When Jesus brings division

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[0:00] Now, if you have a Bible, perhaps you could turn with me to Matthew chapter 10.! We're continuing in this section where Jesus gives his mission mandate to the disciples.

! And we're going to look at the section from verse 16 to verse 25 as we continue to explore what we began to discover last week, that Jesus, his mission and his message, it brings division. So here we are, Matthew chapter 10 and at verse 16 where we read, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard. You'll be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account, you'll be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time, you'll be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the spirit of your father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the times of Israel before the son of man comes. The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for students to be like their teachers and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household and so on. Let me begin with a very famous, perhaps one of the more famous job adverts in all of newspaper history. Back in 1914, Shackleton was looking to reach Antarctica for the very first time. And so in 1914, he put out a newspaper advert looking for crew members. And the description is wonderful. Let me share with you the advert and let's think who would sign up. He said, men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, safe return, doubtful, honor and recognition in events of success.

Now, whatever else you would say about Shackleton, you would never accuse him of false advertising. Right from the beginning, that stark reality of the hazardous nature of this voyage was clearly laid out. And remarkably, people signed up. And if you have a chance to read or to learn something about the story, it is epic and amazing. But as we read Matthew chapter 10, we get the sense, don't we, that Jesus is providing a similar job description for his followers. Wanted, those who are willing to become sheep among wolves, to be hated by all, to be persecuted wherever they go. There would be no surprises and there are no false promises. And again, remarkably, as you read the pages of the New Testament, as we read the pages of church history up until the present, despite the peril, despite the prospect of persecution, men, women, children have been signing up, willing to sacrifice everything for King Jesus, the one who gave up everything for them. The message of Matthew 10, and this section in particular, is stark. That the real Jesus, as he is communicated, will divide people.

I say the real Jesus because, you know, we live in a pluralistic society and then it's easy to pick and choose those aspects of the life and ministry of Jesus that people find most attractive. So lots of people are drawn to the goodness, the virtue of Jesus, or perhaps his ethical teaching, but will gladly kind of do away with, you know, his teaching on sin and the need for forgiveness or the realities of judgment and hell. And the idea that there's only one way to be put right with God, and that's through faith in Jesus. But if we're dealing with Jesus as he is, and as he's presented in the gospels, and as he speaks about himself, we are considering the one who said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

The one who would say really clearly, whoever believes in me, well, they have eternal life, but the person who doesn't believe stands condemned. Jesus is the one who spoke more about hell than anybody else in the Bible, who would tell so many parables that spoke of end time, judgment, and salvation. And so it's very clear from listening to the teaching of Jesus that he brings division. And

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it's really clear, I think when we think about the church in society, that our message continues to cause division.
[5:46] We speak about absolute truth. And we say that there is one God, that there is a standard for right and wrong, that God the creator has the right to determine how we live. Or we say that we need Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. It's not an optional extra. It is essential to avoid eternal condemnation. And when the church is faithful to the mission of Jesus, as we thought about this morning, that again, it's not surprising if we meet with resistance and we begin to discover for ourselves this division that happens. So Jesus wants to prepare the disciples for this mission in particular here in the first century, but for a Christian mission universally, helping us to see that we should not be surprised when the division happens. And also, as we will see next week, that we should not be afraid when it happens. And that's what we see from verse 26 onwards, but that's our focus next time. So this is a very realistic job description for the disciple, for the Christian on mission. And the first thing that Jesus wants to highlight for us is that we should be prepared for opposition. That's their verse 16 to 20, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. This is their first mission, the first time that they've been gathered by Jesus, and now they're going to be sent by Jesus. But it becomes a preparation for all of their life as witnesses for Jesus. Last week, we saw that when they move from town to town, sometimes the doors will be opened and they'll be welcomed. Other times the doors will be slammed shut in their faces.

It gets more intense still in verse 17. Be on your guard. You'll be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. The Jewish religious authorities will be opposed to Jesus and to his disciples. And they're warned about that. And it will grow still further. Verse 18, on my account, you'll be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. So as the mission grows and expands beyond Israel, so the opposition will grow too. So we read the book of Acts and we discover multiple times the likes of Peter and John and Paul were arrested and flogged and beaten. Apostles, disciples killed for their faith. So that by the time we get to a book like Hebrews, Hebrews chapter 11, the end of the great gallery of faith, it speaks about some who face jeers and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning. They were sawn in two. They were killed by the sword. So within a generation of Jesus' ministry, this is reality for those who are going into the world bringing the good news about Jesus.
We could take a look if we had time at some of the regimes of our day. We spoke about some of them this morning, where there are labor camps and Christians being worked to their day. And we could go to places in Africa and the Middle East where kidnap and torture are not uncommon for the followers of Jesus. This opposition and persecution is intense in some parts of the world and in our part of the world. It's much more milder by comparison. You know, the opposition might be, you know, we're labeled as bigots or intolerant. It may be that we lose some social credit. We perhaps miss out on certain aspects of work opportunities. We may be laughed at by the powers that be, but it pales into insignificance compared to the first century experience and the experience of so many around the world.
But just to return to verse 16 for a moment, I wonder if you saw the perhaps surprising reality. So maybe we're not surprised about all the opposition and the intense persecution, but notice verse 16. This is Jesus saying, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. So we're familiar with the idea of Jesus as the good shepherd. You know, he leads his people, he feeds them, he guides us, he protects us, he lays down his life for us, he calls people towards himself. But here we also discover that this good shepherd also sends his followers, his sheep into dangerous territory, into spiritual war zone.
[10:53] And that's normal part of the Christian life and Christian mission. And he gives wisdom to the disciples. How should we act in that setting? Verse 16, therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves, be on your guard. So snakes from the earliest of times were that symbol of shrewdness, whereas doves are the symbol for what's harmless and innocent and peaceable. And then he says, be on your guard.

And it's hard to figure out how do those images all play together? What does that look like in practice? Well, he begins to unpack it a little bit in verse 23 when it becomes clear that the follower of Jesus shouldn't go looking for trouble, just running rashly into trouble. So verse 23, when you're persecuted in one place, flee to another. So there's the application of wisdom and knowing the times. But nor should the follower of Jesus stay silent and hide our faith to avoid conflict. We need to be wise and we need to be realistic.

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We need that shrewdness. But at the same time, we shouldn't be hardened and cynical. We should have that innocence that is dove-like. And it's a really hard balance. And we need the help of the Spirit. And we'll come back to the Spirit later. But Jesus is telling us really plainly, we need to be prepared for opposition and persecution. It's a hard thing to hear, but it's reality. And he doesn't want to shelter us from it.
And he moves on from there. And maybe it becomes even more intense as he says, be prepared for disruption and isolation. Look at how it begins. Brother will betray brother to death. And a father, his child, children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me. This is really striking language, isn't it? And it's striking language because it comes from Jesus and Jesus is God and God is Trinity. So Jesus, the Son of God, has always existed.
in a perfect, eternal, loving fellowship, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And the triune God then created people for relationship. And so that God would say it's not good for people to be alone, that it's God's good idea for flourishing society to establish marriages and families. And then we know as the story of the Bible moves from Genesis 1 and 2, God's creation story, to the fall, that sin, when it comes, well, that brings disruption and breakdown within all relationships, including human relationships.
[13:48] And many of us, I guess, will know that in different ways, painful personal experience of that. But here, what becomes clear is that it's Jesus himself who's bringing disruption.

And how can this be? This one who made us for relationship and fellowship with God and with one another, how is it that he can speak so openly about the disruption that's going to happen within families? Let's think about it this way, that the reality that we live with as people now, created in God's image for flourishing relationships, but that's now ruined by the fall into sin, by nature, our trajectory is away from God. We turn our backs on God. The direction of travel that we choose is away from God and his ways. And when we do that, everything else tends to fall apart.
Faith in Jesus involves a 180 degree turn in the opposite direction. And that immediately puts us on a different path, perhaps a different path, perhaps a different path to the people within our own family.
Now we live with a very different value system. We have different loves and we have different loyalties. And Jesus is saying, that's what can bring the fierce division and that sense of isolation. Because people do not want to associate with the one who becomes a follower of Jesus. Because people want to exclude and resist the one who believes that Jesus is the savior the world needs.
[15:34] And it's a high cost. And Jesus sends his disciples to bring a message that will have a huge impact on families and communities. I guess in Western society, we tend to be much more individual individual than other parts of the world where families is how you think about yourself in terms of your identity. And I'm sure we've all heard stories that to convert to Christianity means you could very well be disowned from your own family. You'll cut out of the family photos, people operating as if you never existed, even the extremes of honor killing. Where a whole community might reject Christians.

And if you ever get the prayer news from like Barnabas Trust or Open Doors, you'll discover how much time they have to spend in setting up small businesses for Christians who've lost their family, lost their job, lost their place in society, and they need help to survive as followers of Jesus.
Even here in the West, it's certainly the case that sometimes a parent will be displeased if an adult child becomes a Christian and decides that they want to serve Jesus instead of pursuing their intended career.
Even here, if a sibling becomes a Christian and none of the other brothers and sisters are, they might be treated differently, kept at a distance because of faith.
One really important reason why the church needs to be growing together as a family is the reality that some people might lose theirs because of their faith. Jesus is speaking to that. But into this situation, notice what Jesus says in verse 22. So he says, you'll be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.
[17:50] And so there is huge cost, but there's also huge promise and huge reward of end time, eternal salvation for those who are willing to endure, to stand firm to the end. So here Jesus is speaking to us from the human point of view, to say that as believers, we must persevere through many trials in the life of discipleship. Other times he'll speak from God's point of view and he'll remind us that the believers are kept safe in the grip of the father and the son. And then we come to

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verse 23.

When you're persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly, I tell you, you'll not finish going through the times of Israel before the son of man comes. So remember, Jesus is speaking to his first disciples.

But maybe we're asking, well, what's he talking about? What's the timetable there? Not finishing going through the times before the son of man comes. Well, most of the commentators reckon that this is speaking about the judgment on Jerusalem that Jesus predicted in AD 70. Remember that Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they turned their back on Jesus as God's king. And Jesus announced woe and judgment on the city and prophesied that judgment would come. And so Jesus is now saying that he will come in judgment, that judgment that happened when the city was taken over by enemies. But what Jesus is saying to his disciples here is that they can expect to be persecuted. And when they're persecuted in one place, they need to move to another place, they need to move to another place. And that will continue to happen.

And there'll always be more need. That their mission will keep on going. There'll be trouble and there'll be opportunity. And even when it becomes impossible, probably to bear witness in Jerusalem, because of the judgment, there's still new places to do mission. And so the follower of Jesus, is being taught here that we need to be ready to walk the same road as Jesus did. When we read the gospels, don't we find so often he comes to a town and he's not well received and he faces opposition, even in his own hometown. And he's constantly on the move and he's facing opposition from the religious authorities in particular. And so that leads him to conclude in verses 24 and 25 with the need to be prepared to follow in Jesus' footsteps. That's what he means when he says the student is not above the teacher, not a servant above his master. So in preparing his disciples for mission, Jesus has been taking them through various scenes in life. He's taking them to the fields and he's inviting them to imagine themselves as sheep among wolves. And then he takes them into a family home where they can see division that will be churned up because some people follow Jesus and some people don't.

And now he uses this image of students who follow in the footsteps of their teacher, their master. And that's how things were in first century Israel. You would have well-known rabbis, teachers who would travel from place to place and they would gather dedicated learners who would follow. They would help to make sure that their master was well-resourced and they would listen to him and they would live with him and they would shape their lives around his teaching. And Jesus is inviting his disciples then and now to do likewise. And what does the learner of Jesus discover as we follow his life and ministry in the gospels? We discover one who was rejected in his own hometown. [21:45] They're trying to throw him off a cliff. We meet him often treated with contempt. Isn't this the carpenter's son? We hear Jesus often being slandered. Verse 25, if the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household. One of the accusations that people hurled at Jesus was that he worked not with the power of God, but with the power of the devil. In fact, that he was none less than the devil himself. And so to follow Jesus is to follow one who experienced this opposition and persecution. Follow him on the road to the cross and we see it grow in intensity.

We see him dressed up in a purple robe and with a crown of thorns placed upon his head and people mocking him in false homage and worship. We see him blindfolded and beaten, insulted, prophesy who struck you. Even as he hangs dying, we see cold hatred and disregard. Let God save him if he wants it. He saved others. He can't save himself. What these disciples saw in their master was that the Lord Jesus came as the suffering servant that Isaiah spoke about. He set his face like flint towards Jerusalem in the way of the cross. He gave his back to be beaten and his beard to be pulled out. He was familiar with suffering and grief, crushed for our iniquities, humiliated so we could be honored, forsaken so we could become part of God's family, condemned under the curse so we could know God's eternal blessing.

The message of verse 24 then is a realistic lesson in the school of discipleship. The student is not above the teacher. The crown of thorns comes before the crown of glory. So we put all these things together and what we see is that mission is demanding. There are hazards. There is the possibility of persecution. There is a willingness to share and to participate in Christ's own suffering.

Mission is costly. It requires sacrifice. And so the question is, where does that power, where does that willingness to bear the cost come from? Well, it comes from us looking again at Jesus' mission and Jesus' sacrifice to show us God's saving grace, to recognize that he is the one who has called

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us and is preparing eternal glory for us, and he is with us as we go.
To borrow from Shackleton's advert, we follow Jesus knowing there is honor and recognition from our God and our Father, even if people in this world dishonor us. So just to draw our thoughts to a close, here's a fourth reflection. Be prepared for this kind of mission by looking to the Lord Jesus. Just to go back to Shackleton's voyage for a moment. He spent 17 months with his crew at sea, many of those on sort of frozen wasteland. Their boat was eventually crushed by massive ice flows and they had to camp in the middle of an ice flow in this frozen barren wasteland. And eventually they sent a small lifeboat hundreds of miles over to the south, through the South Georgia Sea to Elephant Island to then bring a rescue mission. 17 months of some of the worst experiences, worst conditions any human has probably ever had to face. But to read the account, what's remarkable is that those men who went with Shackleton, they were willing to do literally anything for him. They went to the ends of the earth with him. As he led, they followed. And the whole account, all the diaries that you read, it tells stories of great camaraderie, of people holding Shackleton in such high regard. You read stories of resolve and endurance. And it helps to capture something of the call of mission. We're not called to our own mission, we're called to the mission of Jesus and we follow him. And we look to him as our leader day by day and we rely upon him to sustain us and to empower us. So some help from Jesus that we find in this text as we close. I want to say first of all that
[27:02] Jesus helps us by being honest with us. He's not selling a pleasure cruise around the Med and then presenting the reality of Antarctic storms. He's been really honest about what we can expect, opposition, persecution, rejection. Don't be surprised. When we take the gospel into our community, when we try and share it with the people that we know, we might be met with a polite nod or total indifference. We might also be met by mockery and rejection. And Jesus has prepared us for it and Jesus himself has faced it and his own ministry shows it. And he helps us by being honest with us and he helps by giving us a call to faith, a call to stand firm, a call to not give in to fear, to live with the fear of God over the fear of others. And the second thing that this text reminds us is that Jesus helps us by giving us his spirit.

Look at verse 19 again. When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you'll be given what to say, but it will not be you speaking, but the spirit of your father speaking through you. So here's a wonderful promise facing the heat of opposition. These disciples are told when you find yourself having to defend your faith before people, the same people perhaps who will put Jesus to death. What does he tell them? He tells them the same spirit that filled Jesus fills the disciples, fills us too. The promise is that when the need arises, Jesus will help us. The spirit will be with us. He'll help us speak in such a way that we can honor Jesus.
And maybe some of us, as we think about our own Christian stories, we can think of those moments that can only be explained in a supernatural way. When people seem really hostile and asking really difficult questions, but you're able to share the gospel clearly and freely. Maybe you're asked a really hard question and you find just the right words when that question is asked.
Or maybe it's just your character holds up and when you are mocked, you patiently and lovingly respond. We're given help. We've got this promise. The spirit of our father, the spirit of Jesus is in us and will speak through us. And so we remember that Jesus helps us by being honest and he helps us by sending us the spirit, which means he gives us himself. Jesus who calls us to costly mission.
Well, he's the savior who faced a much greater cause, much greater danger that led to death. And he did that empowered by the same spirit that now lives in us, trusting in the same heavenly father that we are invited to pray to. And we remember it's because of Jesus loving, sacrificial commitment to us that we get the privilege of the call to mission. Yes, it's high cost, but yes, it's high reward.
[30:36] And so in the end, we prepare ourselves by looking to the Lord Jesus and by resting in his great love for us. Let's pray together. Lord, our God, we thank you that Jesus was willing to say hard things to his disciples and hard things to us, honest and realistic things that speak to us of the nature of Christian discipleship, that help to set our expectations. That means that we don't need to be taken by surprise.

If not everyone responds positively and warmly. Thank you for reminding us that we're not on our own as we go as servants of Jesus, but rather your spirit is in us. And we ask that you'd help us to walk in step with the spirit and to rely on the help of the spirit to direct us in our paths and in our conversations and perhaps as we face accusations too. Lord, we want to be those who are willing

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to take up our crosses daily to follow Jesus. And we want to be those who recognize that Jesus did not cling on to comfort or glory for himself, but he laid it all down so that our sins could be forgiven, that eternal death could be turned to eternal life for us. And as we consider all that he has done for us, may you make us increasingly willing to sacrifice and serve for him. May we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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