

Preparing for Persecution
Matthew 10:16-25

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Well friends, I hate to be the bearer of tough news but I have to do it. Summer and vacation time is just about over. For some, school starts next Monday. The Fall rush is upon us. If we have not already done so, we will need to move out of summer vacation mode and into regular life mode.

But this transition is not that easy. We had the privilege of going to Prince Edward Island and Southern Ontario this past summer. That time provided me an opportunity to really disconnect and just relax. I knew I'd had quite a break when we started driving back from the Edmonton airport to home. I looked in front of me and saw this white license plate with red letters. I didn't recognize it. I'd been driving in PEI and Southern Ontario so I knew the PEI – birthplace of confederation plates and I knew the "Yours to Discover" Ontario license plates. But what was this red letter plate. Alberta – Wild Rose Country. Okay, I have been away.

Then I came back to work to a wedding, sermon, funeral, child dedication, another sermon, Elder's meeting and pastoral care. Suddenly I was jolted out of my comfortable relaxed state into the reality of everyday life and work. Can anyone else relate a little to this experience that you have had or are about to have?

I share this because I think it's pretty common for us to struggle when leaving a comfortable place or situation. I think most of us find it a challenge to move from vacation and relaxation to work and sometimes frustration. And we can take such expectations into our Christian life.

We come to Christ and enjoy all the wonderful blessings – forgiveness; new life; Jesus' presence and companionship through life; a God who hears our prayers; support in tough times from our community. We can settle into a pretty comfortable Christian lifestyle. But what if we experienced persecution because of our faith? What if we were harassed, mocked, shoved, arrested and maybe even beaten just because of our love for Christ? Would anyone here volunteer for that? Would we continue to confess Christ if we knew we would suffer for it?

We're continuing today in our journey through the Gospel of Matthew. We're doing this because we are pursuing discipleship under Jesus Christ. If we want to be growing disciples of Jesus, we need to follow Jesus' life and hear His teaching. Matthew provides both. He follows Jesus' life. Then he gives us a big chunk of Jesus' teaching. Matthew actually gives us 5 big chunks or collections of Jesus' teaching. The first was the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. That focused on every day discipleship. Jesus showed us what following Him looks like in the ordinary everyday life.

This section focuses on missionary discipleship. Jesus describes what's involved in following Christ as we spread the good news of the kingdom to others.

Today's passage helps readers and future disciples of Christ understand the reality of persecution while we live as missionary disciples. But this talk of persecution might come as a shock to some of us. So I want to begin today first by answering the question "Why must Christians face persecution for the faith?" Then we'll look at how Jesus' prepares His disciples and us for persecution.

Matthew 10:16-25 ESV

[16] "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. [17] Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, [18] and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. [19] When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. [20] For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. [21] Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, [22] and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. [23] When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

[24] "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. [25] It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

Jesus' words here may have had a shocking impact on the disciples. He's been teaching about and demonstrating that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He's brought this good news to those who are lost. How could such a message of joy and power fit with what the disciples are told to expect here? Yet Jesus reveals this for their benefit and preparation.

It's like Jesus is the commander giving a briefing to some soldiers selected for a difficult mission. That commander reveals the objective, the obstacles that stand in the way of the objective and the great importance involved in obtaining the objective. Yet he warns of dangers and provides info that will give his soldiers the best opportunity to actually make it.

But first, I think we need to answer the question "Why must Christians face persecution?" But we didn't expect it would include persecution. It seems to be a fairly universal experience for God's people throughout the Old and New Testaments and for most of church history. Christians were persecuted after Christ ascended to heaven. You may have heard of Christians being fed to the lions in the Coliseum at Rome. There was great persecution of Christians under

Nero. And so it went throughout history. In fact, the origin of the Baptists started out of persecution. Some groups in England believed that only believers should be baptized. They were so severely persecuted for this belief that they had to flee England and go to mainland Europe. Today persecution of Christians continues throughout many countries in the world. About 100 Christians die in the world every month for their faith. We live in a place where we currently still enjoy religious freedom. But our freedoms are being restricted more and more.

Why must Christians endure persecution?

1) It is God's chosen way to demonstrate His love and compassion for sinners.

Imagine Jesus appeared at His first coming and destroyed the Romans in a dramatic display of super power. Then He said, "I am God. You must turn to me or I will destroy you." Many would turn. Many would become His followers. But would it be out of love? Would it be out some choice and desire to actually want God for who He is? More likely if people would follow just to survive.

But instead God puts forward a suffering servant. It was prophesied in the Old Testament that a such a servant would redeem His people through His own sacrifice. Jesus comes and suffers more than anyone has ever suffered. He bears more than anyone else would have to bear to redeem us. Yet, out of love, He went through with it. So we see God's love through the suffering of Jesus.

God does it this way to woo and draw sinners to Himself. He doesn't show up and say I'm God and you better submit to me. He offers this sacrificial love first. Then He calls people to come and find life and forgiveness in Him. When God's people endure persecution and persevere, it declares something to others. It shows them something serious is here. Normal people don't endure persecution. They try to escape from it. So if someone endures persecution for the faith and continues to love even their persecutors, it gives opportunity for God to display His love.

Why else might Christians need to endure persecution? **2) It reveals the real ugliness of sin, evil and the devil.** The message of the Gospel confronts evil, sin and the enemy. It announces the ultimate doom of these three deadly adversaries. So they respond with fury, opposition and oppression of messengers who spread the good news.

Sometimes, we can get lulled into thinking that people don't really need Christ. We can buy into the notion that every one really is a good person and the only people that deserve Hell if such a place exists would be Stalin, Hitler and certain members of ISIS. But evil and sin are real. The enemy is real and hates it when God is glorified. The enemy is

used to having some ownership over this world and the people in it. So when someone comes to Christ, God's kingdom advances a little more. There is a war going on for people's souls. Persecution reveals this reality to us.

But the third reason Christians must face and endure persecution comes from our passage today. **3) A servant is not above his/her master.** In verses 24 and 25, Jesus talks about this. In the last phrase he states "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household." Beelzebul was a name for the chief of demons or Satan. Jesus was regularly called the chief of demons – the Son of God was misrepresented as the devil. Jesus says, if they can call the only sinless human being to ever live "the devil", how much more will they persecute His followers?

Sometimes, I think we get confused in our perspective of our relationship with Christ. We can begin to believe that we have done him such a massive favor by becoming a Christian. "God, I hope you appreciate how blessed you are to have me on your side. Christianity and your church were failing but all is ok now that I'm on the scene. I should get some significant compensation for that and be able to write my own job description because you are so blessed to have me." No. Coming to Christ is an incredible grace filled gift beyond measure. Bearing the message of the Gospel is a privilege. But along with that privilege comes the price of persecution. Jesus endured immense intense persecution. We don't deserve to escape similar treatment.

But when do we experience persecution? I can't think of anyone in our congregation who has been thrown to the lions lately. We haven't seen martyrs from our church. The persecution we experience is not so obvious and physical. But we do face a subtle yet growing persecution. We are no longer allowed to question or object to the promotion of gender confusion by our culture and in our schools. I wonder how long I will be able to preach the Bible and the whole counsel of God. Or will I one day be charged with a hate crime for reading or quoting some of the passages in the New Testament that speak against the practice of homosexuality. What if one day, a government decides that any church that refuses to bless same sex marriages will lose its charitable status? Would you continue to give to the work here if you didn't get a tax receipt?

Some of you may have experienced persecution at work – maybe you were passed over for promotion because of your faith; or maybe excluded because of your faith. You may have been denied a contract because of your faith or your unwillingness to play a dirty or underhanded game. You may have endured a lot of persecution in your marriage

because of your faith. You may have experienced persecution in a class where your Christianity was mocked. Maybe you were persecuted for refusing to participate in something everyone else was doing because you wanted to honor Jesus. Persecution may not be as obvious but is subtle and increasing in our country today. So how can we deal with it?

How does Jesus prepare His disciples for persecution?

1) 10:16-18 – He shows them how to approach a hostile environment. Jesus jolts the disciples with the reality of persecution by stating “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. What? Didn’t Jesus just talk about the crowds being like sheep without a shepherd back at the end of chapter 9? Now He applies the sheep metaphor to disciples? They are being sent among wolves? You don’t send sheep among wolves. Wolves eat sheep. Sheep are defenseless and vulnerable to a wolf’s attack. Why couldn’t Jesus have said “I am sending you out as pit bulls among wolves, or Rottweilers among wolves or Tasmanian devils among wolves.” At least we’d have a fighting chance. But we’re being sent out as sheep among wolves?

Then he describes what will happen. Men will deliver the disciples over to the courts. They will flog or whip the disciples in the synagogues. Basically this happened especially to someone accused of spreading a false teaching. They would tie the person to a pillar in the synagogue. The flogger would take a whip and strike the person 13 times on their chest and 26 times on their back. That was forty lashes less one. Paul received that treatment 5 times in his ministry. There was also dragging before governors and kings maybe for trial or judgment. This is some pretty serious persecution. That’s why we need to go out as pit bulls among wolves.

But Jesus says we’re sheep among wolves, like he was sheep that was led to slaughter quietly. Yet he shows the disciples how to approach this reality where they will be sheep among wolves. “So be shrewd as snakes; innocent as doves.” To be shrewd, in a good way, is to make decisions that will not unnecessarily provoke or bring offense to opponents or outsiders. So using the sheep analogy – a sheep shows up in town and notices a few wolves over there that are busy having a wolf party. The sheep doesn’t start baaing really loud to announce its presence and draw the wolf’s attention. It is discreet or careful in going about its business in town.

I remember talking with someone from a mission’s agency this past year. They shared how in one country, the word *missionary* was equivalent to the word terrorist in English. So if you announced that you were a missionary, the people from that country would assume you were there to bring destruction and tear down the society. This person

experienced this phenomenon when they used the word “missionary” in a coffee shop. A person at a nearby table immediately looked up and viewed them with suspicion. So to be shrewd as a snake in that context would mean you don’t use the word missionary.

But it also involves being innocent as doves. We don’t sin to spread God’s message. We don’t play the same games or do the things the same way others do things just to get an in or remain safe. We need to do things right in God’s eyes. This is how a sheep among wolves will survive. But this doesn’t mean that we won’t get persecuted or discovered. We still might. When those times come, Jesus continues with a promise.

2) 10:19-20 – He promises words from the Father when needed for defense. “Do not be anxious, he says in verse 19, how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” There would be times the disciples would face kings and powerful citizens and stand before a court. Remember we learned last week these were ordinary disciples. They were not Israel’s 12 most influential people. It could be pretty intimidating for fisherman to stand before powerful human rulers. Yet they need not be anxious about what to say. The Holy Spirit, here described for the only time in the New Testament as the Spirit of the Father, would provide words.

We might wonder what to say if we suddenly face a situation of persecution. But we need not worry. In that moment we pray, “Father, please give me the right words.” He will come through to use that opportunity to bring the message right into that situation.

Another way Jesus prepares the disciples for persecution is **3) 10:21-22 – He alerts them to possible persecution from family.** Verses 21 and 22 talk about brothers giving over brothers to death, a father his child and children against parents. There would come a time when people thought they would be doing God’s work by betraying those who had confessed Christ. This would extend into families. Such a practice is not so far-fetched. You’ve heard of honor killings. There are also situations where people have come to Christ and their family treats them like they are dead. Some hold a funeral to declare their child or family member is dead to them because of this faith decision. Some families cut off communication with a family member because they believe this one has betrayed the truth. There will be more on this family division in verses 34-39 of Matthew 10.

Finally, Jesus prepares the disciples for persecution by **4) 10:23 – He reveals the time to move on and for how long.** In verse 23, Jesus instructs the disciples to flee persecution and go to the next town. Now this does not mean that the second we experience opposition to our faith we run away or stop talking. Likely it took some time to discover a town's response to the message of the Gospel. After a deliberate concerted attempt to share the good news it became obvious that there would be no reception at this time. So instead of continuing to try to beat a dead horse, Jesus says there is a time to move on and try the message in a new town.

But for how long are they to spread this message? Jesus says "You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes." So the disciples will not get to spread the message to every possible Israelite. There will always be more who need to hear. But what does Jesus mean by the phrase "until the Son of Man comes?"

The title "Son of Man" comes from the Old Testament in Daniel 7. It is a divine name reserved for one who will rule and take his seat at the right hand of God. The phrase "the Son of man coming" does not just refer to someone showing up. It indicates there is some sort of coming with power and authority.

So what can "until the Son of Man comes" mean in the disciple's context? Four suggestions have been made. One – it refers to Jesus' resurrection, when he came back from the dead. So the disciples would not get to all the towns of Israel before the cross and resurrection. Two – it refers to the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. So the disciples would not visit all the towns before the Spirit's coming, 50 days after Passover. Three – it refers to his coming judgment on Jerusalem when it was destroyed in A.D. 70. So the disciples would continue to preach and go throughout Israel after the resurrection. Then the Romans would come and invade the land – destroy Jerusalem and the temple and they would all have to leave Israel. Four – It refers to the second coming of Christ at the end of the age. So the disciples would continue to preach until their death. Disciples must continue to spread the message until Christ's return. Each view has its strengths and weaknesses. The first two – Jesus' resurrection or the coming of the Spirit seem weaker because the disciples had not done much missionary work before that time. They would go out on missionary work extensively after Jesus ascended into heaven. Then they would experience all that was talked about here. So it's likely Jesus could be referring to both the destruction of Jerusalem and the time of the end. For Jews in the first century, that destruction was like the end for them. For those of us who continue as followers, we are commanded to spread the message until Jesus actually returns.

Jesus did not call us out of the world into a safe haven of rest. A perpetual holiday and vacation time of comfortable Christianity. We must venture out as defenseless sheep in the midst of ravenous wolves trusting Christ, so we must guard our hearts. Guarding them means being wise as serpents. We are to know the ways of the world, especially the traps that await us. Yet God is with us through persecution. He uses it to spread His message.

The apostle Paul experienced a lot of persecution. Listen to what he wrote about this in 2 Timothy 3:10-13

Timothy 3:10-13 (ESV)

[10] You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, [11] my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. [12] Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, [13] while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (2 Timothy 3:10-13 ESV)

Are you enduring any persecution for your faith right now?

If not, what might that say about your pursuit of a Godly life?

If so, what do you need to pray about to help you endure it?

Maybe you never understood why Jesus endured all that suffering and then died on the cross. But it was for you. He was willing to endure such torment so that you might be reconciled to God. You can receive that reconciliation today by turning from your old way of life and putting your trust entirely upon Christ. By trusting in Christ's life and death upon the cross on your behalf, God will save you. God will forgive your sins. God will declare you not guilty forever. God will make you one of His own. Will you turn to Christ and put your trust in Him today?