

Sheep Among Wolves, Part 2

Scripture: Matthew 10:16–23

Code: 2280

REVIEW

In Matthew 10:16-23 the Lord Jesus Christ prepares to send the apostles into a hostile world that would reject them. They needed to know how to deal with that, so Jesus carefully instructed them.

I. JESUS' OPENING STATEMENT (v. 16a)

"Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves."

II. SOME BASIC QUESTIONS (vv. 16b-23)

A. Who Are the Wolves? (vv. 17a, 22a)

"Beware of men.... And ye shall be hated of all men."

B. Why Are They So Vicious? (vv. 18a, 22a)

"Ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake.... And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake." Lesson

C. How Do the Wolves Attack? (vv. 17-18, 21)

1. Through religion (v. 17)

"Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues."

a) The Jewish religion "Synagogues" is the key word because it establishes a religious context. The Jewish people had synagogues (meeting places) in virtually every town and village. There the religious leaders carried out their law. If someone violated any of the laws of Moses or rabbinical tradition, he would be brought before the local synagogue. A tribunal of twenty-three judges would render a verdict, followed by a sentencing. Frequently the sentence was scourging. Old Testament law required no more than forty stripes to be given to each victim (Deut. 25:3), so they never gave more than thirty-nine to be sure they remained within the letter of the law. One judge would recite a passage from the Old Testament and another would call out the number of blows to be given (cf. the Babylonian Talmud, Makkoth 22b). Our Lord told the disciples to expect to be delivered up to "the councils," the local courts in the synagogues. The supreme court of the land was the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. The apostles were scourged in the synagogue (Acts 5:40). Acts 22:19 tells us the apostle Paul, before his conversion, went from synagogue to synagogue having Christians scourged for heresy. Second Corinthians 11:24 says that Paul himself was scourged five times. Commentator William Barclay said, "It has often been true that the man with a message from God has had to undergo the hatred and the enmity of a fossilized orthodoxy" (The Gospel of Matthew, vol. 1, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975] p. 376). Christ was sentenced to death by religionists--the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees, and elders. Jewish persecution of Christians continued until the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. While individual Jewish people who come to Christ often experience rejection and persecution from their family, there has been no wide scale persecution of Christianity by Judaism since A.D. 70. b) Other religions While the Bible shows that Jews once persecuted Christians, that is only a representation of religious persecution in general. There have been and will be other councils of religionists who persecute Christianity. (1) Persecution by the Romans The Romans increasingly became committed to emperor worship and Christianity threatened that worship. (2) Persecution by natives Demons have influenced pagan people in remote areas to massacre innocent missionaries. (3) Persecution by so-called Christians Associated with

Christianity are false teachers who devastate the church. As Paul said in Acts 20:29, "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock."(4)
Persecution by "Babylon the great" According to Revelation 17, the worst persecution will occur during the Tribulation. Revelation 17:5 identifies the final form of world religion as "mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth." When the Lord scattered the people from the Tower of Babel, they apparently spread the roots of false religion around the globe. By the end times it will culminate in one world religion controlled by Satan. As John saw the vision of the future false religion, he said, "I saw the woman [the final representation of world religion] drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev. 17:6). We should not be surprised at such a future. Our Lord warned of those who would come dressed in "sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matt. 7:15). Satan disguises himself as an angel of light so we're not to be surprised if his ministers are disguised as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:14). Such religion masks itself as respectable, but it is in fact a persecutor of the truth. It is operated by Satan, who is a liar and a murderer.

2. Through the government (v. 18)

"Ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles."

"For a testimony against them" could refer to standing as a living rebuke to those who persecute you. But here I believe it refers to literally being brought before government officials to give your testimony. That's what happened to the apostles.

a) Persecution in the Roman Empire The Roman government feared a slave revolt since there were approximately twenty million slaves in the empire. It was thought that slaves and freedmen could never marry because a slave wasn't considered a person. But when slaves became Christians, they were immediately confronted with the truth that in a spiritual sense there is neither slave nor free (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). So many Roman authorities thought Christianity was dangerous because of that teaching. Sometimes the government made up charges against the Christians. They accused them of cannibalism, distorting the symbolic meaning of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ in Communion. They accused them of immorality in their love feasts. They accused them of revolution because their eschatology taught that the earth would be destroyed by fire. As a result Christians were blamed for the burning of Rome in A.D. 64. They accused Christians of disloyalty to the emperor because they wouldn't bow down to him. They accused them of breaking up marriages and destroying the family. The Roman Empire persecuted Christians. Most of the disciples who heard Jesus' instruction in Matthew 10 died at the hands of the government. b) Persecution throughout history Governments have attacked the church throughout history. In Russia, countless Christians were slaughtered after the revolution. Many were slaughtered in communist China as well. In Uganda under the government of Idi Amin, Christians suffered horrifying atrocities. Pastor F. Kefa Sempangi told about going with one of his church's elders to visit a family. They discovered the entire family terribly mutilated, with the exception of one small boy, who somehow was overlooked by the assassins (A Distant Grief [Glendale, Calif.: Regal, 1979], pp. 46-48). c) Persecution during the Tribulation In the Tribulation the government of the Antichrist will persecute whatever Christians are around. Revelation 13:7 tells us that after he comes to power, "it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them; and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations." Verse 10 says he will kill them. Christians have never been able to avoid trouble. Although governments are entities ordained by God to preserve the social structure (Rom. 13), they are also manipulated by Satan. Daniel, Isaiah, and Ezekiel saw the demonic forces behind their governments. The government of the world will persecute Christianity because Satan is the prince of this world (John 12:31). You might think the United States won't persecute Christianity. But if the Lord tarries, and we live long enough, we may see the day when our government will deny us some of the freedoms we have had in the past. It's already encroaching on a few of those now.

3. Through the family (v. 21)

"The brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child; and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death."

I have known of people whose families held funeral services for them upon hearing of their faith in Christ. I know of a child who is dead because of his Christian faith. Only God knows how many people have persecuted, betrayed, or killed members of their own family because of their faith in Christ.

Commentator R.C.H. Lenski quoted one author as saying "that two things are stronger than natural love, the one born of hell, the other born of heaven" (The interpretation of St. Matthew's Commentary [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943], p. 404). According to Romans 1:24-26, people forsake natural affections because they are so evil.

a) Zechariah 13:3--This will be the fate of false prophets at the return of Christ: "It shall come to pass that, when any shall yet prophesy, then his father and mother who begot him shall say unto him, Thou shalt not live; for thou speakest lies in the name of the Lord; and his father and his mother who begot him shall thrust him through when he prophesieth." b) Matthew 10:34-37--Jesus said, "I came not to send peace, but a sword.... to set a man at variance against his father.... A man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me." c) Mark 13:12-14--Families will also be set against each other during the Tribulation. Jesus said, "Brother shall betray brother to death, and the father, his son; and children shall rise up against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake; but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. But when ye shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel, the prophet." That last statement places the context as the middle of the Tribulation.

Christians will be persecuted because the world reacts negatively to the gospel. False religions react because they are generated by Satan. Government reacts because they are influenced by the prince of this world. And families react because they have difficulty tolerating a righteous individual in the midst of their unrighteousness (cf. 1 Pet. 4:3-4).

D. How Are the Sheep to Respond? (vv. 16b-17a, 19-20, 22b-23)

1. Be wise (v. 16b)

"Be ye, therefore, wise as serpents."

In Egyptian hieroglyphics the serpent is a symbol for wisdom. Many of the ancients viewed snakes as shrewd, cunning, prudent, and cautious. In Colossians 4:5 Paul says, "Walk in wisdom toward them that are outside." Christians are to be wise in dealing with the wolves of the world.

a) Achieve the highest goal We're to say the right thing at the right time in the right place. It's our goal to discover the best means to achieve the highest goal. b) Avoid offensive situations We must be careful about how we approach an anti-Christian world. You can say inflammatory things and ignite conflict, or you can use discretion. When the Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus if we should pay taxes, our Lord replied, "Render ... unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God, the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). He didn't compromise the truth, yet He was wise enough not to say everything that could be said and perpetuate an argument. Be wise. Find the best way to handle a confrontation or conflict. Don't make trouble and don't wreak havoc.

2. Be harmless (v. 16c)

"[Be] harmless as doves."

a) Gentleness Christians are not to be intrusive, brash, or rude. We're to be harmless and gentle. b) Purity In Song of Solomon 5:2 the husband says to his wife, "My dove, my undefiled." The dove was a symbol of purity, holiness, and innocence. While we are to be wise, we also are to be pure. When we seek a wiser method in dealing with a problem, we should never compromise the truth. Keep your integrity, honesty, and purity. Those who represent Christ are not to cause injury or employ trickery or deceit in trying to escape from danger; they are to be wise, pure, and gentle. (1) Luke 6:27--"Love

your enemies, do good to them who hate you." To do that you must be as wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove.(2) 1 Corinthians 9:22--Paul said, "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." You have to be discreet, but never compromise the truth. Find that perfect balance between the two.(3) 1 Peter 2:23--When our Lord was reviled, He didn't revile in return. When His enemies abused Him on the cross, He forgave them their sin (Luke 23:34). Such was the gentleness displayed by Jesus.

3. Be on your guard (v. 17a)

"But beware."

Evil intentions lurk in the hearts of many. When I talk to the press or do a radio interview, I have to be watchful and discerning, seeking to avoid forums that attempt to discredit the gospel.

Paul was caught in such a situation in Acts 23:1-5. He said he stood before God with a clear conscience. When the high priest "commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth. Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall" (vv. 2-3). But when Paul discovered that he just said that to the high priest, he had to apologize (v. 5). He wasn't as alert and under control as he should have been.

Don't give the wolves an opportunity to condemn you. One of their evil intentions is to make you compromise.

4. Be calm (vv. 19-20)

a) The skillful defense of the Father (v. 19)"When they deliver you up, be not anxious how or what ye shall speak; for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak."If you were arrested, you'd tend to worry about your defense. But Jesus told the disciples not to worry because He would take care of them. They didn't need to prepare a defense; they just needed to relax and stay calm. In Philippians 4:6 Paul says, "Be anxious for nothing." Jesus gave the reason for not being anxious: "For it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak" (v. 19). I believe that when anyone goes before any council in the name of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God will bring to his or her mind the right things to say. Based on what we have learned from our study of Scripture, the Spirit of God will be our defender. Many of the most memorable and powerful testimonies of the great martyrs were uttered just before they were put to death. God gave them a special presence of mind and clarity of thought to present a testimony more powerful than they would otherwise have been able to give.b)

The specific instruction for the apostles (v. 20)"It is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaketh in you."(1) The promise of divine inspirationThe apostles wouldn't be speaking; God by His Spirit would speak through them. God gave those men the promise of divine inspiration. That promise also applied to Stephen. When he stood before those who took his life, he spoke the Word of God. So did Paul when he stood before those who brought him to trial. Their testimonies are a part of Scripture.(2) The implication of biblical inerrancySince God gave the apostles the very words to speak in the moment they were brought before the councils of men, how much more we can be assured that when they sat down to pen the Word of God they could claim the same promise--an undertaking of far greater importance. Matthew 10:20, one of the clearest texts in the Bible on inspiration, affirms, "It is not ye that speak [Gk., laloun, "utter"] but the Spirit of your Father who speaketh in you."Lenski said, "Without previous thinking, planning, imagining, at the time of their trials in court the apostles will receive directly from God just what to utter. It will come into their minds just as it is needed, and thus they will utter it aloud.... The apostles, indeed, make utterance, and yet they do not, for their act is due to the Holy Spirit, so that most properly he is the one who does this uttering. Everything that is mechanical, magical, unpsychological is shut out.... The apostles will not be like the demoniacs, their organs of speech and their very wills being violated by a demon.

Absolutely the contrary: mind, heart, will operate freely, consciously, in joyful, trustful dependence on the Spirit's giving, who enables them to find just what to say and how to say it down to the last word, with no mistake or even a wrong word due to faulty memory or disturbed emotions occurring. This, of course, is Inspiration, Verbal Inspiration" (p. 402).

5. Be patient (v. 22)

"Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake, but he that endureth to the end shall be saved."

The context is persecution, so the text is saying endurance is a hallmark of genuine salvation. It isn't saying people who can make it through persecution will hold on to their salvation. Those who are saved survive.

a) Romans 2:7--"To them who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life." People aren't saved by continuous good deeds, but they do prove the validity of their salvation. b) Hebrews 3:14--"We are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end." c) John 8:31--Jesus said, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed." d) 1 John 2:19--"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us."

There are times I pray God would persecute the church because it has the effect of purging the chaff. When persecution begins, the phonies leave. They're not going to die for something they don't believe in.

The Greek word translated "saved" in Matthew 10:22 means "delivered." Go through the persecution and you will be delivered. First Corinthians 10:13 says, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not permit you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will, with the temptation, also make a way to escape." If you patiently keep the faith, you will endure whatever comes and be delivered.

Paul said, "What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creation, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord" (Rom. 8:35-39). Nothing will destroy you. When you are in the midst of persecution, be patient and you will endure to the end and be delivered.

6. Be on the move (v. 23)

"When they persecute you in this city, flee into another; for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come."

Keep moving as necessary until Jesus comes again. There is no sense in standing around taking harassment and persistent persecution until someone kills you.

Paul would preach, a riot would start, then he'd leave town and go to another. When a riot broke out there, he went to the next town, and so on. He wasn't going to stay in one place and die--life was too precious; there were too many towns to reach and too much to be done.

The last missionaries will be moving from one place to another when the Son of man returns. During the Great Tribulation 144,000 Jewish evangelists will preach all over the land, and keep moving until the Lord comes. When all the cities are reached, He will come.

We have no right to provoke animosity or destruction. There is too much work to be done and too many places to reach. Life is precious. Every one of us matters to God's kingdom. We have to move to the receptive places and keep moving, knowing that God is with us all the time. In the power of the Spirit He will help us to say the right things and reach the world.

CONCLUSION

We are sheep among wolves. It was not uncommon in Palestine to hear about a shepherd found dead among the sheep he was trying to defend. But our Shepherd is not dead--He ever lives and is our defender. There is an invincibility about us because He controls everything. Zechariah 2:8 says, "He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye." If you think it's tough on the sheep, it will be tougher on the wolves for what they do to the sheep. God will make all things right in the end. No

matter what Satan does, he can't destroy God's sheep.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is the key word to understanding Matthew 10:17? Why?
2. How was punishment for a violation of the law or a rabbinical standard carried out in the synagogue?
3. When did Jewish persecution of Christianity stop?
4. Where did false religion obtain its original form? How did it spread around the world?
5. What are two possible interpretations of the phrase "for a testimony against them" from Matthew 10:18?
6. Why did the Roman government persecute Christians? What were the accusations that the government brought against Christianity?
7. Although governments are entities ordained by God to preserve the social structure (Rom. 13), they are also _____.
8. According to Romans 1:24-26, why would family members persecute their own Christian relatives?
9. Why are Christians to be "wise as serpents" (Matt. 10:16)?
10. What is the meaning of the phrase "harmless as doves"? What is the dove a symbol of (Matt. 10:16)?
11. What do Christians need to beware of (Matt. 10:17)?
12. Why were the disciples not to be anxious when they were brought before councils? Explain (Matt. 10:19).
13. According to Matthew 10:20, what did Jesus promise to give the apostles? What is the implication of that promise? Explain.
14. What is a hallmark of genuine salvation? Support your answer with Scripture (Matt. 10:22).
15. What effect does persecution have on the church?
16. Why is there no persecution that can destroy Christians (Rom. 8:35-39)?
17. Why did Jesus say to keep moving to different places when facing incessant persecution?

Pondering the Principles

1. To what extent have you experienced persecution from a religion, the government, or your family? Give examples of each occasion. What has God taught you through each? As a result of this lesson, determine how you will prepare for any future persecution from those sources. What must be manifested in your life before anyone would bother to persecute you?
2. Review the six responses of the sheep (see pp. 9-15). Based on the times you have been persecuted, how did you respond? On a scale of 1-10, rate the effectiveness of your wisdom, purity, watchfulness, calmness, patience, and willingness to move. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? In the case of future persecution that may come your way, what must you do to shore up the responses you are weak in?

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