

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Agree or disagree: Putting God first in my life will make me more comfortable. Agree or disagree: Putting God first in my life will make my relationships with other people more peaceful. Agree or disagree: Putting God first in my life may be a significant source of pain and upheaval.

Wahn currently lives in Loas. As a teenager, she became a Christian. When she came home from church, a five-mile walk, her mother would refuse to feed her. After a few months, her mother confronted her, insulting her, pulling her hair and demanding that she renounce her newfound faith. Soon after, her father confronted her, told her she was an embarrassment to the family and made them lower in the community. He struck her in the head and started kicking her until her brothers and sisters pulled him away. Weeks later, he, her own father, packed her suitcase, pulled out a knife, and threatened to kill her if she ever came back. You can listen to her interview and that of hundreds more like her from all over the world on the website Voice of the Martyr. These are well-researched and documented stories. They are not sensationalized.

Now I don't personally know anyone with a life story quite like that, but I do personally know Christian students who have been told by professors at the university they attend that there is no place for their faith in the field of science and similarly in psychology. I know personally parents whose children have given them an ultimatum – mom or dad, you choose me or you choose your church. And I know plenty more who have endured the rolling eyes and snickers and “you can't be serious” comments of friends and relatives. And we've probably all at least come in contact with the barbs and scathing comments on social media condemning Christians and our beliefs.

For every Christian who endures these things, it is a struggle, but I think it's especially difficult when we encounter it for the first time, or we see it getting worse. And maybe I'm wrong about this, but I think that stems from a misunderstanding of just what God has promised in this world. Isn't Jesus supposed to make things better? Doesn't Jesus have power over his enemies? Isn't following Jesus supposed to make my life better? I personally have heard many TV preachers, and popular Christian writers teach the Bible as if it were the guide to being healthy, wealthy, and popular. If that's what God promises, it seems like putting God first doesn't live up to the hype!

But is that hype really based on the promises of the Bible? In other words, is the Bible a self-help book that will fix your finances, your career, and your relationships? Does the Bible promise harmonious relationships with all the people around you if you put God first? Does it? Jesus answers that question for us today in his words recorded in Matthew chapter 10.

Matthew 10:34-39 “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—³⁶ a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.” ³⁷ “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. ⁴⁰ “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

Based on Jesus' words here, consider the questions again. Agree or disagree: Putting God first in my life will make me more comfortable. Agree or disagree: Putting God first in my life will make my relationships with other people more peaceful. Agree or disagree: Putting God first in my life may be a significant source of pain and upheaval. And we can't help but then ponder the question, “is it worth it?” But today permit me to pose the question in a different way. Do I have to be “all in?” Is it OK if I put God first most of the time or in most circumstances? Is it OK if I key in the core Bible teachings – God forgives people, God is love, I should be kind, God will take us to heaven – and downplay Bible teachings that are objectionable to many, such as humility, making sacrifices, forgiving others, giving generously to God's work, using bad language, gathering with God's people every week, honoring God's plan for sex and marriage? Can I just leave those things alone and still be OK? I just want to be a Christian without people rolling their eyes and thinking I'm weird.

Jesus' words answer that question, don't they? No, it's not optional – it's essential! And as he speaks these words, understand that he is saying this to disciples who as of yet had not really experienced the painful effects of putting God first. Up to this point, following Jesus was kind of the trendy thing to do, it was new and exciting. He was healing people. He called out the hypocrisy of the current religious leaders. They had recently watched as he cast multiple demons out of a man who then entered a herd of pigs and ran off of a cliff. But now Jesus is preparing them for their first go at public ministry, sending them out to evangelize and teach and he knows how sheltered they have been. His words are sobering. If you read all of Matthew 10, it is his training sermon as it were and here's a brief summary: a lot of people are going to reject what you have to say, this work won't make you wealthy, you will be arrested, falsely accused and harmed because of what you do, the same people who hate me will hate you at least as much as me. Boy sounds great, doesn't it? BUT then he shares this: God is more powerful than your enemies, he holds the key to heaven and hell, he will take care of your needs, but understand... And then he goes into the words before us today. His point – you aren't going to be the

cool and the trendy. Following me will cause pain – expect these things. Don't let harmony be your key objective if achieving harmony means rejecting me. Stick with me for the long haul and it will all be worth it. Putting God first isn't optional, it's essential.

Jesus lists some pretty extreme examples, correct? Children turning against their parents. Family members, good friends being alienated from each other. Wouldn't you try to do all in your power to prevent that? Yes. Don't misunderstand – Jesus isn't saying go out there and intentionally alienate and irritate everyone, but there is a limit and Jesus identifies it here. If we prioritize those relationships above our relationship with God, the results won't be pretty. Don't marginalize God or any of his directives in the Bible thinking, “What's the harm if I bend a little on marriage and family if it means my sister and I are still on good terms? What's the harm in ignoring the Bible's teaching of a six-day creation if it means I will be more likely to get this job? What's the harm in ignoring God's directive to giving generously to his work if that will make my financial situation more comfortable? What's the harm in ignoring God's admonition to gather weekly with his people if it means I can participate in the activities all the other people are doing? I still believe Jesus forgives me, I still believe in heaven. In fact, It seems to me that if I go all in on these other things, people will see me as some sort of religious zealot, and my life gets harder.”

So, can any of us here say we haven't fallen into this? I'd be lying to you if I said I've never declined to reveal to someone that I am a pastor because I think it will color the way they perceive me. How about you? Can anyone here honestly say, “I've never laid aside or marginalized any of Jesus' teaching so that my life is more comfortable?” Can any of us say that we have always put Jesus first all of the time? That's why we need Jesus who, as we confess these sins, forgives them too. And he does forgive us! He forgives the penitent in spite of who we are, but do you know what he does NOT say? He does not say, “I forgive you, so just keep right on doing what you're doing.” God forgives us, just as we are, but he does not say, “Go on being just as you are” he says “fight!” He says it's critical to fight. He warns that if we continue to intentionally put him in second place – even our family members, even in ways we think of as little – we are setting ourselves up for big trouble. “...**anyone who finds their life will lose it.**” he says. I'm guessing you've heard that line numerous times in your life, but have you stopped to consider it? How would you put it in your own words? Anyone who thinks life's meaning lies in health, wealth, and popularity and rejects Jesus to gain them will miss out on God's greatest gift (heaven). He promises, “**anyone who loses their life for my sake will find it**”. Put that in your own words. When you lose or forgo health, wealth, and popularity to be faithful to Jesus, you retain God's greatest gift (heaven.)

For all the Christians around the world – physically abused, threatened, kicked out of society – for all of you here today who have parents, children, friends, or family members who have turned against you because of your faith, who mock, who have maybe even said to you, “choose me or your faith” – my heart aches for you, it truly does, and I pray for you and your friend and family and children. But as hard as it is, when you put God first, know that you do the right thing, those aren't my words, they are Jesus' words. And the good thing is that for those who have rejected God and taken it out on you, there is still time, and God is still a merciful God not wanting any to perish but for all to have life.

But note that Jesus isn't done yet. Look what he says in the last verses: ⁴⁰ “**Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.** ⁴¹ **Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.** ⁴² **And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.**” Don't stop at Jesus' warning, look at his encouragement! As he closes, Jesus encourages us to help our fellow Christians who do face pain and hardship as a result of their Christian living. Welcome those God has sent to repeat his words!

You've heard the phrase “kill the messenger” right? It means that those who don't like the message often take it out on the people who deliver it. Jesus here encourages all of us to welcome those who speak God's truth as it stands written in the Bible – even those things that society hates! Let me just take the time to say “thank you” to so many of you that do that, that encourage our pastors and teachers! Thank you! It helps, it really does. Then the next words, **whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.** Those who are bearing a cross right now, maybe kids who are wandering in the faith, maybe tension in the workplace, rejection by peers, Jesus calls on the rest of us to encourage them. I know that often times Christian parents who in all honesty have done a better job of Christian parenting than I have children who fall away, and on top of the grief, they are burdened down with guilt as if somehow it is their fault. You and I need to be there for them, to comfort them, to encourage them, to pray for them and with them, to affirm them in their faithfulness and strip away the false guilt that Satan wants to hang on their necks! And finally, Jesus says, “**if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.**” You know what this says to me? You don't need to have all the right words. You don't need a masters or doctorate degree. You don't need to be the most talkative or empathetic person to demonstrate that God is your first priority. It can be as simple as giving someone who is thirsty a drink! There are literally millions of “yes I can do that's” which demonstrate that God is first in our lives by caring for his sons and daughters – your fellow Christians. It could be just taking the time to talk to that high school teenager and asking “How's it going?” It could be having a short conversation with a kindergartener at school even though you are in eighth grade. It could be the hug for the member who just lost a loved one. A thank you to the soloist who sang. God sees all of that as putting him first, and do you know what? It's enjoyable, it's meaningful, and it's fulfilling! Remember Wahn? Do you know what happened after she got kicked out of the house and her father threatened to kill her? The Christians from the church she was going to took her in. Another family took her in as if she were their own daughter. While it is true that putting God first can and does bring pain and conflict into our lives at times, that isn't the only thing it does. God does balance it with the joy and deep satisfaction and fulfillment that comes with growing in maturity and taking advantage of more and more ways in which to build others up.

So, whether as one bearing a cross or one building another up or both, putting God first – it's not optional, it's essential!
AMEN.