll see, that's not going to be applied to every person in the same way, but it is demanded of every person that they love Jesus more than any person or material thing. In that sense, the renunciation is a criterion for all

disciples of Jesus. No disciple of Jesus, in other words, can love any possession (all that he has) or any person (those whom you love) more than Christ; he has to be number 1. If he's not, you can't be his disciple. Alright, we'll come back to that at the end and we'll see how the Catechism interprets this verse.

Let's go back to the first reading for today though. So the Old Testament reading for today is another example of a book from the Catholic Old Testament, the Wisdom of Solomon 9:13-18, and this is what it says:

For what man can learn the counsel of God?
Or who can discern what the Lord wills?
For the reasoning of mortals is worthless,
and our designs are likely to fail,
for a perishable body weighs down the soul,
and this earthy tent burdens the thoughtful mind.
We can hardly guess at what is on earth,
and what is at hand we find with labor;
but who has traced out what is in the heavens?
Who has learned thy counsel, unless thou hast given wisdom
and sent thy holy Spirit from on high?
And thus the paths of those on earth were set right,
and men were taught what pleases thee,
and were saved by wisdom.

Okay, so why is this passage juxtaposed with Jesus' teaching in the gospel for today? I think what the Church is getting at here is it's using Wisdom of Solomon, the distinction between things of heaven and things of earth, and saying that true wisdom is to discriminate between the things of earth that are temporary, temporal, even our own bodies which will pass away, although people put a lot of emphasis on their bodies, you almost end up worshiping the body (this was definitely prevalent in ancient paganism, the worship, the occult of the body). The body's good, but it's earthly. It is perishable. It will pass away until the resurrection on the last day. By contrast, the Holy Spirit (the wisdom of God) is eternal, is everlasting. And so what Wisdom is doing is saying we need to choose the things of heaven over the stuff of earth. We need to remember that there are greater things in the heavens that we can imagine. If we can't even figure out the things of earth (if they're so far beyond our understanding), how much more the things of heaven? So it's trying to

inculcate in us (to cultivate) an eternal perspective, a heavenly perspective, on the things of this earth.

And that's what Jesus is doing in the parable too. He's trying to get us to realize (in the parable) that it's so easy to make our possessions, and even the people in our lives, into our last end, into our ultimate end, to what we're here for; that we can pour our whole lives into our relationships with our family and our friends and our spouse and our children. And that's a natural thing and we do have duties in that regard, but it's easy to fall prey to putting all those things before Christ. That's the point. It's easy to put our treasure in earthly possessions and in other people rather than in the God who made all those things and gave those gifts to us. So Wisdom, the wisdom of the Holy Spirit would be to count the cost of discipleship, realize it'll cost you everything, and then go and follow Jesus. And what Jesus will say elsewhere is, "Anyone who's given up father, mother, sisters, brothers in this life, will receive a hundred fold in the world to come." So you give it up with the expectation that it will all come back to you multiplied in the life of the resurrection. I mean it's one thing to have a wonderfully earthly life with your spouse and your children, and your friends now, but if it's just for this world it's going to pass away. How much greater would it be to spend all eternity in the resurrection. Think about this, not just in heaven, disembodied souls, but in the resurrection, to spend the resurrection life in your body with all of your family: your spouse, your children, your mother, your father, your friends, in the world to come, in their bodies; bodies that are just as real as Jesus' resurrected body in Luke 24 as we're going to see. "See I have hands and feet, touch me. A ghost doesn't have flesh like this." That's the hope that Jesus is teaching to his disciples.

So he's saying if you're willing to renounce everything in this world now, if you're willing to pay that price now, what you'll receive in the resurrection far outweighs what you might appear to be losing in this life. So it's not an easy perspective to have, it's not an easy perspective to keep, the only way we really can have it (as Wisdom says here) is through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom to see things in an eternal perspective. So just keep that in mind. It's very easy, especially in an American culture too (in the West), even within Christian circles, to put the bulk of our energies into the earthly well-being of our wife or our children, spouse, parents, children, friends, but what are you investing in their spiritual well-being? How much effort are you making to make sure that they're with you forever — well, first of all, you make it into the world to come and that they're with you there, forever? If you really loved them, then you'd put Jesus first

and then he brings it all along together. So, end of homily. Sorry, I was getting a little preachy. But it's an important topic. It's the eternal perspective. That's really what the whole gospel's about today, putting first things first. And the first thing is Jesus.

So the Psalm for today is really what I was just talking about. Psalm 90, one of my favorite psalms, it's about learning to count our days, learning to number our days. It's basically about how fleeting life is, how short life is. Psalm 90:9:

For all our days pass away under thy wrath,
our years come to an end like a sigh.
The years of our life are threescore and ten,
or even by reason of strength fourscore;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

In verse 12 it says:

So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.

So if Jesus of Nazareth is who he claims to be, if he's God come in the flesh, then he's the savior of the world. Then your little life of 50, 60, 70, 80 years, you need to put it in perspective. Count your days (number your days), get a heart of wisdom, and realize that he has to be the lord of your life. That's what Jesus demands of his disciples, absolute and complete fidelity to him, putting him first in our lives. That's the heart of wisdom that we need. So that responsorial psalm is a great psalm to pray with if you struggle with that over-attachment to earthly goods, over-anxiety about earthly situations. Psalm 90 is a great psalm for helping us gain wisdom in an eternal perspective on life.

In closing, you might be thinking, "Okay Dr. Pitre, that's all kind of cool, but how do I know that that's what Jesus was actually saying?" Maybe in the back of your mind you're wondering "Does he really mean for me to hate my wife and children? What is the meaning of this saying?" And this is where we don't want to just lean on a scholar or somebody to interpret the scripture but ask, "Well, what does the Church teach?" Christ gave the Church the keys to the kingdom, he gave her the authority to interpret scriptures. She's the final and definitive authority in interpreting it, and so in this case it might be helpful just to refer to the *Catechism of the*

Catholic Church. How does the *Catechism* interpret these verses? And these two verses from Luke 14 are dealt with in two paragraphs in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. So I'm going to look at both of them in sequence. So the first one is paragraph 2544 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It quotes Luke 14:33 and this is what it has to say:

Jesus enjoins his disciples *to prefer him to everything and everyone*, and bids them “renounce all that [they have]” for his sake and that of the Gospel [Luke 14:33]. Shortly before his passion he gave them the example of the poor widow of Jerusalem who, out of her poverty, gave all that she had to live on. The precept of *detachment from riches* is obligatory for entrance into the Kingdom of heaven. (CCC 2544)

So notice, how does the Church interpret Jesus' words, “unless you renounce all that you have, you can't be my disciple”? It does not say every single individual person has to become a monk or a nun and live that life of radical poverty. What it does say is, number 1, we can't prefer anything to him; number 2, we can't prefer anyone to him; and number 3, we have to live out the precept of detachment from riches, which means you have to be willing to let them go. You have to be willing to give them up. And the way we express and live that detachment from riches, the majority of Christians who live in the married state, is through almsgiving; it's through giving alms to the poor and to the church. And I know I keep banging this drum of almsgiving but it's really crucial, it's part of Jesus...I'm not banging the drum, Jesus is banging the drum. I mean this is his teaching. So if you want to ask, “How can I live that detachment?” Look at the story of the widow, the *Catechism* says. She is so detached from her possessions that even her last two pennies, she gives them to God, trusting that he will provide for her and he will care for her. So that's the first point, detachment from wealth. However, the *Catechism* has another paragraph I'd like to read, paragraph 1618, because some people are called to live out Jesus' demand of discipleship in a radical, total, and complete way. And the *Catechism* recognizes that as well. So in paragraph 1618, this is the section on virginity for the sake of the kingdom of God in the *Catechism*. It quotes Luke 14 again (it's in one of the footnotes), but it says this:

Christ is the center of all Christian life. The bond with him takes precedence over all other bonds, familial or social.

So notice, how is the Church interpreting his words? “Unless you hate your father, mother, sister, brother, wife, children, you can't be my disciple.” The church is say-

ing what that means is, the bond with Christ has to be first in your life. It has to be above everything, even the relationship with your spouse or your children. It is supreme and that goes for every single Christian. However:

From the very beginning of the Church there have been men and women who have renounced the great good of marriage to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, to be intent on the things of the Lord, to seek to please him, and to go out to meet the Bridegroom who is coming. *Christ himself has invited certain persons to follow him in this way of life, of which he remains the model.* (CCC 1618)

So what the Catechism there is saying is everyone is called to put Christ first but for some people that means renouncing the good of marriage itself and following him in a life of virginity (or the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience). And so this is why the religious life is so important. We, all Christians, need the witnesses of consecrated men and women who live that radical life of detachment, not just from possessions but from persons as well, from family and friends in order to go out and follow the bridegroom, to meet the bridegroom.

So although Luke 14 might not be the most popular passage to use for vocation days or “come and see weekends”, it’s really what it’s about. There’s a dimension to this (and this is really honestly, in the Catholic Church, this is where this is clearest) that we do have people who in a sense take Jesus literally. Not in the sense that they hate their family and friends, but they renounce everything to go and follow him and live that life that he lived, the life of the son of man who has nowhere to lay his head, who is completely and totally devoted to the mission of bringing the gospel to the world. And we’re all called, on some level, to look to that and to ask, how can I live out that same spirit of renunciation in my own life, where I always put Christ first and I love him above all things and above all others?