

*“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 up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me.”*

Under the surface of these words hides a mystery. Although I can feel it, I cannot really grasp it. The words cover something provoking and inconvenient. I am afraid to think about it because when I do, a little dark whisper in the back of my head tries to convince me that God is somehow cruel and cold. Should he really be asking that much? How can I love God more than my father or mother? On the one hand, the answer seems very easy because my parents are imperfect, and there are many things for which I am ready to blame them. On the other hand, it seems impossible to love God more than I love my parents. I still see clearly in my mind the image of a man and woman, once a boy and a girl, who decided to go through life together. In joy and gratefulness, they couldn't wait for me, their child, to join them. They never hesitated to change their plans or to put aside their dreams for my needs, even in very difficult times. As usual, they did this with joy and gratefulness. How can I love anyone more than them? How can a parent love anyone more than their children?

I still don't know how to answer to God. There is something more here. Surprisingly, the third step in Christ's teaching leads to the cross. It is surprising because after mentioning father and mother, son and daughter, the word “cross” looks out of place. Is the family the cross that he is talking about? Or is abandonment of the family for the sake of God what defines the cross for us? Christ sees the cross differently. For him, it is not a death penalty. It is not the end of a failed mission, some sort of bitter test, or some kind of natural necessity that he must face, whether he likes it or not. For Christ, the cross is the ultimate place of freedom. What a shocking realization: the ultimate place of freedom. He becomes victorious on the cross, not because he must die, but because he does not have to die. He chooses death on the cross out of obedience to the Father. For Jesus, death on the cross is not an act of desperation, like it would be for every other human being. Christ *chooses* the cross because he is so free that he can be obedient to the Father completely. Through this astonishing revelation of freedom, he reveals something more: the love for the Father. And then, an even deeper perspective reveals itself. This love of the Son, who chooses to die out of love for his Father's creation, reveals the love of the Father who entrusts the whole creation to his son. The Father receives the gift of the cross with the gratitude of the person who requested something impossible, and was still given it in a humble gesture of love. That is the mystery that Christ describes to me. This love is total, and its totality and purity gives strength and direction to every other love. This is the place where I realize that, without the light of the cross, I will never know who my father and my mother are and how I can love them. Without the light of the cross, I would never be more than just a disciplinarian to my children. Love, to be real, must become a complete gift of a person.

*“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*

This is the true logic of life! My love will never mature if I live as an everlasting unfulfilled possibility. My love will never be real if I never offer myself completely to anybody. I will never be

able to offer a complete gift if I don't see the love of the Father and the Son. This is the logic of the Trinity to which Christ invites us. This is the source of true freedom, because in the light of this logic, I can love my parents even if they were not perfect. In the light of this logic, I can love my parents even knowing they will die. In the light of the cross, I discover that they live forever, and every act of love here will stay forever in the Father's love. In the light from the cross can I love my children, knowing that their life will expand way past my lifetime. And knowing that my imperfect, frustrating toil of trying to figure out parenting will at the end bring fruits of the Father's love into their lives.

That's why Christ is right. I must love him more than anybody else because otherwise, I could only offer my love. And that's insufficient. In His love, the great love of the Father offered to the Son and returned by him, things receive their real proportions. The one who receives the prophet receives the reward of the prophet. The righteous man received as a righteous man offers the reward of a righteous man. And the cup of cold water given to a little disciple can become an astonishing act of glory, and bring eternal reward.