

Perseverance in Persecution
Matthew 10:16-31
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Matthew 10 contains the summoning of the twelve disciples for their commission to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom to the Jewish people. After teaching the disciples to “beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest,” Jesus sends these twelve disciples to do this work. The entirety of chapter 10 contains the teaching of Jesus to the twelve who are listed in 10:2-4 for the purpose of preparing them for their mission that they would embark upon.

The twelve had observed the works of Jesus and they would now be sent to do these works themselves. They will also be sent to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. This discourse of Jesus as they are sent is related to this specific occasion. It is a lengthy section covering Matthew 10:5-42 which divides into three units:

- (1) Directions to the disciples (10:5-15)
- (2) Perseverance in persecution (10:16-31)
- (3) Reward of the righteous (10:32-42)

Matthew 10:5-15 focuses on what Jesus taught about their mission, their provisions and their method.. Their ministry was to be to the lost sheep of the house of Israel because God’s plan was for the Jews were the means by which the world would know God until they rejected their Messiah. The disciples were to travel light and move along when their message was not received.

Matthew 10:16-31 focuses on the persecution that the disciples would encounter. This section divides into two parts, the first addressing the people who bring persecution and the second addressing how to respond when persecution is encountered.

The people who bring persecution (10:16-22)

1. Persecution from false prophets (10:16)

The disciples are associated with sheep and the persecutors are associated with wolves. This is not the first time that Jesus used the analogy of wolves to describe those who oppose the work of God, “*Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves*” (Matthew 7:6).

That Jesus described false prophets as ravenous wolves earlier in the Sermon on the Mount points to the danger the disciples faced as they would encounter those who misrepresented God.

Those who misrepresent God by assigning Him words that He did not say are particularly dangerous for they stir up people against the truth. The followers of the false prophets are often involved in the persecution as well.

Paul later would also use the imagery of wolves to describe opponents of the church, *“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them”* (Acts 20:28-30).

These wolves will come in “among you” and affect the flock of God. Then “from among your own selves men will arise,” meaning the effect of the wolves will lead to others speaking “perverse things to draw away the disciples after them.” The disciples of Christ will face opposition from false teachers and we must beware of them.

We respond to wolves with shrewdness and with innocence. That is, we must act carefully, with prudence, and faithfully, with integrity. As serpents are responsive in their attack, we should prudently address wolves for the danger they present. *“Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting”* (Romans 16:17-18).

As doves are passive birds that flee rather than fight when attacked, we should hold to the integrity of our faith peacefully, without the pursuit of conflict. We ought not be the aggressor against the opposition of false teaching but should rather, *“so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men”* (Romans 12:18). Some Christians have made it their mission to attack everyone who does not agree with them about doctrine. It is one thing to disagree, but we should not be contentious. The ends of teaching the truth do not justify the means of personal attacks.

2. Persecution from Jews (10:17)

The next group of men that the disciples were to beware of were their own countrymen, who would “*scourge you in their synagogues.*” The Jews would reject Jesus and therefore, they would likewise reject His followers.

This oppression would come from the religious systems that they set up. The courts were established by the Jews to preserve the civil peace and religious purity of Judaism. The supreme court was the Sanhedrin, which we find Peter and John before in Acts 5:27 and Acts 6:12. Later, Paul would stand trial before this same council in Acts 23.

Synagogues were developed during the dispersion of the Jews to create a religious community among exiles. These became the center for Jewish worship in any village with at least ten Jewish men. Synagogues would typically be constructed facing Jerusalem and the temple. This indicates that this opposition would not be localized to Jerusalem, but would spread throughout the empire. We see the fulfillment of this opposition in testimony of Paul in Acts 22:19, “*Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You.*”

The opponents of Jesus, the Pharisees and Sadducees, are seen in this verse as the Jewish courts were controlled by the Sadducees and the Jewish synagogues were controlled by the Pharisees.

3. Persecution from government (10:18-20)

The disciples would be brought before governors and kings. This is the clearest indication that the disciples were also being instructed for their future ministry far beyond the time of Christ’s life on earth. There is no indication that they stood before governors and kings during this time. Christ was brought before Jewish and Gentile rulers (Matthew 26:57-59; 27:11; Luke 23:8-11).

However, after Christ’s death, we find the disciples appearing before kings and governors (Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-21; 6:12-8:3; 12:1-19; 16:19-40). In particular, Paul had the opportunity to testify of Christ in his trial before governors and kings and to many Gentiles (Acts 21:27-28:31). This fulfills the prediction by Jesus that persecution would be used by God as a means to bring light to the Gentiles as the disciples are brought to trials before rulers.

The disciples should not worry about what they would say “*for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say.*” This is not the equivalent of the remembrance of John 14:26 that the Spirit would lead them to record the Scripture. This is also not a promise that God will provide the specific words to speak.

Rather, this is a general promise of the assistance of the Holy Spirit during times of persecution. The Spirit will help God’s people to respond with godliness and the Spirit will use their words to achieve His desired outcome. When faithful disciples are persecuted for Christ’s sake they will be led by the Holy Spirit and there is no need to be fearful about what to say at that time.

4. Persecution from family (10:21-22)

Jesus' words, “*you will be hated by all because of My name*” does not mean we will be hated by every single person, for there would be no disciples. It means that there will be no distinction between types of people who will oppose Christ’s disciples. Opposition will come from those of every ethnic group.

Most significantly, persecution will come from one's own people, even family members. This opposition will be expanded on in Matthew 10:35-36, “*For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; and A MAN’S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD.*”

There will be no limit to this familial opposition, for “*brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.*” Family members will kill fellow family members in their opposition to Jesus. There is no fulfillment of this statement in the Scripture but even today, particularly in muslim countries, such hatred occurs.

This verse counters the flawed view that godly parents will raise godly children. In God’s sovereignty, He will draw many to Himself, but certainly there will be opposition by children against their parents because of Christ. The stark absence of this verse in the volumes of Christian parenting material has left many parents unjustly shamed and criticized by their fellow believers for the decisions of their children. Conversely, when children become believers, many parents are tempted to view their work in raising them as a critical part of their children’s faith, thus glorifying parental methodologies and usurping the glory of God in His sovereign graciousness.

The phrase “*the one who has endured to the end who will be saved*” is not a threshold of a works-oriented effort to continue in faith, but rather a promise that true believers will endure such persecution until the end. The end could mean the end of one’s life but in light of Jesus’ use of these same words in Matthew 24:13, it also refers to the end of the age. Whether by way of death or by the return of Christ, the sincere believer in Christ will be characterized by endurance.

This endurance implies patient perseverance when persecution comes. Paul wrote of the inevitability of such difficulty that Christians will face. “*Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Timothy 3:12). When we are persecuted, we stand firm in our faith, following the example of Jesus Christ, “*For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously*” (1 Peter 2:21-23).

The principles to respond to persecution (10:23-31)

1. Flee persecution (10:23)

When we encounter persecution, Jesus taught that we should flee, not fight. The Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem fled persecution in Acts 8:1. Paul followed this teaching by fleeing Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:50-51), fleeing Iconium (Acts 14:6), fleeing Thessalonica (Acts 17:10), and fleeing Berea (Acts 17:10). It is foolish to fight against the persecutors. “*You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you*” (James 5:6). We must follow Christ’s example in 1 Peter 2:21-23 and entrust ourselves to Him who judges righteously.

This point about fleeing persecution is often lost in the midst of a debate regarding the meaning of the words, “*you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.*” The most simple understanding is that the disciples won’t finish their ministry of going from city to city until Jesus rejoins them.

However, the phrase “*until the Son of Man comes*” is used in an eschatological context in the Gospels (Matthew 25:31; Luke 18:8). This leads to the view that the disciples would not finish going through the cities of Israel until the second coming of Christ. It is important to see the context of Matthew 10:11-15, which speaks of the cities of Israel not receiving the disciples.

Matthew 10:23 continues the teaching that the rejection of the Messiah will result in the rejection of the disciples. The disciples of Jesus will travel from city to city in Israel but will not be welcomed. Until Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom in Israel, His people will not receive Him and His disciples will continue to move along, shaking the dust off their feet (Matthew 10:14).

2. Follow Jesus (10:24-25)

“A disciple is not above his teacher” speaks of the disciples’ relationship with Christ Himself. If Jesus would be persecuted, the disciples would not be treated more honorably than their teacher. Indeed, the early opposition to Jesus by the Pharisees was a criticism of the disciples, *“Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath”* (Matthew 12:2).

Beelzebul means “prince of Baal” in Hebrew and Baal was the premier god of the Canaanites. The Jews viewed Baal as the essence of the devil and Jesus says that if He is being called the prince of Satan, the disciples will also be called this in their ministry. The disciples must expect to be treated as poorly as their Master by those they are sent to serve.

This is the essence of following Jesus. We do not follow Jesus for earthly glory, for He was despised and forsaken by men. *“Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way”* (Luke 6:26).

3. Fear not (10:26-31)

The normal expectation for people who hear their future is opposition, persecution and physical attack would be fearfulness. This is why Jesus commands His disciples to not fear. Three times in Matthew 10:26-31 Jesus uses the phrase, *“do not fear.”*

Jesus gives them three reasons why they must not fear. The first reason is because everything hidden will be known. There is no need for them to hide anything, for it will all come out in the future.

Specifically, Jesus is speaking of hiding the things that He had spoken to them. They should proclaim His words publicly, as from the housetops. As in many places, roofs in Israel were flat and were used by residents like we might use our patio, particularly without air conditioning on warm days. Addresses from rooftops could be more easily heard at a distance.

Since the words of Jesus would be known by all, they should not fear being associated with these words, since one day everyone will know them to be true. While we are alive on earth, we have the blessed opportunity to inform people of these life-giving words of Christ. This is a great privilege and responsibility with the knowledge of Christ that we enjoy. Indeed, in terms of the content of the New Testament, we have more of the revelation of God today than the disciples did when Christ spoke these words to them.

The second reason to not be fearful is because physical death is not final. The worst that persecution can bring is death. But physical death does not compare with spiritual death, for physical death is temporary while spiritual death is for all eternity. People can do nothing beyond killing our body, not our soul.

In reality, physical death may be less painful than the long endurance of physical suffering. Pain and suffering have often plagued the followers of Jesus. Paul put the significance of such suffering in perspective in Romans 8:18 when he wrote, *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”*

The third and final reason that we should not fear is because God is sovereign over all, including our lives. God, in His providence, cares for us. This parallels what Jesus taught earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, *““For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?”* (Matthew 6:25-26).

This is an argument from the lesser to the greater. If God cares for even sparrows that are sold cheaply, will He not also care for us? If God keeps them flying in the air, will He not keep us alive if it is His will? He considers His faithful followers more valuable than sparrows, *“you are more valuable than many sparrows”* (Matthew 10:31).

Sparrows were also considered of much less importance economically in the first century. One cent was the equivalent of one-sixteenth of a denarius, which was about a day's wage for a laborer. So thirty-two sparrows could be purchased for a day's wage. Sparrows were used for food by the poorest of the land. The Lord protects this food source for the poor and He is able to protect us from evil.

The God who sustains the sparrows is called “*your Father*” by Jesus. God’s care for us is as our Father. Not only does God providentially care for us because we are more valuable, He cares for even the smallest detail, “*But the very hairs of your head are all numbered*” (Matthew 10:30). We have no idea how many hairs are on our head, but the Lord knows this. He knows more about us than we know about ourselves and there is nothing about our lives that is too small for His attention. This is the opposite of what many people think.

We have no need to fear opposition to our faith because our Father loves us and cares for even the littlest detail of our lives. If He cares for the smallest things, He is able to care for the biggest things, including our very life. Our faith should lead us to trust that He controls all things that we may face, and this confidence should strengthen us as we press forward to serve Him according to His will.

Conclusion

Opposition from people due to our faith and service of Christ is to be expected. “*If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you*” (John 15:18). Since we are not above our Master, we know that if we are serving Him, we will not be honored by all. As Paul promised in 2 Timothy 3:12, “*Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*”

We do not fully understand why God allows persecution, but by faith, we know that God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnisapient, and all-loving. God has the ability to guard His disciples from any ultimate harm, and in His knowledge and wisdom, He providentially guides us through life’s circumstances to serve us according to the kind intention of His will.

We also know that He will deal with all men justly. In the words of Abraham, “*Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?*” (Genesis 18:25). The wicked will be judged according to their deeds (Revelation 20:13).

Our hope in this life is for eternity. We trust the Spirit of God will enable us to persevere through suffering and that our service of Christ in this life will be blessed for all eternity. In the words of Paul, who knew suffering well, “*the Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen*” (2 Timothy 4:18).