



Question from a congregant:

Why "hate" one's family and self? A translation issue? In my mind, this is a clear example of hyperbole; nothing more complicated than that; for us the word hate and God is anathema, clearly Jesus has told us to love our enemies so much less are we to hate our family! So hate in my mind includes overvaluing familial relations to the extent they supersede one's commitment to God, divine purposes, and the same is true for our own life; for in other places Jesus said we are to love neighbors as we love ourselves; so we are to love ourselves.

There is a tremendous amount of ink spilled trying to claim that the Greek *miseo* does not actually mean "hate", it simply means to establish proper priorities in preferring one thing over another. Nonsense. This word means hate, detest, despise! And yet, clearly the great weight of biblical witness calls us to love. In fact, Jesus himself tells us, "My command is this: love each other as I have loved you." Rather than being a mystery, the questioner is correct – this is simply a case of hyperbole. But don't breathe a sigh of relief. It doesn't make Jesus' words any easier, in fact it makes them harder. If it truly was hate, then we could dismiss these words as either a mistranslation or mishearing of Jesus.

But now we have to deal with Jesus' intent in speaking these demanding words.

We use hyperbole when we want to make a point; often pointing to a failure and underscoring a critical demand. Former Minnesota football coach, Murray Warmath, said, "Lads, you're not to miss practice unless your parents died or you died." Clearly hyperbole, but also clearly demanding. First, this comment was likely spurred by players not taking practice seriously enough and using pathetic excuses to skip. Second, the implication is that without a truly valid excuse you would be benched.

Jesus is frustrated and demanding the disciples to keep their priorities. Namely, the primacy of the command to love the Lord with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul. He tells us it is the first and greatest commandment. But it is hard. It can be so very hard.

We want to love God more. But God is ethereal and remote; our family is present and knowable. We see them, we yearn to make their lives better. They are a precious gift and we want to do everything to protect them, to help them.

But the simple truth was being a disciple of Jesus was demanding. Clearly they had to favor Jesus' call over the immediate needs of their families because following Jesus meant leaving families at home, and eventually for

many disciples it meant losing their lives. Thus Jesus declares, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, **cannot be my disciple.**”

But there is more to this than needing to leave home to attend to Jesus’ call. Something that applies to all of us, not only His key disciples. Without keeping first things first, our love for our family and friends can degrade our allegiance to God’s laws.

We have seen the devastating effects of this failure in our society. Failing to love God first means we are more willing to bend God’s moral laws. It is one of the factors that enables an abuser to continue because those who know don’t want that friend or family member go to jail. It enabled industries such a big tobacco to lie for years about the effects of smoking, to keep themselves and their loved ones prospering. In this same section, Jesus tells us those who love their life will lose it. Ultimately, many of the tobacco executives not only lost their place of pride in society but they lost their lives. Even though they knew smoking caused cancer in part, they kept at it to keep up the façade.

To be an effective disciple all of us must love God first. A disciple is one with a special responsibility to be an exemplary witness to their teacher’s mission and way of life. If you don’t love God first then inevitably you will consistently fail to fulfill the moral law of God.

But Jesus states two special commandments. Love God is first, and then He tells us the second is like the first, “*Love your*

*neighbor as yourself.* All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Since *everything* hangs on these two commandments even loving our neighbor and our family depends on loving God first.

Loving God first, means loving our neighbor through our lens of love for God. It is what gives our love perspective. We see this in the error many parents make. In an effort to provide our children with every advantage, we ultimately make it harder for them to be ready for the world and to rely on themselves and the gifts they have been given.

What might feel like love, putting children first in everything, can amount to spoiling them, failing to nurture children who are filled with compassion and understanding, and to realize that not all the world revolves around their needs. Ironically, the very process of loving God first and letting your love for them flow through your love for God enables them to feel more love, to be more whole.

Here are some practical examples from a pediatric website:

- Don’t rescue your child from normal life challenges
- Don’t overpraise your child
- Teach your child that adults also have rights

It means loving your children the appropriate amount. For example, we may be generous with them but it is also important for them to know that financially we have responsibilities beyond our own kith and kin and those come from God; feed the hungry, clothe the naked; do good to those who persecute you.

To love God and God's laws first can entail great sacrifice, which from one perspective can make things harder for your family, but ultimately allows you to love them even more.

In WWII, soldiers left their families and lost their lives to defeat great evil. It was a tremendous hardship not only on the soldiers but their families and yet we can say with confidence, despite the loss, they too were better off. It is what spurred the Freedom Riders to stand up and take action during the Civil Rights era. They rode buses throughout the South to challenge segregation laws at bus terminals, lunch counters, and water fountains. Violence faced them at every turn. In one such incident, an angry mob in Alabama threw a bomb onto the bus and as the Freedom Riders escaped, they were beaten.

Long-time congressman from Georgia, John Lewis, at a young age rode that bus and believed his work was a call from God, "Nothing can stop the power of a committed and determined people to make a difference in our society. Why? Because human beings are the most dynamic link to the divine on this planet."

They risked their ability to earn a living, harm to themselves and harm to their families, but by loving the ultimate values of God more they ultimately were able better care for their family by providing a more just world for everyone.

Hate is indeed hyperbole but as you can see, it does not make the call any easier. Ultimately, it will not only bring you peace with God, it will help you love everyone and heal the

world, as our Lord did so long ago. At least this is what John Lewis thought when He said:

You are a light. You are the light. Never let anyone — any person or any force — dampen, dim or diminish your light...Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won.

Amen.