

ACKNOWLEDGE JESUS BEFORE MEN

Matthew 10:17-33

Key Verse: 10:32

“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.”

In verses 17-33 Jesus continues to give instructions to his apostles. However, the scope changes. Jesus says that they will witness to the Gentiles. This reveals the universal purpose of God and is directed toward the future, even to us. Jesus warns his people that they will be persecuted. Jesus teaches us what our attitude should be. Jesus urges us to acknowledge him before men, overcoming our fear. Then Jesus will acknowledge us before the Father in heaven. This gives us true and everlasting victory and glory. Let's accept Jesus' words.

First, the right attitude toward persecution (17-23).

In this part, Jesus teaches us that persecution will come. Jesus helps us to prepare for it by teaching the elements of a right attitude toward persecution. Let's think about seven of them.

Element one: be on your guard. Look at verse 17. “Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues.” When we preach the gospel and serve others sacrificially, we expect to be honored. However, we will be persecuted. Instead of hearing many “Amens” we may be arrested and put in jail. If we are not ready for this, we can be confused and become vulnerable. We must realize that we are always involved in a spiritual battle. Our enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion to devour its prey. We must have a basic attitude like soldiers in a war zone. Therefore, we must overcome easygoing desire. We must be on guard all the time.

Element two: know the source. Persecution comes from three main sources. The first is the religious leaders who run the synagogues mentioned in verse 17. Jesus' greatest opposition came from the Jewish religious leaders. The same was true for St. Paul. Throughout church history, religious leaders have been persecutors. For example, the Inquisition was established to expose and punish heretics. However, genuine Christians often became their targets. The Russian Orthodox Church has systematically persecuted Christians. And last week, a local church leader in Ireland began to speak against John and Blessing Park, right after they had a successful Bible conference with 26 attendants.

The second source is civil governments. Look at verse 18. “On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.” Jewish leaders used Rome to crucify Jesus. The Roman governor Pilate knew Jesus was innocent, but he gave in to Jewish pressure and had Jesus executed. Since then, Jesus was regarded as a criminal by Rome. Furthermore, when Christians refused to acknowledge Caesar as God, they were persecuted by Rome. In our times, Christians in China, North Korea and many Muslim countries have been systematically persecuted by the governments.

The third source is families. Look at verse 21. “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.” This persecution may be the most painful. We human beings were made to live in families in an atmosphere of love and trust. However, to each person, there is a relationship that is more important than the family. It is our relationship with God. When we put God first, we can have deep and meaningful relationships with family members. But if one rejects God, he becomes vulnerable to the devil and can betray Christian family members at any time. At the last Easter conference, a young man at Loyola accepted the gospel and decided to live a holy life. When he returned home, his brother tempted him to watch pornography. The young man refused, saying, “I want to live a holy life.” Then his brother became irrational and abusive. Many parents don't mind when their children live indecently. Yet when they worship Jesus and live a holy life, their parents suddenly become very upset and take drastic action against them. Look at verse 22. Jesus warns us that all men will hate us because of him.

Element three: have a clear life purpose to glorify God. Look again at verse 18. Jesus emphasizes that persecution comes on his account. It is not because we are bad, or because we made a mistake. It is simply because we bear Jesus' name. This persecution happens to fulfill God's purpose: to witness Jesus to the world. “Witness” means to preach the gospel with our mouths. It also means to reveal the gospel by a courageous and loving response to

persecution. Ultimately, it means to give one's life to testify to the love of Jesus. Jesus gave us a good example. When he was brought before Pilate, Jesus did not think about saving himself. Instead, Jesus told Pilate about the kingdom of heaven (Jn 18:36). Jesus was deeply concerned about Pilate's soul. Again, when Jesus was on the cross, with his blood dripping, he was mindful of one criminal who cried out to him for help. Jesus promised to bring that man to paradise (Lk 23:43). These two acts of witness by Jesus have led untold multitudes to eternal life and the kingdom of God. When Jesus' people respond to persecution with Jesus' love, they proclaim his presence powerfully, more powerfully than words can.

To witness to Jesus we must have a clear life purpose to glorify God. This does not come about suddenly. It comes about gradually, when we struggle daily to do so. Through daily decisions to obey God, overcoming ourselves, we purify our life purpose in God. Stephen was the first martyr. He did not suddenly become a martyr. Before his glorious and inspiring martyrdom, he spent many hours teaching the Bible to rebellious sheep, and serving the saints. We must purify our life purpose to glorify God through daily struggle.

Element four: depend on the Holy Spirit. Look at verses 19-20. "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." Most people who are arrested spend all of their time worrying about what to say and how to say it. They worry because they want to save themselves. Jesus' disciples are different. They are fulfilling God's purpose. They can depend on God. Our Father gives us the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is the wisdom and power of God. When Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, he did not try to save himself. He taught the word of God to the Sanhedrin members, though they were trained Bible scholars. Stephen's message was so full of wisdom and insight that they were cut to the heart; their sins were exposed (Ac 7:54). It was not Stephen who was on trial, but the Sanhedrin members. Later, when Paul stood before the Sanhedrin, he had such great wisdom from the Holy Spirit that he divided the Pharisees and Sadducees against each other, paralyzing them (Ac 23:6-7). When Paul stood before Governor Festus, his gospel message was so powerful that Festus lost his composure and shouted at Paul that he was insane (Ac 26:24). During persecution our Father God in heaven draws close to us. He gives us his Spirit of wisdom and power. Then we can be victors. We don't need to worry. We need to trust God. He will give us his Holy Spirit in our time of need.

Element five: stand firm to the end. Look at verse 22b. "...but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." The time of persecution is the time to purify our life purpose. It is the time to make a new decision to live for the glory of God and to stand on the gospel truth. There is a temptation to compromise for self-preservation. We must overcome this by making a new decision to stand firm to the end with Jesus. Jesus promises us that when we do so, we will be saved.

Element six: flee and keep witnessing. Look at verse 23a. "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another." Jesus did not tell us to invite abuse from persecutors. Jesus does not expect us to sit down and wait for the worst to happen. He told us clearly when we are persecuted in one place, flee to another. He urges us to find people who will listen to the gospel. God uses persecution to spread the gospel rapidly. After Stephen's martyrdom, the saints in Jerusalem spread and went up into Asia, over toward Europe, and into northern Africa. In our time, persecution of believers in China has resulted in a tremendous growth of genuine Christians. It has given birth to the Silk Road vision to bring the gospel back to Jerusalem. And as they go, they want to preach to Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist peoples along the way. When we invite students to Bible study, we don't need to irritate them until they call the campus police. We must simply move on to the next person.

Element seven: hope in Jesus' Second Coming. Look at verse 23b. "I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes." Jesus gives a great promise. Jesus will come again in power and great glory. Then Jesus will take his precious children to paradise. It is the end of suffering, the end of sorrow, the end of pain, the end of sin, the end of Satan, and the end of death. It is the beginning of eternal life in perfect joy and peace, and in the love of God. This can happen at any time. When we hold this hope in our hearts, we can be strong in the time of persecution.

Second, persecution makes us like Jesus (24-25).

Look at verses 24-25. "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 Beelzebub, how much

more the members of his household!” Jesus tells us that persecution is part of disciple training. It is not an elective; it is a required course for development and graduation.

When Jesus came to this world, he did only good works. Jesus gave sight to two blind men and then drove out the demon from a mute man and restored his speech. It was what the Messiah was prophesied to do (Isa 35:5-6). Yet, the religious leaders concluded, “By the prince of demons he drives out demons.” What terrible slander against the Son of God! They became irrational and violent. Finally they had Jesus executed. In this way, Jesus purchased our salvation. Moreover, Jesus’ suffering shows us how to grow spiritually as his disciples.

No one likes to be slandered. We have a strong sense of honor, being made in the image of God. But when we follow Jesus, we will be slandered, falsely accused and lied about. Then we must remember that Jesus was treated in the same way. We must realize that we are sharing in the suffering of Christ. Though it may seem painful at the time, this suffering in Christ makes us more like Jesus in our inner man. It is also the evidence that we are part of Jesus’ family, for we are receiving the same treatment that our shepherd Jesus received.

Third, do not be afraid (26-31).

In verses 26-31, Jesus repeats three times the words, “do not be afraid.” No doubt, when the disciples heard Jesus talk about persecution, their hearts sank. They tried to look courageous. But they were scared to death. Their great enemy in doing gospel work was inner fear. According to Jesus, they need not be afraid. Jesus explains why.

In the first place, the gospel conquers the world with truth. Look at verse 26. “So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.” Concealed or hidden things include both deeds of darkness and the good work of the gospel. The truth will be revealed in the end. The truth alone will stand for eternity. Twenty-five years ago, Pope John Paul II was the target of an assassination attempt. This week an Italian parliamentary commission formally declared that Soviet agents were behind the attempt. It was done to hinder Poland’s struggle for freedom from Communism. The truth prevails in the end, no matter how people try to cover it up. There is a very sacrificial woman of God. She never appears on the stage. But she is always there to serve God behind the scenes. Someday this will be revealed for the glory of God and her eternal honor in Christ. The truth triumphs in the end. Therefore, we can overcome fear.

Look at verse 27. “What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.” The disciples heard the gospel truths from Jesus. What they had seen, heard and experienced in a corner of Israel would spread to the whole world. The gospel of God’s love drives out hatred and deceit. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. When we preach the gospel boldly it triumphs over lies and hatred. It brings God’s victory.

In the second place, fear God alone. Look at verses 28-30. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” The devil wants us to fear death and become helpless. But Jesus compared death to sleep. Death is entry into eternal paradise. We must not fear death. We must fear God. God holds our eternal destiny in his hands. God sends people to heaven or hell. At present God is the Sovereign Ruler of the world. Even the death of a sparrow happens according to the will of God. Certainly, the suffering of his children is known to him. No one can harm God’s children without God’s permission. If God allows us to suffer, he has a good purpose for it. It will work for our eternal salvation and for the salvation of others. We belong to God. God holds us in his hand. We must fear God alone.

There is a spiritual reality that we cannot see with human eyes. St. Stephen had to face the poisonous Sanhedrin. They were full of the devil’s hatred. Stephen was not afraid. He was full of the Holy Spirit. He looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. As the Sanhedrin members stoned him, causing blood to flow, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (Ac 7:54-60). At the moment of martyrdom, he entered the presence of Christ with the image of Christ. When we see God, we fear nothing.

In the third place, God's love drives out fear. Look at verse 31. "So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." God's people are precious. God loves each of his children so much that he gave his one and only Son Jesus Christ as a ransom for our sins. When we truly realize the love of God, there is no fear in our hearts. Even if God calls us to make the supreme sacrifice, we can do so with peace and trust. It is because we know that God is with us. Psalm 116:15 says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

There is a movie called "The End of the Spear." It is about the courageous missionary lives of Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, and others who were martyred in Ecuador in 1957. In one scene, after being speared in the chest by the Waodoni Indians, they lay in a river bed in a jungle far from the civilized world. Their blood pours out and mingles with the water of the river. Their attackers surround them shouting and jumping. The missionary martyrs look up and see flashes of light. They are the angels of God preparing their welcome into heaven with eternal glory. They smile and become most peaceful. When we know the love of God and see the glory of God, there is no fear, even in death.

Fourth, acknowledge Jesus before men (32-33).

Look at verses 32-33. "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven." When we acknowledge him before men, he acknowledges us before the Father in heaven. We can acknowledge Jesus by sharing his name and his message. We can acknowledge Jesus by sharing our personal testimonies of his grace. We can acknowledge Jesus by sharing the word of God with people we meet. When we do this, something happens in heaven. Jesus turns to his Father God and acknowledges us as his people. When God the Father hears from Jesus that we belong to him, he sees us as he sees Jesus. God justifies us to be right with him. Our Father God looks upon us with the same affection and care as he does upon Jesus. Those whom the Father acknowledges must be acknowledged by all creation. Those whom the Father acknowledges can hold their heads up and live with joy and a real sense of honor as children of the King Jesus and members of God's family.

On the other hand, those who disown Jesus before men will be disowned by the Father. He will say to them, "I never knew you," regardless of their excuses. Their destiny is eternal punishment.

Today we have learned from Jesus that persecution will come to his disciples who preach the gospel in his name. But God uses that persecution to achieve his ultimate purpose of spreading the gospel to all peoples of all nations. God also uses persecution to refine our inner person to be like Jesus. We have nothing to fear because our Father God will give us his Spirit. Jesus will win the final victory. Jesus is with us and he loves us immeasurably. Let's trust his love and acknowledge Jesus before young people on our campuses.