

Part 17: The War of the World

Tyler Velin | Matthew 10:16-42

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I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

I'm under the assumption that most of you have heard this poem by Robert Frost before. Though beautiful in language and rhythm, it is the meaning not the meter which so quickly captivates our hearts. It speaks of adventure, the appeal of the unknown, and the risk of life. We love art like this because so often the primary metaphor we use to describe our life is that of a journey.

As we've looked at the Gospel of Matthew we have seen Jesus inviting us to journey with him. "Follow me," Jesus says to his disciples, "and I will make you fishers of men." This is after all what the word "disciple" implies. It is someone who follows and learns from Jesus. As we saw last week Jesus took his disciples and sent them out. This action is where we get the word, "apostle." And apostle means a "sent one."

The truth is that each and every one of us is following someone or something, and that act of following simultaneously sends us out the door. Whether it is the advice of a self-help book promising a better life now, or if it is the internal commitment of your own aspirations, we begin to frame expectations and ideas of what it is to come. All this in hopes that we might enjoy the ride and get to where we are going.

But for the Christian, if we are to follow Jesus to his kingdom, we must see where the following leads and where the sending carries us. It was only a couple weeks ago where Jesus spoke on the expectations of following him when he said this: **Matthew 7:13-14**.

"Pilgrim's Progress," is a classic book written by John Bunyan. The story is an allegory of the Christian life. In the book we follow a young man named Christian as he makes his way to the Celestial City. On the way Christian must choose whether to proceed through the narrow gate, or the broad road. He does choose the narrow gate, but almost immediately Bunyan begins to describe the type of journey this will be: "I beheld then, that they all went on till they came to the foot of the hill Difficulty, at the bottom of which there was a spring. There were also in the same place two other ways besides that which came straight from the gate: one turned to the left hand, and the other to the right at the bottom of the hill; but the narrow way lay right up the hill, and the name of the going up the side of the hill is called Difficulty. Christian now went to the spring, and drank thereof to refresh himself, and then began to go up the hill."

What we are going to see this morning is a clear picture of the hill of difficulty which we may face in our call to follow Jesus. This is a hill that many in our world are on today, and a hill which is lined with those who have given up their life for the call of following Jesus.

In this passage Jesus secures the expectations of those who wish to follow Christ, and I want us to consider the initial command Jesus gives in our passage today: **Matthew 10:16**. The call to follow Jesus is a call to look as weak and tasty as a lamb in the midst of hungry wolves. The call to follow Christ is not a call to popularity or

prosperity. As we are going to see today it is a call to a life opposed by the world, but also a life anchored in Christ.

I want you to be prepared for this today. It is going to be heavy. We are going to look at the reality of what it takes to follow Jesus even when the road is paved with fear. Jesus wants you to be prepared for whatever it is which comes rolling down this hill of difficulty. What we are going to see today is this: **The expectation of discipleship is the world at war with those worthy of Christ.**

If you have your Bibles we are going to be in Matthew 10:16-42 and the entirety of what Jesus is going to be addressing in this text is the reality, scope and reason of persecution. I want to preface all of this in saying that in America we have had the privilege of being strange in regards to history. The lack of physical, emotional or legal opposition we have faced on American soil is wildly unique when you study the history of God's global church.

There are many influences which have contributed to this: the religious motivation of the early settlers, the idea of separation of church and state, the democratic reliance upon a moral majority, or even the cultural idea of manifest destiny. But above all these conditions is the simple truth that we are what we are in America not because America, Americans, or Americana is blessed, but because God has been kind to us. The church in America is not a product of the American experiment, it is the product of God's mercy towards a people who did nothing to deserve it.

If we fail to see this we can fall into two mindsets which go directly against Jesus' warning we saw in verse 16. The first mindset believes that lack of persecution is the expectation. If we really love Jesus, if our country would just repent and turn back to God we will face no persecution, suffering or affliction on account of our faith. If you really love Jesus you will be wealthy in prosperous freedom. As we will see in this text today, this is not a right mindset.

The second camp we can fall into is the one which then sees persecution as our greatest enemy. Because of this we are paranoid about when and where persecution will come and we will align ourselves with anyone who promises deliverance from our fears. But such fearmongering, though prevalent inside American politics today, will be shown as out of touch with what our expectations should be.

Between these two camps is Jesus warning us of what may come, and calling us to instead be wise and unstained from the world. So as we wade through this text I do not want to try and define what persecution is in our context, nor predict when persecution will come. Knowing the when and where of persecution is nothing if we are not prepared to face persecution. The air-raid sirens during WWII were helpful for letting people know when danger was coming. But unless that siren reminded you of where to go and what to do, the alert would be nothing more than the soundtrack of terror. Jesus wants us to be prepared for whenever and wherever this might happen, so that in that moment, though we may be surprised, we will never be caught off guard. Jesus wants us to know how we are to act, respond and hope when we get to the hill of difficulty.

The first expectation Jesus wants us to have regarding our life in a hostile world is that: **Persecution carries us before the world as Christ.** If, as Paul says, Christians are the aroma of Christ, persecution is the gust which carries the scent of our salvation before a starving world.

Read with me: **Matthew 10:17-23.** The first command Jesus gives his disciples as they enter a hostile world is the charge to beware of men. Look out for them, watch out for them. It can become all too common for our hearts to take the opposite posture. We look to men. We are wary of them in that we wonder what they think of

us. We want their approval, their affirmation, we want our leaders, our senators, our bosses or celebrities to vindicate us by condoning our faith in Jesus.

But Jesus is clear here: to follow him is to set the trajectory for opposition not opulence, affliction not acceptance. To be a friend of God is to make oneself an enemy of the world. Did you notice the cascade of Jesus' language here? They will deliver you to the courts, they will flog you in their synagogue, they will drag you before the kings, eventually handing you over to death.

With each step our ability is crippled. We are delivered, flogged, dragged, put to death. With each step the authority gets greater: from the Jewish synagogues, to the provincial governors and Roman Kings. And yet when it seems our capability and our influence is most minimized by culture, the gospel of Christ grows stronger. Look back at **Matthew 10:17-20**.

In the forced silence of persecution, God speaks through the faithfulness of his saints. We support a missionary who works in a country where it is illegal to share the gospel of Jesus. One day one of the missionary's friends was reported to the officials for sharing the gospel. The officials went and arrested this man and questioned him. By the laws of this country such an offense could result in immediate deportation. The police officers asked the missionary what he was talking to people about, and the man answered by sharing the gospel with them. Never would the ministry workers in this area ever be able to go up and approach a police officer with the gospel, but in his interrogation he was able to share the gospel with a room full of government officials who otherwise would have been the last to hear this message.

For the sake of Christ we will be persecuted and for the cause of Christ our words and our lives will portray the beauty of salvation in our weakened bodies. We often hear in church history stories of men and women giving passionate and empowered gospel messages in their dying moments. Their final breaths are wasted not in their own defense but poured out as an offering rich with the gospel message. When God wants to speak loud, he often brings the bullhorn of angry men. In those moments the anxiety will be removed by the divine work of God.

I cannot explain how this works, but here we see promised, and in church history we see the pattern of martyrs enduring the worst suffering man can concoct, while without anxiety, entrusting themselves to their faithful God and his saving message. Jesus even describes the cannibalization of the family unity on account of his name. But this too serves the cause of Christ. As men, women and children are displaced by persecution, the saving message of Jesus goes with them. This led one of the early church fathers to write that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

But why? This seems unfair that Jesus would call his disciples to suffer such great cost for his cause. But look at what Jesus says: **Matthew 10:24-25**. The world will hate us because it has hated our master. The world doesn't have the physical body of Christ to destroy so it will turn to his body the church. If God were to call you to missions in a hostile country, if God were to remove his veil of kindness from our own country would you follow Jesus in this way?

The world might see us as vermin, our family might see us as enemies, but our identity and expectations lay in the gospel not the world. Look at how Paul speaks of this paradox in **2 Corinthians 4:7-12**. We should not be surprised in the day that men rise against us, but what we will be surprised at is the way in which God uses the worst of humanity to bring forth the best picture of his kingdom. To follow Christ is to be willing to suffer so that others may see and hear the gospel.

But again, why is this fair? In 1969 the Japanese author Shusaku Endo wrote book called *Silence*. The novel told the story of Japan's imperial persecution of Christians during the 17th century and wrestled with the seeming silence of God. The Japanese would find converts, tie them to poles and stick them in the ocean at low tide and watch as the tide came to drown these men, women and children. After one of these executions Endo writes, "This was the sea that relentlessly washed the dead bodies of Mokichi and Ichizo, the sea that swallowed them up, the sea that, after their death stretched out endlessly with unchanging expressions. And like the sea God was silent. His silence continued." We just saw that God is not silent towards the persecutors, but is God silent towards the persecuted?

Jesus now turns his attention to this challenge in **Matthew 10:26-28**. This is our second point today: **Persecution reminds us of our voice in Christ.**

How is it that immediately after describing the potential onslaught of believers even by their own family that Jesus is now able to say so boldly: "So have no fear of them"? Grammatically this phrase is not the quiet whisper of Jesus meek and mild, this is the command of Christ the King calling us to hold the line.

How can Jesus expect us to face the worst of mankind and not fear them? Does this mean that the opposition will not be worthy of our fear? That if we find these ideas scary that we are less Christian? Is Jesus calling us to a blind faith which denies the real experiences of our world? No.

Look at what King David says in **Psalms 23:4**. David doesn't deny his experience. He is cornered by the walls of the valley, he feels the cold shadow of death but in the midst of such and experience he receives comfort from God to a greater degree. In Matthew, Jesus is not calling us passage to have no fear. He is calling us to have no fear of them.

Look at what he says in **Matthew 10:28**. Why should we fear man who man kill the body temporarily, when our sin has put us at odds with the God who can condemn the whole of us to eternity in hell? Sin is not a trivial disobedience to a specific worldview or moral code. Persecution shows us the evil that lay in the hearts of man, but all sin is an even greater evil against a holy God. Persecution violates the personhood of fallen humans. Sin violates the kingship of a perfect God. Persecution speeds up the inevitable death of those already destined to die, sin demanded the murder of the eternal and innocent Son of God on cross. Persecution is directed towards what is temporary, sin is the root of a physical and eternal death.

Persecution is not our greatest enemy. Sin is. In the Western world we can read stories of martyrs and be led to have sympathy and hope that if the same conditions were brought to us we may respond in the same way. While we cannot be certain of our response when we feel persecution, Jesus is calling us to right now feel instead the weight of damnation. You may wonder how you would endure if such persecution were here. But if we see the weight of our sin rightly we can take heart that we will respond faithfully. For if we feel the death that sin has wrought in our life, even the worst affliction is nothing but a passing blow compared to the redemption we have in Jesus.

Jesus then appeals to the idea of God's sovereignty: **Matthew 10:29-33**. So here we see that God is in control of every last activity which happens on this earth. From the very hairs on your head, to the lives of the most trivial creatures. So what comfort do we draw from this? Look back again at **Matt. 10:29**. Jesus is here speaking to his disciples, to those who are true followers of him by faith. And the comfort he gives to them is the sovereignty of God wrapped in the affection of their father. Though we were once separated from God, he has now become our Father through faith. A Father who works all things for good. A Father who will withhold not even his only son from us. Nothing we encounter is encountered apart from this God. And even in the moment of our fallings, we are more valuable to God than all the sparrows in the world.

And what comfort do we have in these moments? **Matthew 10:32-33**. If persecution were to come our way. When we stand alone amidst the tribunal of man, we are not abandoned. To confess faith in Jesus in the moments of greatest trial is to take up the real assurance of faith in the high court of God. We can never find more comfort on earth than the comfort we feel in our salvation. When persecution comes we are afforded through our confession a reminder that we have been delivered, that those who endure to the end will not be met with disappointment but with the words of the Father, "Well done good and faithful servant!"

Because it is Christ who speaks in our defense our own tongues have been loosed to proclaim without fear. I think that verses 26 and 27 are two of the most beautiful sentences in all literature: **Matt. 10:26-27**. The eternal treasure we hold will one day be exposed. What is hidden in Christ will be made manifest in the furnace of persecution. What we hear in the cover of our church is just as true when culture's spotlight seeks to root us out. What is whispered in China's underground churches is worthy of being proclaimed among the nations. Not sheepishly but by sheep who trust their risen savior. Paul says in Philippians that he is willing to share in the suffering of Christ because he will also share in his resurrection.

With this hope we can fear Jesus rightly and therefore we can proclaim all the more loudly amongst our world that there is one name given among men by which we can be saved. In persecution we find our voice by hearing the affirming voice of Christ: you are mine. Dear church if you hear that voice today, know that he will not forsake you. To place your life in his hands is to endure all things because Christ has delivered us from all things on the cross.

The last expectation I want us to see today is this: **Persecution prepares us for Christ.**

Sanctification is the process of becoming more like Christ. We see in Ephesians 5 that it is the goal of Jesus to sanctify and set the church apart so that he might at the end of all things present the church to himself in perfect glory. Persecution is part of God's plan to set us apart by burying us more and more into Christ.

Look how Jesus closes this lesson: **Matthew 10:34-39**. Twice now Jesus has reminded his disciples of the division he brings. He said he came not to bring peace, but a sword. The irony is that the sword Jesus brought, he has temporarily handed over to the world. He has not come at this moment to declare war on the world, but instead the world has declared war on Jesus.

He then quotes a passage from **Micah 7:6**. What is important to know in this is that Jesus didn't actually set anyone against anyone. But when Jesus came, and when his gospel went out, it provoked the hate which was already in our hearts. Sin will always hate its conqueror. We should never be surprised when sin, like a cornered animal does evil things. If sin were not grotesque and dangerous then Jesus would never have needed to come. The reality of this is that there will be times when even your family rises against you and your faith.

Already in Nepal this year, a young girl named Sarala and her mother were held captive, beat, and placed on the run because her father refused to allow them to convert to Christianity and be baptized. The two are currently in hiding with ministry workers because they fear what the Father will do if they do not deny their faith.

I cannot speak for Sarala, but I have heard stories like this from others in the persecuted church. What happens in moments like this is not overwhelming hate for her father, instead it is a deep desire for him to be saved. She very well still has great love for her father, but what persecution has confirmed in her is a greater love for Jesus.

This is a great gift. If we are not willing to love Jesus more than we love our family, then we are not really loving Jesus. This should be sobering for us in America. Where we do not have persecution to reveal this hope, we must

bathe our hearts in prayer. I pray that I would love my children and wife more by loving them less than I love Christ. If I do not love Jesus with an exclusive love, I will not be able to prioritize their eternity properly. I will not be able to love them properly. I might be able to maintain relationships by refusing to deal with issues of salvation, but that is no love at all.

Jesus is not calling us to love our family less as much as he is calling us to love him more. And if we love Jesus more, we will find our life in him. We may lose all that we hold dear to us, but still see the life which is hidden in Christ. We may experience the joy of being worthy of Jesus as he strips away from us the things we hold most worth our affection.

One artist puts it this way: “If you caused for me to suffer, Or to suffer for the cause of the cross, If the cost of my allegiance is prison, And all my freedoms are lost, If you take the breath from my lungs, And make an end of my life, If you take the most precious part of me, and take my kids and my wife, It would crush me, it would break me, It would suffocate and cause heartache, I would taste the bitter dark providence, But you would still preserve my faith. What’s concealed in the art of having, is revealed in the losing of things.”

Persecution reveals the infinite worth of our faith in Jesus. Persecution also provides us an opportunity for reward in how we care for those who are persecuted: **Matthew 10:40-42**. There may be a time in the future where caring for the persecuted church will put yourself in danger, but in that moment Jesus says you will gain greater rewards. Even to provide the simplest of relief to the most ordinary believer in trial is to reap the reward of Jesus himself.

Right now we do not have to worry about such opposition when we support the persecuted church. Because if this I want to invite you all, maybe as a community group, to visit the website of Voice of the Martyrs. On this page you will find various ways in which you can support those who are being persecuted right now with everything from prayer to filling out support packs which will be carefully delivered to those who are suffering. It may one day be the case where we are the persecuted church in need of encouragement, so let us practice reaping rewards by giving aid to those who need it now.

Brothers and sisters, this passage may have struck you in two ways. With one group you may have been struck by the sober weight of Jesus' words, and for others you may hate it. You may hate what it means to your own autonomy, you may hate the interruption it gives your own journey, you may even hate the God who demands such loyalty from his followers.

But this I know, for the convicted and for the calloused, it is only Jesus who will change our hearts to think such things and count them as beautiful. We may never know when this is coming, we may be struck with uncertainty when it arrives, but what we can know is the one who went before us. The savior who did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself taking on the form of a servant, humbling himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross.

Jesus suffered persecution and bore the weight of all our sins, so that we can face persecution knowing the burden of sin has been removed from us. This is what it means to follow Jesus. This is what it means to see him as worthy of all things.

In Pilgrims Progress, as Christian began to climb the hill of difficulty he sang this song. A song I hope becomes your song on this journey towards heaven:

**“The hill, though high, I covet to ascend;
The difficulty will not me offend;**

**For I perceive the way to life lies here:
Come, pluck up heart, let's neither faint nor fear.
Better, though difficult, the right way to go,
Than wrong, though easy, where the end is woe."**