

The story of *Faust* is one of the classic tales of European literature, music, and art. Dating back to the 16th century, the basic outline of the story tells of a well-learned and successful man who is disappointed and unhappy because of his limitations in life. Although respected, successful, and educated, he wants more. He illustrates the human condition – nothing in the universe will satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart except God, but humanity will look anywhere else for happiness. Instead of striving for what is most important – Faust becomes sad because he thinks if he had more things of this world, he would be happy.

So, a representative of the devil visits Faust and makes him a deal. He can have everything he wants, unlimited money, knowledge, and power over people, as long as he makes a contract that his soul, at the end of his life, will belong to Satan. Faust agrees. Eagerly he steps into his life without limits, and he gets whatever he wants. He becomes obsessed with a young woman and uses his power to seduce her. She becomes pregnant with his child, whom she kills out of shame, and she is punished for murder. Faust then realizes too late that the power he has gained only brings death to other people, misery to himself, and in the end he has lost his soul.

Faust is a classic morality tale that accompanied and decorated the period of the Enlightenment, when Europe looked at the future as endless progress leading to utopia. The story acts as an illustration of what happens when people put faith in themselves – the violence and moral decay of today come from the same *Faustian* contract. Money, knowledge, and power, without God, brings death to other people and misery to one's self.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel cut like a knife to the heart of what it means to leave behind the contract of misery humanity has with the devil. He tells us to pick up our cross and follow, leaving behind our many possessions when necessary. Renouncing the lure of sin and the various ways it sets its hook in us is at the center of our conversion to holiness and life.

Do you remember what you promised at baptism and renew every year at Easter?

Do you renounce Satan? I do. And all his works? I do. And all his empty promises? I do.

Jesus uses strong words of renunciation in today's Gospel. "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." The word in Greek which is translated as "hate," does not carry the modern English sense of violence and animosity. Rather, the word carries the sense of comparative desire. In other words, you must desire Christ comparatively so much more than family or even yourself to be a disciple.

Why does following Christ require me to renounce the highest priority of my family for Christ?

After all, I should honor my father and mother, it even is the fourth commandment. How many families fall into disfunction when priorities are all out of order? It is in family relationships where we are often most challenged. The closeness, the ties of obligation, need Christ, or they can become places of disfunction and misery. Jesus is not talking about rejecting your family, but changing the priorities of your relationships. Instead of speaking more abstractly, allow me to illustrate how this works from an example of my own. My brother and I grew up very close. He is three years older than me, very disciplined, and very intelligent. As we grew older, into our college years, his way of expressing his affection for me transformed into pushing me to excel in school and to take my faith very seriously – good things. But the way he pushed me did not have Christ at the center, he focused on me – and I resented it deeply. Our relationship for almost a decade became miserable because he, in his desire for my success, would push me to excel. And I, in my resentment, would push back to make him stop. It became a cold war of the will to the point where we could hardly be in the same room at holidays. It was a source of great sorrow to my parents. It was only when we renounced the control and let Christ take priority that we were able to be reconciled. When we use our power, knowledge, and wealth without placing Christ first, especially with those we love, we only spread misery and disfunction. How much of our family troubles come from the best intentions misdirected.

Jesus' words today require us to courageously examine our priorities. We can look at our priorities, not defensively, but honestly. We have said we renounce Satan, empty works, and empty promises. Yet, have you embraced a manner of life that reflects this? Or, do you go from thing to thing, person to person, trying make yourself happy through them? When I honestly look at myself in the light of this Gospel passage, I can immediately see goals, things, and people that I have made more important than Christ. As difficult as it may be, with the help of God, I must go one by one and release them so that I can freely follow Christ. I am sure the same is true for you. May the words from the responsorial psalm be our prayer, "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart."