

No One Like Jesus: Living And Dying For His Name
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Psalm 140; Hebrews 11:32-40; Matthew 10:16-25

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 10:16-25. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “[Jesus told the apostles,] I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!”

Honest. Authentic. Real. These buzzwords describe what 20-somethings today have told researchers they want in a church, a church that isn't pretending to have it all together, a church that's more real than relevant, where faith is authentic. I'm twenty years past 20-something, but those ring true for me too. We want to be truthful.

But truth hurts. Authenticity can be painful. In today's passage, Jesus is brutally honest with His twelve apostles. Last week, He gave them instructions to go out sharing that the Kingdom of God is at hand. As Jesus continues today, the disciples learn that violence, hatred, and persecution will be directed at them because of Jesus. I'm thinking, “The apostles still went out and shared about Jesus after hearing all this?” Sometimes Jesus was indirect, telling parables. But with His close friends, He pulls no punches. He tells them what life as an apostle is really going to be like. Amidst the warnings about life and limb are also amazing promises.

We don't want to miss the most important words in it, the first five. “I am sending you out.” The apostles didn't risk their lives because they thought it would be cool if other people knew about their teacher. When we talk about our faith, it isn't because our church (or any church) needs more members or cash. It's because Jesus sends us, as His servants, on a mission: to represent Him to the world at large. Each week, during the benediction, we are told “go in peace.” When worship is over, we are sent back out into the world to be Christ's people.

When we are sent, we are safe not because we are free from earthly threats but because of the One who sends us. Our greatest reassurance is that Jesus sends us on our task. People have risked and sometimes lost their lives for millennia over causes – some good, some bad. Some do it to improve others' lives, others for personal status or power or glory. Our motivation is eternal life. As James 1:12 puts it, “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

The risks involved in sharing Jesus are worthwhile because we know Jesus. He is God, the final definition of love, kindness, compassion, mercy, and grace. When we are sent, we go because our joy and purpose are in Him. If your ultimate joy comes from anything but your relationship with God, risk for Jesus seems like madness. But if your greatest pleasure is pursuing God, you won't find joy in anything that isn't rooted and grounded in Him. Being sent by Him, knowing He holds your life in His care, becomes an honor, a privilege, and a blessing.

So, Jesus continues, "[You'll be] like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." This is a dangerous metaphor. Sheep don't last long among wolves. Wolves like gyros. Jesus is blunt – you will be persecuted, hunted, even killed going out on this mission to spread word of God's Kingdom. Jesus sends us into the enemy camp to set free the captives – but the guards of the prison carry really big guns.

Why be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves? The devil disguised himself as a crafty serpent in Genesis 3. Jesus knows we must understand evil and see it for what it is. We must be smart – quick-witted enough to not get tricked by the slick schemes of sin. We must be shrewd with others; as Jesus says, "be on your guard against men." We cannot naively think an ungodly person has salvation, that somehow they are good enough to earn God's favor. We must not be persuaded by sweet-sounding words. We recognize that the heart of unsaved man is evil.

Yet to be as innocent as a dove is to be free from dishonesty and willful sin. It's to talk to everyone with an attitude of love and compassion while speaking the truth clearly. It means we don't berate or rage; we don't threaten; we don't misrepresent the love of God. We love others fully, even while knowing they may not accept us or even like us. As Jesus directed us, we love our enemies and pray for those that persecute us.

We live as Paul told us in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5: "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." There's two parts – thinking clearly to overcome arguments against God, and keeping our thoughts in line with what God teaches us in Scripture.

Here's a way that played out this very week: in our Tuesday Bible study, we got into a deep conversation about the transgender issues that have played out on news shows and social media over the past several weeks. We weren't willing to accept any argument without first analyzing closely to see how it conforms to godliness – how we show respect to all, how we are to love even those who oppose and persecute us, how actions can glorify Christ or insult Him.

We talked about how being attracted to a certain sin is not sin. Only indulging in that temptation is sin. We talked about gentleness with those actually living with these issues while being wise about the arguments – since many arguments come from emotion and not the Word of God. I'd be happy to share our conclusions in our fellowship time with those who are interested, because they go beyond our passage today. But we had a real live training session on being shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves. We must to engage those conversations rather than merely avoiding them.

In the next section of the passage, there's a scary and awesome promise. “They will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.” Jesus is speaking about their mission years down the road, after His death and resurrection.

Jesus is clear: you will suffer for me. You will be beaten to an inch of your lives for nothing more than calling me Savior and Lord. You will be persecuted and tortured for saying that the Jewish sacrificial system is ended, that the only way to get right with God is to come to His Son, and that everyone must stop bowing to the gods of the Gentiles and to Caesar Himself.

On the other hand, Jesus promises the apostles that they will be heard. Because of Jesus, they will appear in kings' palaces and governors' mansions to speak on behalf of the Kingdom of God. From the least to the greatest, everyone will hear about the Kingdom because of the work they will do.

Jesus is very factual. He says these things prophetically: they will occur. He is encouraging the disciples, “Don't be intimidated or alarmed or think you're on the wrong path because these things happen.” Because that happens to us a lot! We're genuinely following God and something miserable happens and we second-guess ourselves. We think that adversity is proof of God's displeasure when adversity is often proof that we're doing the right thing!

During my lifetime, much of the church, even churches that believed many core truths of Christianity, taught that God was the means to an end – wealth, happiness, well-adjusted children, safety. But Jesus tells the apostles the opposite. Difficulties and distress will come on them “on my account,” He says. If you live for Jesus, you will struggle...and that's OK. Jesus blesses us often in this life, yet the greatest blessings are for the life to come. Look carefully at your life. If adversity comes because you stand for Jesus, don't fear. God is with you.

Jesus' next statement reassures us of that. “But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” Talk about intimidating! The apostles are warned that they will be brought before the highest religious authorities, people who know the Scripture who will try to counter their every argument. They will go in front of kings who consider themselves demi-gods. And I get nervous speaking in front of twenty people if I don't have my notes!

But Jesus says to the apostles, do not worry. Do not be threatened or intimidated by what you should say. Because it's ultimately not you. *The Holy Spirit will speak on your behalf.* God has your back. And sure enough, that's what happens. In Acts 4, Peter and John are brought before the highest religious authorities in Israel – the elders, the teachers of the law, the rulers, and the high priest's family. They had an immense amount of knowledge regarding the ancient Scripture, our Old Testament.

And yet, when Peter was finished speaking, Acts 4:13 says, “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.” It wasn’t because Peter was smart. He was a fisherman, not a scholar! He had no formal training, and neither did John. But they spoke with authority because the Holy Spirit worked through them.

If I can assure us all of two things today, the first is that we will never have enough wisdom, intelligence, charisma, charm, faith, knowledge, and boldness to be confident enough to share Christ. That’s why most people don’t. They assume they’ll fail. Many, many times, I have been exactly the same way. I don’t have what it takes to lead someone to Christ.

The second thing I can assure us of is this: no lack of wisdom, intelligence, charisma, charm, faith, knowledge, and boldness is going to stop the Holy Spirit from working through us to lead people to Christ if we are willing to be used by Him. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be prepared and learning the truths of the faith – in 1 Peter 3:15, we read, “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” But as we answer, it is the Holy Spirit working through us that convicts the other person of the truth.

We do not do this alone. We can’t. But God works through us. He promises this. Hang on to that promise when you are scared to share your faith with someone, especially if you’re scared because a broken relationship with them would mean a loss for you. God will speak through you, and He will care for you even through any losses you face on His behalf.

Most of the ending of the passage is bleak. Families will betray each other, even to death; Jesus’ followers will be persecuted. Jesus says “all men will hate you because of me.” He ends this portion of his instructions by saying that His disciples will be hated because He is hated. A student is like his teacher and a servant like his master. *If people don’t respond to us the way that they responded to Jesus, we might very well be doing it wrong!*

So what is so offensive about the message of Jesus that peoples all around the world have killed missionaries and saints who have tried to tell them the truth? Why would the message of Jesus, meek and mild, friend to the poor and helpless, healer and wise teacher, be such a threat that millions upon millions over the centuries have died just for speaking His name in faith? We got a flier recently about a new church that offers “upbeat music, complementary continental breakfast, hopeful and relevant message, awesome children’s programs...and new friends who will be pleased to meet you.” Who could be threatened by that?

Did you notice the one thing missing from the flier? Jesus! *Jesus is the threat!* Jesus is perfect, loving, kind, and He is also King of Kings and Lord of Lords. His perfection destroys our belief that we are good enough to earn heaven. His love shows that our love is peanuts in comparison. His message that we are sinners who have all fallen short of God insults us. The teaching that those who reject God and His ways will be eternally condemned to existence outside the presence of God scares us and makes us angry.

The claim that He rose from the dead and will raise His followers from the dead stretches our limits of understanding and belief. His Lordship threatens every power structure because His people have no allegiance stronger than Him – not king, not country, not ideology – and will not allow anyone or anything to usurp His throne. Jesus’ followers obey Him even when it costs their lives. Someone who commands that kind of allegiance is dangerous to those who desire power because they cannot break it, even at the threat of death.

Remember, too, that news of the Kingdom is joy for those who will hear it. To the poor and powerless, it is hope that God loves them. For the wicked who regret their ways, it is a second chance, a way out of the cycle of depravity and a promise of mercy. Jesus’ enemies weren’t sinners who didn’t want to hear about hell. No, people who knew they were sinners knew they were on the path to hell and wanted to escape their fate!

Jesus’ enemies in His own lifetime were the rulers and authorities and religious people who would not acknowledge their fallen status before God, relinquish their power, and follow His righteousness. They cried out, “We are the children of Abraham!” And to that, Jesus said, “God can make children of Abraham out of these stones.”

And that’s the truth. God takes stones – stony, unbelieving, miserable hearts – and He makes them soft. He takes the hard, rough edges and smooths them out. He takes you and me, with all our sin and rebellion, and He makes us like Himself, through faith, by His good pleasure. That happens when we tell people the blunt, honest truth – we are sinners far from God, destined for an eternity apart from Him, whose only hope is in the shed blood of Jesus, who died so that through faith, we might live a new life and enter into God’s Kingdom.

Perhaps that’s our take-home question for the week. Have we believed and shared the true message of the gospel, of the Kingdom of God, or have we believed and shared a watered down substitute that isn’t really good news at all? The true gospel will offend. But it also changes lives. If we’ve said we like the church for the fellowship or the music or the movie night or whatever but forget about Jesus, may we repent and believe the truth, that the church is not here to teach us how to have happier lives but to bring people into the Kingdom of God.

All we have is Jesus. Nothing more. Every church, no matter how big or how small, the music program, the youth program, the childrens’ ministries, the buildings, the staff...all we’ve got is Jesus. He is our message. He is our hope. He is our purpose. All those other things can help us proclaim Him or distract us from Him. But no one is saved by a worship team or a youth group or even a preacher. Everyone who is saved is saved by Jesus. If we tell about Jesus, that is enough.

Our passage has some elements about Jesus’ second coming. He repeats those later, so we will deal with those at another time. For now, may we remember that we are the servants of God no less than the apostles. While we have different roles and different people to reach, the struggles of living and dying for Jesus remain. Let us give thanks that we do not face many of the persecutions the church has experienced throughout the world over time. And let us give thanks that even when we do, even if more are on the horizon, we can be sure that those who persevere to the end in Jesus will be saved.