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<sup>31</sup>So do not be fearing. You are more valuable than many sparrows.  
<sup>39</sup>Those who find their life will lose it,  
and those who lose their life for My sake will find it.  
From Matthew 10:24-39

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We have all heard that saying, and been reminded of it again and again: “When all else fails, read the instruction manual first.” Instructions are important. If you buy new clothes, but don’t care for them according to the instructions, you could cause colours to fade or the fabric to be destroyed. If you buy a new device, but don’t use it according to the guidelines, don’t be surprised if the motor burns out or it doesn’t work properly. If you buy a new car but don’t care for it according to service guidelines, don’t be surprised if it doesn’t last as long as another car that someone has taken care.

In these COVID-19 times many people have had to learn new skills. I wouldn’t be surprised that if some people had been asked only a few months ago to do online banking, or online shopping, or communicate to a family member via technology, the response would be a clear and loud ‘No!’. But how things have changed.... And when we use new devices or technologies or the like, it is good to have simple instructions. And it’s really great when we have someone around who can guide our way at a pace we can understand and work with.

When it comes to life itself, the old adage may also ring true: “When all else fails, read the instruction manual first.” But the question in our world today is, “What ‘instruction’ should one follow?” It seems there is no end to people giving us advice. And when it comes to areas such as building a home, or managing finances, or not receiving a fine in the mail, it is good to follow instructions. We might not always like them, and at times may think some are unreasonable or so compliance driven they seem more about control than care of people. But at the heart of ‘good instruction’ is a genuine care of people. And when it comes to ‘instruction for life’, it is good to have deep and meaningful guidance for relationships with those around us. And when it comes to such ‘instruction’, we know that God’s Word is a wonderful gift in this regard. Indeed, some have described the Bible with the acronym: B.I.B.L.E – Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth. Certainly God’s Word is much more than an ‘Instruction Manual’ (see John 20:31). But the role of ‘instruction’ should not be underestimated (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

In our Holy Gospel for this day (Matthew 10:24-39. cf whole of Matthew 10) we hear Jesus giving a list of ‘instructions’ to His disciples. These are ‘instructions’ as regards living as a disciple of Jesus, proclaiming the message of Jesus, constantly confessing the message of Jesus, being willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the message of Jesus, and acknowledging there is a real and

significant 'cost' if one wishes to also receive the benefits of living as a disciple of Jesus.

In these verses (Matthew 10:24-39) Jesus gives us a number of sayings that have to do with committed discipleship. These verses are anchored in the history of Israel—famous for persecuting prophets (Jeremiah 26:20-23; 2 Chronicles 24:20-22; Luke 11:47-51; Acts 7:52; Hebrews 11:32-38). The point is that, if prophets suffered persecution and Jesus suffered crucifixion, Jesus' disciples can also expect challenges in living God's way.

Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant (Greek: *doulos*) above his lord" (v.24). Jesus states this self-evident principle to establish a foundation for a greater principle—that His disciples can expect to face opposition and persecution just as He did. One may also note that the word *doulos* can be translated servant or slave. A *doulos* is subservient to his or her master and is expected to obey the master's command. The apostles often referred to themselves as *douloi* of Christ (Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1). We are to 'do' as Jesus said...

Jesus said, "What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in the ear, proclaim on the housetops" (v. 27). Jesus calls the disciples to proclaim boldly and publicly that which He has taught them in private. Flat housetops make platforms for public announcements. Jesus calls us to shout His teachings from this kind of public perch. We are to actually 'speak' of Jesus as we go about this life...

Jesus says, "Whoever acknowledges Me before others, I will also acknowledge before My Father in heaven. But whoever disowns Me before others, I will disown before My Father in heaven" (vv.32-33). The acknowledgement Jesus requires is acknowledgement before other people. We acknowledge Jesus by our deeds as well as by our words. The person who participates in regular public worship is acknowledging Jesus publicly. However, if that person acts selfishly or dishonestly on Monday, then they compromise their Sunday witness. The words of our mouths and the works of our hands need to be consistent if our witness is to be effective. We are to live totally for Jesus...

Jesus also said, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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 – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' 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" (vv.34-37). Jesus tells us that we can expect conflict even from our family when we live by faith in Him. The husband or wife who chooses Jesus will want to attend worship on Sunday mornings when their family might prefer their presence elsewhere. The child who grows up may no longer want to participate in religious practices held dear by their parents. The wage earner who chooses Jesus may find it necessary to choose work that involves less compromise but

also offers less pay. This does not mean necessarily that this causes conflict within families (although in Jesus' time, as indeed in many counties today there are real and significant consequences for faith in Christ). But the reality is that faith in Christ impacts every aspect of life.

We live in a "What's in it for me!" kind of world where we are tempted to focus on what we can get rather than what we can give. Jesus calls us to a different way of life. An older prayer puts this way: "Almighty God, give us grace to be not only hearers but doers of Your holy word, not only to admire but to obey Your teaching, not only to profess but to practice the faith, not only to love but to live Your gospel. So grant that what we learn of Your glory we may receive into our hearts, and show forth in our lives: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

When it comes to 'instruction' such as this, we may see both the comprehensive and challenging nature of this. But at the heart of such instruction is God's great love and care for you. This is encapsulated in Jesus' words in Matthew 10:31, and verse 38-39.

Jesus says, "So do not be fearing. You are more valuable than many sparrows." On three occasions here (vv. 26, 28, 31) Jesus speaks about 'not fearing'. This three-fold repetition means Jesus wants us to take this word to heart. And here Jesus uses the illustration of a sparrow bought in Bible times (which may be used as a sacrifice for the poor in the Temple, and also as food for the poor) to reinforce His point. Jesus had said that two sparrows were sold for a penny (Matt. 10:29). Elsewhere Jesus spoke about five for two cents (Luke 12:6). In other words, they were considered of such little value that if you bought 4 you got one for free. Jesus also said that "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care" (v.29). This is both a reminder that none will die without God paying attention, as well as every time they hop along the ground, God notices them. And if God pays such attention to the sparrow, will not God also pay great attention to you... As you strive daily to live according to God's Word, and as you experience various trials and challenges in following God's commands, know that God does care about you. And this also means that even when we 'sin and fall short of the glory of God', God does not stop loving us.

Jesus said, "Whoever does not take up their cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for My sake will find it" (vv.38-39). At one level this is a call for great commitment in following Jesus' way. The cross in Jesus' time was a reality where people died a humiliating and excruciating death. Hearers in ancient Palestine knew Jesus was speaking about a real life commitment. But at the heart of Jesus' word is a 'gospel word', a 'good news message'.

Have you ever found at times you cannot stop worrying about something? Have you ever experienced an event, or a series of events, that you simply cannot stop thinking about, and in many ways deep down you know have

painfully shaped your life? In these times, Jesus calls us to 'let it go' (to 'lose your life'). This does not mean that we 'forget about things', or stop caring about things. But here Jesus is calling us to let these pains and sorrows rest in the heart and hand of the One who also cares for the sparrow. Our sins have been nailed to the cross, so why should we carry them and live in them still? (See also Romans 6:5-7) Our sufferings and pain that seem too much to bear have also been held in the heart of Him who went the way of the cross. So why should we also still let these burden us? (See also Romans 6:8-10). Truly, we have new life in Christ, and so we have received a whole new perspective on living.

God indeed calls us to a new way of life. When Jesus said "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", Jesus was not saying that we should not love our families. But He wants us to see the great love God has for us as true members of His heavenly family. In a world where there is a simple 'rule' that you are born and one day will die, God wants you to see the great gift of eternal life in Christ. In a world where so often relationships are distorted or painful (and here this is not simply about people doing 'bad things'; we also know the great pain from death as well), God wants you to see the great relationship of love He has established in Christ. And all this is seen in the cross, which we would want to 'take up'.

"Do not be fearing... let go of your life..." At the heart, these are God's words of love to us. Jesus gives good reason for not being afraid, because in the end light will conquer darkness—that which is true will conquer that which is false—and true righteousness will be seen for what it is: good and from God. As Jesus said, "for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." It doesn't matter what the world says now about your faith in Christ. What matters is what God Almighty says in the end.

God takes care of us far more than we realise. Despite our demanding behaviour, despite our lack of knowledge, despite everything we do, He still cares for us and nurtures us. No matter how old we may become, no matter what we may do, no matter where we are, we are still His precious children and He loves us. Let this great truth be the source of your security. Rest in the Lord. Lay your soul upon the solid rock of God's eternal salvation. Rest in His control over all things.

Lord God, we thank You that you know all things. There is so much we don't know, and so much we don't understand. Help us by Your Spirit to our eyes clearly on You with a godly fear, so that faith may rise to banish our fears. In Jesus' name, Amen.