

Fear God, Not Men
Matthew 10:16-42
Key Verse: 10:28

"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."

Everyone wants to be successful in their personal lives and ministries. No one wants to be a failure. So we are eager to learn new skills or use programs that enhance success. Some people think that success in God's work depends on methodology, technique, or organization. You may have heard of the gospel horse of the 1950's. It was used to attract people to evangelistic meetings. The horse answered theology questions by stomping his hoof once for yes and twice for no. Sometimes such things may be helpful. But, ultimately, our success in God's work depends on something more fundamental. In today's passage Jesus teaches his disciples the way of success in ministry. It is to fear God, not men, and to love Jesus most.

In 10:16-42, Jesus gives general instructions for future ministry. Jesus honestly foretold that many kinds of persecutions would come. Persecution accompanies gospel ministry like shadows follow the sunlight. St. Paul said, "...everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2Ti3:12). Jesus also expanded the scope of the disciples' ministry to the Gentile world (18), that is, cross-cultural ministry. This added a new challenge to their work. It is relevant to us. We live in a multicultural society with many different ethnic groups. As we face persecution, cultural barriers and misunderstanding, it is easy to become fearful, and then useless. In this passage, Jesus helps us become effective gospel workers by solving our fear problem. Jesus begins by teaching us an important principle.

I. Be wise and innocent (16-25)

Look at verse 16a. "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves." Jesus wanted his disciples to accurately assess their situation: they were like sheep among wolves. Sheep are pure and innocent, and at the same time naïve and vulnerable. Wolves are crafty, cunning and fearsome. Wolves are quick to sense weakness and exploit it. When sheep confront wolves, the wolves will win every time. So there are no sports teams called "sheep," but there are several named after wolves. The world is full of wolves. They think of sheep as delicious dinner. In order to survive, they deceive and exploit others for their own benefit (2Ti 3:13). They are willing to destroy God's servants for their own gain. Jesus worried that his disciples would be hurt, wounded, even devoured by wolves. However, Jesus did not keep them from going. He sent them out into the world. Jesus wanted them to become warriors of faith who would preach the gospel boldly. Jesus had great faith.

Jesus told them in verse 16b, "Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." The word "shrewd" can be translated "wise." Jesus wants his disciples to learn from the snake and the dove. Both of these animals have a good side and a bad side. The disciples should learn their good side but not their bad side. They should learn wisdom from the snake, but not deviousness. They should learn innocence from the dove, but not stupidity. Snakes blend in with their environment, observe a situation carefully, and then strike suddenly and fatally, swallowing their adversary. We may hate snakes, but we need to learn from their wisdom.

However, in the course of learning from snakes, we should not lose purity and become evil. So Jesus said that we must also be as innocent as a dove. Doves are known to be innocent, pure, and faithful to their partners throughout their lifetime. This may be why the Song of Songs refers to them frequently (1:15; 2:12,14; 4:1; 5:2,12; 6:9). Jesus' disciples must be wise and innocent. When confronting difficulties we should handle them in such a way that advances the kingdom of God. While doing so, we should not lose purity, but have a clear conscience before God and pure gospel faith. The Christian influence comes from keeping purity without compromise. The prophet Daniel is a good example. When he was taken to Babylon as a prisoner, many wolves were waiting to devour him. It seemed impossible for him to keep his purity as one of God's chosen people. But when he decided to do so, God gave him wisdom to overcome all the difficulties. In this way he could become a great, influential man of God in a hostile environment.

After teaching his disciples this general principle, Jesus foretold the kinds of persecution they would encounter. It would come from Jewish religious leaders in the synagogues (17), as well as secular Gentile leaders (18). In the time of persecution, what should they do? They should be on guard (17). They should use their trials as opportunities to

witness to Jesus. They should not worry about how they would handle persecution. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would be with them (19-20). The Holy Spirit would give them wisdom and courage to testify about Jesus.

Here we learn that the Holy Spirit is the source of wisdom and courage. This wisdom is not worldly wisdom, but heavenly wisdom. James describes this wisdom as "first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (Ja 3:17). The courage the Holy Spirit gives is not the boldness of a human will; it is divine strength from heaven. We can see it in Apostles Peter and John before the Sanhedrin. Though they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were so wise, bold and courageous that the esteemed Sanhedrin became helpless, and had to let them go (Ac 4:13,21). We can also see it in the Apostle Paul during his various trials before governors and kings (Ac 23:6; 24:25). When we depend on the Holy Spirit, he will give us heavenly wisdom and divine courage to overcome all kinds of challenges and enable us to share the gospel boldly.

In verse 21 Jesus warned of another kind of persecution to come. It was from family members. In addition, his disciples would be generally hated by everyone because of Jesus (22a). As we know, the bonds between family members are the strongest in this world. When persecution comes through one's family, it is most painful to endure. Jesus' disciples may be tempted to compromise and deny their faith. But Jesus promised that when his disciples stand firm to the end, they will be saved (22b). When one shepherd from Canada began to believe in Jesus, his mother persecuted him and his Bible teachers severely. But he has stood firm for over 20 years. His own faith has grown, and his mother has gradually changed. Now she sees that God is working in him and his family, especially by granting her many grandchildren.

In verse 23 Jesus gave his disciples another strategy in times of persecution: flee. There is a saying, "He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day." Jesus implies that as they flee, they are to preach the gospel. After Stephen's martyrdom, the early church members scattered due to persecution. As they went, they preached the gospel. Through these fleeing preachers, Samaria was evangelized. Soon, the church at Antioch was born, which became the headquarters of world mission (Ac 11:19-21).

In verses 24-25 Jesus emphasized that since he--our teacher and master--was persecuted, so his disciples would be persecuted. It is to be expected, and we should not be surprised when it happens. Persecution is participation in the sufferings of Christ. Persecution helps us grow in Christian character. Moreover, it results in sharing in Christ's glory. 1 Peter 4:12-13 say, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." In part one, we learn that Jesus sends his disciples into a dangerous world. However, the Holy Spirit helps us be wise and innocent. Then God can use us to advance his kingdom. Let's accept Jesus' challenge and pray for the Holy Spirit's help.

II. Fear only God (26-33)

When persecuted in an anti-Christian society, it is easy for Jesus' people to fall into fear. However, we do not need to be afraid. Jesus repeated the phrase, "do not be afraid" three times in this section (26,28,31). In verses 26-33, Jesus explains why we should not be afraid.

First, the truth will triumph in the end (26-27). Persecutors carry out unjust and evil deeds in secret, as though they will never be accountable. However, Jesus said, "there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known" (26). After the Jewish religious leaders carried out the terrible injustice of killing Jesus, he was buried. His tomb was sealed and guarded by Roman soldiers. They wanted to bury the truth about Jesus along with his body. However, Almighty God raised Jesus from the dead. The Risen Christ appeared to many witnesses, who were so changed by meeting him that they willingly gave their lives to share his message. The truth about Jesus, including his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection is now known to the world. Jesus is the Truth that cannot be suppressed. Persecution may last for a season, but truth will triumph in the end. This gives us confidence and a sense of final victory. Let's proclaim the gospel truth boldly (27).

Second, God is the Eternal Judge (28). Look at verse 28. "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." Persecutors try to intimidate Christians with physical violence. However, they have no power over one's soul. Persecutors, no matter how harsh, have only a temporary and limited power. Jesus showed us by his example that we have nothing to fear from those

who kill the body. Hebrews 2:14-15 says, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil--and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." When Jesus rules our hearts, we are free from the fear of death.

On the other hand, God is the Eternal Judge. God decides whether each person goes to heaven or to hell. God's power is almighty and his judgment stands forever. Therefore, God is the one we should fear. When we truly fear God, we need fear nothing else. Before Peter feared God, he was very afraid of people. When he felt threatened, he could not testify truthfully about Jesus, even before a servant girl. But after he met the Risen Christ and was filled with the Holy Spirit, he could see God Almighty. He became a man of courage and wisdom who could lead the early church during times of fierce persecution. John Bunyan lived from 1628-1688 A.D. A poor man, he was led to Christ when he read the writings of Puritan fathers. Then he became a popular lay preacher. During religious persecution in England, he was arrested and imprisoned for twelve years. There he wrote "Pilgrim's Progress," which became the most popular book in England after the Bible. Bunyan could do this because he did not fear men, but only God.

When we review Christian history, we can find many heroes and heroines of faith who did not fear people in times of persecution; they feared only God. The hymn "Faith of Our Fathers," contains these words: "Faith of our fathers, living still. In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword! O how our hearts beat high with joy When'er we hear that glorious word! Faith of our fathers, holy faith, we will be true to thee till death." Perhaps we don't face strong persecution in America today. Still there is peer pressure in our schools and at our workplaces. There is also a growing anti-Christian social pressure. On some moral issues, it is hard to speak truthfully even in church. In times like these, it is easy for Christians to fall into fear, become silent, and hide our identity. But when we fear God, we are free from the fear of people. We can reveal our Christian identity and share the gospel boldly.

Third, God our Ruler protects his children (29-33). Verses 29-30 tell us that God is concerned about each sparrow that falls to the ground. Furthermore, God is concerned about each person he created; God even knows the number of hairs on our heads, including the gray ones. Jesus wants us to know that God is the Sovereign Ruler of all. Our God does not use his power to crush sinners. But in his great mercy he uses his power to save his children, purify us, raise us in his image, and use us for his glorious salvation work. God may send us into danger. But he will be with us to rule over us and the situation for his own great purpose. Apostle Paul and Silas were once arrested, beaten and imprisoned for preaching the gospel. But in prison they sang hymns of praise to God. Then God worked a mighty miracle in the jail which led to the conversion of the jailer and his household. This was an important part of pioneering the Philippian church, which became a power station for world mission. We should know that God reigns over each one of our lives, and over our community. We are in God's hand. God loves us, and considers us most precious. God protects us. Nothing can happen to us that he does not allow, and if he allows it, it is for our ultimate good, though it may take a while to see the fruit (Ro 8:28). So David Livingstone said, "We will never die until our mission from God has been fulfilled." Therefore we should not be fearful. Jesus said in verse 31, "So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

If we are gripped with fear, we can compromise and deny our faith. This is a serious matter. Jesus said, "...whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven" (33). If Jesus disowns us in the final judgment, there is no way to be saved. On the other hand, when we acknowledge Jesus before others, Jesus acknowledges us before the Father in heaven. Therefore we must acknowledge Jesus at any cost. Then our Lord Jesus will give us the crown of victory. Polycarp lived from A.D. 69 to 156. He was a disciple of Apostle John, and served as bishop of the church at Smyrna. As a very old man, he was imprisoned for refusing to burn incense to Caesar. During interrogation, someone threatened to burn him at the stake. To this, he responded: "The fires you speak of last only a little while, but the fires of judgment, reserved for the ungodly, cannot be quenched." As he was about to be burned at the stake, he was offered to be released if he denied Christ. He answered, "During the 86 years that I have served him, my Lord Jesus has never disowned me. How can I disown my Lord Jesus?" Then he surrendered himself to the flames willingly.

III. Love Jesus most (34-42)

Look at verse 34. Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. Sometimes Jesus' words seem contradictory. The Bible says that Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6), who brings peace on earth (Lk 2:14).

Jesus told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. Not as the world gives, do I give to you" (Jn 14:27 ESV). But in verses 34-36, Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword, for he would turn close family members against each other. This does not mean that Jesus tries to break up families. It means that families will be divided based on how each member responds to Jesus. In one family, parents did not object when their son indulged in parties. But when he believed in Jesus and began to live a holy life, they persecuted him, saying, "You have ruined our family harmony. We have strife because of you." This kind of conflict is inevitable. In order to have the true peace that the gospel brings, false peace should be exposed and rooted out. True peace comes through conflict with the power of sin and death. We can bear this conflict when it comes from enemies. But it is hard to bear when it comes through close family members. Jesus said, "...a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (36).

Look at verses 37-38. "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. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me." The key word here is "me," meaning Jesus. When anyone accepts Jesus as King, he or she will have conflicts with parents, children, and even within oneself. To Jesus, the issue is who we love most at such times. Of course, we love our parents, we love our children, and we love ourselves. This is very natural. But we should not love these more than Jesus. When we love these more than Jesus, we are idol worshipers who will suffer from anxiety, sorrow and strife. Jesus alone is worthy of our first love, for he is in very nature God, the author of life and our only Savior, who gave himself for us. So we should love Jesus a little more than anyone else. We must have a Jesus-centered value system.

Look at verse 39. "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." This is not theory but reality. Jesus gave his own life to save us. Jesus wants us to give our lives for him. Then we can have a deep, life-giving love relationship. When we sacrifice everything, even our lives, for Jesus, then we gain everything, especially eternal life. But if we try to keep our lives only for ourselves, we lose everything, including our very lives.

In verses 40-42 we learn that Jesus' disciples do not only receive persecution. There will also be people who welcome them with love and respect. Anyone who welcomes them actually welcomes Jesus himself and God the Father (40). Those who welcome Jesus' disciples will be rewarded without fail (41). Jesus said, "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward" (42).

In this passage we have seen that our Lord Jesus sends his disciples into this dangerous world to share the gospel with people. Jesus knows that his disciples are weak. Jesus knows that they will face cultural differences, misunderstandings, persecution, and all kinds of hardships. But Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will be with them. Jesus promises God's protection, final victory, and eternal life. So we do not need to be afraid of people, or the hostile environment. We should fear only God the Eternal Judge. We should fix our eyes on him, who controls everything according to his wisdom and purpose. Also, we should love Jesus more than anything or anyone. He will give us eternal life. This is the way of true success in our lives and ministries.