

Christian, How Will You Deal with Persecution?

- I. Don't be surprised by it
- II. Don't be afraid of it

*(Matthew 10:24-33) "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. {25} 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! {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. {27} What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. {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. {29} 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. {30} And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. {31} So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. {32} "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. {33} But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.*

Sometimes you see it in the headlines. Sometimes you don't. In Libya, 21 Christians are put to the sword by ISIS fighters. In Egypt, Palm Sunday services are shattered by a bomb that kills dozens of Coptic Christians. In North Korea, hundreds, if not thousands, of Christian men, women and children are sitting in prison camps simply because they confessed faith in Jesus. In the country of Laos, one of our own Hmong missionaries named Xiong Lee was arrested and thrown in jail for 3 months, simply for being a Lutheran pastor.

Have you ever wondered to yourself whether the persecution that Christians are facing around the world will ever reach the shores of the United States? Will there ever be a time when the freedoms we celebrated this past week will no longer include the freedom to publicly worship Jesus? Will the day ever come when you arrive at church to find the doors to the church chained shut by government officials? What if it becomes illegal to own a Bible, or operate a Christian school or call homosexuality a sin?

Obviously, I don't know exactly what the religious or political climate is going to be here in the United States in the years ahead. And we don't know the impact the rise of Islam, for example, will have on our world. But on the basis of what God tells us in his Word, we do know that the persecution of the Christian church is not something that will ever go away. Whether it's the overt physical persecution endured by Christians living in communist or Muslim countries, or it's the more subtle forms of discrimination and harassment that we may face here in the United States, the fact is, Jesus wants us to be prepared for whatever comes our way. And so, in our study of God's Word today, we ask the simple question, namely,

Christian, how will you deal with persecution?

Here in our text, Jesus' advice is fairly simple. He says, when it comes to the persecution of Christians,

- I. Don't be surprised by it.
- II. Don't be afraid of it.

First, don't be surprised by it. The words that we have recorded here in Matthew chapter 10 were originally spoken by Jesus to his 12 disciples before he sent them out as missionaries throughout Judea. Basically, Jesus wanted to prepare them for what they would encounter. He warned them not to expect that everyone was going to welcome them with open arms. Rather, there would be people who would hate them. They will be arrested and hauled before councils, and thrown into jail. They're going to be flogged in the synagogues. In fact when it comes to being persecuted, Jesus doesn't use the term "if" or "maybe". Rather, he says, "when." "*When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another.*" (Matthew 10:23).

And why does Jesus say that his disciples should expect such persecution? Why shouldn't they be surprised by it? Well, Jesus tells them here in the opening verses of our text, "*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.*" (Matthew 10:24-25) In other words, Jesus says to his disciples, "Guys, if you really are my followers, if you are my students, then don't expect to be treated any differently—and certainly not any better—than I was treated. Or as Jesus goes on to say, "*If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!*" With those words, Jesus is reminding his disciples of the time when the Pharisees accused Jesus of being in cahoots with the Devil. In Jesus' day, Beelzebub was a name sometimes applied to Satan. Again, Jesus' point is, "if people treated me, the sinless Son of God, like I was in allegiance with Satan, then don't expect that they'll treat you, who claim to be my followers, any differently. "

And of course, all you need to do is look at the parallels between how Jesus' life ended and how most of the disciples met their end, and you see that Jesus was certainly speaking the truth about what was in store for the disciples. Last week in Bible class, Pastor Sellnow ran down the list of the 12 apostles and what tradition says about how they died. Simon Peter was crucified upside down on a cross. James put to death by the sword at the hand of King Herod. And the list goes on and on and on. In fact, you heard in our children's lesson today, why so many of our stain-glass windows include things like swords and saws and spears to remind us that many of Jesus' disciples ultimately gave their lives for their faith in Jesus.

The point is this. When you think of what Jesus went through at the hands of his enemies, when you think of what Jesus' disciples went through at the hands of their enemies, man, don't be surprised when you and I endure similar hardship at the hands of those who are opposed the gospel. Maybe that opposition comes in the form of Islamic governments implementing Sharia law which, among other things, states that any non-Muslim who leads a Muslim away from Islam is subject to punishment by a sword. Or maybe the opposition comes in the form of a communist government trying to suppress the growth of house churches in mainland China. Or maybe the opposition comes in the form of the professor who vows that no one who believes in creation will receive a passing grade in his biology class. Or maybe the opposition comes in the form of the boss who openly laughs at you for requesting time off to go to church, or the co-workers who want to label you as a better-than-thou simply because you refuse to join in their language and crude behavior. Or maybe it's your boyfriend who dumped you because you refuse to cross the line that he wants you to cross.

My friends, whatever form that persecution takes, whatever emotional or physical pain you are forced to endure because of your commitment to confess and live for Christ, don't be surprised. Jesus predicted it. And as long as Satan is alive and well on planet earth, you can be sure that Satan is going to do everything in his power to separate you from your faith and commitment to Christ.

And yet, just as surely as Jesus says, I. Don't be surprised by the persecution you face, he also says, even more importantly, II. Don't be afraid of it.

Here in our text, Jesus refers to the people who will actually be doing the persecuting, when he says to you and me, *"So do not be afraid of them."* But of course, that's easier said than done. The real question is, what reason do we have to not be afraid of the person who is trying to make our lives miserable because we are a Christian? Why shouldn't I be afraid of the guy wielding a sword? Why shouldn't we fear them? Jesus gives us three reasons. In verse 28 Jesus says, *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. What does that mean? It means that if some jihadist walks in here and detonates a bomb, what harm did he do to your eternal life? None! Your soul will be safe in Jesus' arms in heaven. Isn't that what the Psalmist once confessed? The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? Or to put it another way, a fellow human may be able put you in the grave. But he can't put you in hell. As Jesus says, only God is "the one who can destroy both soul and body in Hell."* And as long as you trust in God's mercy in Christ, hell will never be your final destination.

The second reason you and I have to not fear those who persecute us is found in the value that God puts on each one of us. Here in our text Jesus makes a comparison between birds and believers when he says, *"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 numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."*

Think about it. As much as God knows and cares about the smallest of his creatures, the fact is, God never had his son die for sparrows. No, Jesus died for sinners. So when you think about who or what is more valuable in God's eyes, you need only look at the price that Jesus paid to make you his own. The blood of Jesus means that you are worth more than the sparrows. And that's true whether you are sitting all alone in the cafeteria or you're sitting all alone in a prison cell. You are precious to God.

And the third reason you don't need to be afraid of those who persecute you is simply this: In the end the truth will come out. Jesus puts it this way, *"So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known."* What does Jesus mean by that? Here Jesus is drawing a distinction between what appears to be true and what really is true. For example, when Christians are tortured and imprisoned because of their faith in Christ, it may not look like God is on their side. They may not feel like they are the sons and daughters of the king. But looks can be deceiving. The truth is, in the words of Jesus in his sermon on the mount, *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 5:10):

My friends, there's the truth that drives out fear, the fact that those who trust in Jesus have eternal life, even as they are being thrown to the lions. That's the certainly that you and I have in Christ. And it's what compels us to want to take that message to others. How does Jesus put it? *"What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs."* And when we do that, when we speak the truth in love, even when people don't want to hear it. When we stand up, stand up for Jesus, even when it's hard to do. When we are not afraid to confess that our only hope of heaven is Jesus' blood and righteousness, then what promise does Jesus make? *Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.*

Wow! Do you realize what an amazing promise that is? To think that if you acknowledge that the only thing you've earned from a just and holy God is hell, and yet, God for the sake of his Son, has given you heaven as a free gift. If you recognize that even your faith is an

undeserved gift from God, worked in you through Word and Sacrament, if you recognize that it's your God-given faith that allows you to confess Christ's name before others, then when you stand before the judgment seat of God, do you know what Jesus is going to say? He's going to point to you and say, "Father, this one, in spite of all his flaws and that one, in spite of her failings, they all belong to us. I bought them all with my blood." Which ultimately is what leads us to say, "Whether we live or we die, we belong to the Lord." God keep us faithful to that confession, no matter what we have to endure, in Jesus' name. Amen.