

Well how many times as Catholics have we heard that “Jesus loves us unconditionally”? Personally, I’ve heard this countless times in my life, especially as a young person growing up. And I know people who are even sick of hearing this because they hear it so often and so they begin to treat it like an empty platitude.

But let me be clear: the statement, “Jesus loves us unconditionally” is *absolutely true*! Jesus *does* love each of us *unconditionally*, meaning that there is absolutely nothing we can do to *earn* or *lose* Christ’s love for us. Now let me further clarify: when I hear this, “Jesus loves us unconditionally,” I think this statement, while being true in and of itself, is *incomplete* for two reasons.

First, this statement can be easily misinterpreted by people to think, “Well if Jesus loves me unconditionally then I can just do whatever I want, think however I want and treat others the way I want with absolutely no consequences.” Of course, this selfish attitude is a *total abuse and rejection* of Christ’s unconditional love. Secondly, the statement “Jesus loves us unconditionally” is incomplete because what

does that even mean for me practically in my life? How should I *respond* to Jesus' unconditional love for me?

Brothers and sisters, today's Gospel focuses on the necessary second half of the true statement, "Jesus loves us unconditionally." In the context of today's Gospel, especially the second half, this statement can be completed with the following: Jesus loves us unconditionally, *therefore, we must love Jesus unconditionally and follow Him unconditionally!* If Jesus loves us unconditionally, then the most fitting response is to *reciprocate that love* and love *Him unconditionally* as well with every fiber of my being—in all of my thoughts, words, and actions. This is what our Lord Jesus rightfully demands in today's Gospel: that we love Him and follow Him *unreservedly, unconditionally, and with total commitment!*

And this is only reasonable because who wants to follow someone "half-heartedly"? *And who would ever want to be loved "half-heartedly"?* I mean, can you imagine a marriage where a spouse says to their husband or wife, "I'm not going to give you my whole life, I'm not

going to love you with all my heart, and I'm not going to be totally devoted and faithful to you." That's not marriage.

And so Jesus' words and demands in today's Gospel regarding discipleship and fidelity can make us uncomfortable. But brothers and sisters, that's exactly what love does! True love challenges us! True love lifts us out of our comfort zones and challenges us to be better! True love might be hard, but with the help of God's grace, *it is never impossible and it is ultimately fulfilling*. And so the bottom line with this whole Gospel is that we are called to love our Lord Jesus *unconditionally above everyone and everything* and to follow Him *unreservedly with total commitment and devotion!*

This Gospel clearly demonstrates who Jesus is and who He is *not!* Jesus is *not* some domesticated, nice, namby-pamby therapist or ethical guru who simply pats us on the back once a week and affirms us in our selfishness making no demands on our personal life. No, He is the Son of the living God and the Savior of the human race Who rightfully demands our total love, fidelity, and obedience. Now that might not sound "politically correct," but it is *correct* in the eyes of God. God

doesn't have time for "political correctness" that obscures and disfigures the true nature of love. In fact, true love is *not politically correct* simply because it requires that we humbly die to ourselves and live totally and selflessly for Christ, His Church, and others!

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that our Lord Jesus wants *all* of us—He wants *all* of you as an individual person. When Christ calls us by name to follow Him unconditionally, He desires total commitment—and this discipleship must be defined by a constant and enduring love that is 24/7, 365. And this is only reasonable because this is the same love that we demand and desire for ourselves!

Brothers and sisters, if we love Christ unconditionally and follow Him unreservedly, making Him first in our lives, *then He will never lead us astray!* If we make Christ first and love Him above everything and everyone in our lives, *then* we will love others as we should, because love of God and love of neighbor are *always inseparable!* If Christ is first in our lives, then we will fulfill our vocations and live our vocations with great love, courage, and joy! As disciples of Christ, we must establish a hierarchy of relationships in our life. Christ *must* come

first, followed by our family, then our friends, and then all others.

Again, if our Lord Jesus comes first in our life, then we will love others as we should, *especially* our family and friends.

Such a decision to follow Christ unconditionally and totally by dying to ourselves does not lead to personal slavery, as the popular culture seems to think. Rather, in the second reading today, St. Paul definitively declares that our Lord Jesus Christ came to bring us freedom! Following Christ leads to freedom! Making our Lord Jesus first in our life leads to great freedom!

When we follow Christ unconditionally with total commitment and dedication, we will experience more freedom in our life, especially freedom from sin, fear, confusion, spiritual anxiety, and doubt.

Following Christ *in and through His Church* leads to authentic freedom: the freedom to be who God created us to be! The freedom to be the best version of ourselves! The freedom to love! The freedom to choose the good – ultimately the freedom to choose God Who is Infinite Goodness and the highest Good!

Following Christ in and through His Catholic Church does not lead to slavery, as so many tragically believe! Do you know what leads to slavery? Selfishness, pride, lust, greed, envy, resentment, bitterness, laziness, and wrath. Not only do these evils enslave us, they can destroy us. It is only in following Christ unreservedly and loving Him unconditionally in word and deed that we enjoy true freedom!

Of course we cannot follow Christ all on our own. As fallen creatures, we're too weak and so we need our Lord's help, His grace, and the support of His Body the Church. For to love and follow Christ *unconditionally* means to *depend on Him unconditionally*. Such total surrender to our Lord Jesus leads to the fullness of life and freedom.

So as we prepare to worship and receive our Lord Jesus Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist, let us pray: Lord Jesus, You love me unconditionally. Give me the grace to reciprocate Your love so that I can love *You* unconditionally and follow You *unreservedly* with total commitment—because it is in following You Lord and making you first in my life that I will enjoy true and lasting freedom. Amen.