

The Divisiveness of Jesus

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. I encourage you to open in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 10 to page 791. We're continuing our sermon series from Matthew chapters 8 to 12, and we're up to the second part of chapter 10.

Let's pray. God our Father, we pray that your word will live in us and bear much fruit for your glory as we are faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray this for his sake. Amen. When Jesus confronts the world, the world divides. The world divides into those who respond to him with faith and those who do not.

Jesus came for peace, and we often think of the idea of Jesus as the Prince of Peace who gathers everybody together in a sort of harmony and so on, and yet the Prince of Peace is the one around whom the world divides.

He came in love, but in demanding holiness and faith and repentance, the world divides into two groups in its response to him.

[1 : 11] He came as the Savior to die for the sins of the whole world, and yet not the whole world responds with faith. He preached good news, but as we've seen in recent weeks, not all the world received with joy the good news of him preaching.

Indeed, we saw two weeks ago that for many, they actually claimed that he was doing the miracles that he did under the power of the Prince of Demons, not God.

The word of grace is a two-edged sword dividing humanity into two. We tend to forget this division that Jesus creates.

We tend to underplay it or ignore it because the predominant idea of Jesus is as the peaceful, loving shepherd who gathers everybody together and brings everybody into God's kingdom united in harmony.

In fact, we often recoil from any suggestion that Jesus is divisive. But you see, the gods of our age are gods of tolerance and pluralism.

[2 : 19] That is, the gods of those where there are many tracks that all lead to God in the end, that Jesus may be one amongst a whole range of possibilities that lead people to God.

Our gods are things like happiness and tranquility, our trouble-free life, harmony and peace. Isn't it great if we just get on with each other and put our differences aside and pretend that we're no different from each other?

Nobody's wrong. Your view, my view, they're all equally acceptable. It doesn't really matter. That's the gods of our age speaking. They're our world's goals. But of course, Jesus does divide because he's an exclusive claim for salvation.

There was a few years ago when the dean of the Anglican Cathedral in Sydney said that Islam and Christianity cannot both be right. Either both are wrong or one is right, but not both, because their claims are mutually contradictory.

And all he was saying at that point was simply a statement of logic, thoroughly true, that they can't both be right because they make opposing claims.

[3 : 29] But our world hates that sort of thing. Our world likes to think that everybody will be united in a happy harmony that doesn't really worry about truth and claims and certainly is not exclusive.

But what we find in the scriptures is a Jesus around whom the world divides. We've seen it in recent weeks. Last week we saw that Jesus sends his disciples on a mission limited to the people of Israel.

It's a sort of prototype of the mission of Christians through the ages. Now he expands on the dangers of being a follower of Jesus and being on mission for Jesus.

The perspective now seems to go far beyond the perspective of the mission that we saw last week. Now we get the sense not just to Israel, but to the Gentile world as well, to all the world in fact. Now beginning to anticipate Christian mission after the resurrection of Jesus, sometime after these words of course were spoken. Here is the good shepherd doing the exact opposite of what we would expect the good shepherd to do.

[4 : 42] We expect the good shepherd to gather the sheep, to protect the sheep, to guard them out from wolves. But instead Jesus says, I'm sending you as sheep into wolves or among wolves in verse 16.

Seems to be rather callous in fact for him to do that. But as we'll see in this passage, there is a greater perspective in which Jesus is the good shepherd guarding and protecting for eternity. And that's the priority in which this takes place. I'm sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves. So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Sheep needing wisdom and innocence. Innocence not being naivety but rather purity. And we'll see how that is elaborated on in these verses that follow.

Jesus gives some description of expectation or prediction of what the wolves will do to the sheep. And that follows from verse 17 for a number of verses.

[5 : 57] Beware of them, the wolves, for they will hand you over, same word as earlier used in verse 4 for betray, over to councils and flog you in their synagogues.

And the perspective there is of Jewish authorities opposed to followers of Jesus. They're legal courts, they're religious courts, and they will hand you over, betray you, and flog you.

But the perspective goes on then to include the Gentile world, the non-Jewish world. You'll be dragged before governors and kings. Pontius Pilate was in effect the governor of Judea at the time, kings like Herod the Great or even Caesar in Rome.

So now Jesus has in mind that there will be Jewish opposition and Gentile opposition. In fact, it's a universal opposition and it's what happened to Jesus himself.

So using the language of the courts, the synagogues, the governors, the kings, Jesus is alluding to what will happen to him in his own trial and crucifixion as well as here predicting what will happen to those who follow him.

[7 : 10] Clearly he's looking beyond the mission that we saw described last week at the beginning of chapter 10. But notice that this persecution will give opportunity for testimony, witness about Jesus.

The end of verse 18 says, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. So it's not simply opposition that will quash and squash, but it's an opposition that actually creates an avenue of giving testimony about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's a testimony that will be bolstered by God's help. So in verse 19 and 20, when they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you at that time, for it's not you who speak, but the spirit of your father speaking through you.

Today is what we call Pentecost Sunday, as well as Mother's Day, as well as a normal Sunday. And Pentecost Sunday is the Sunday where we remember the gift of God's Holy Spirit seven weeks after Easter at the Jewish feast of Pentecost, that's a Greek name for it, or the Feast of Weeks, it's called in the Old Testament.

And the Holy Spirit was poured out in Acts chapter 2 on those followers of Jesus on that day. Many were converted on that day. Here is Jesus anticipating one of the key benefits of receiving God's Holy Spirit, that is enabling testimony about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[8 : 42] And when we read the Acts of the Apostles, which describes what happens after the resurrection to the followers of Jesus, we find on many occasions that they are described as being filled with the Spirit.

And if not on every occasion, almost every occasion has as a consequence of being filled with the Spirit, speaking or bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That's what Jesus is predicting here. Something that doesn't end, of course, with the Acts of the Apostles, but through the ages, we can rely upon God's promised strength to give testimony to the gospel when we are under opposition or persecution.

Now, we ought not underestimate the significance of this. Through history, since the time of Jesus, testimony about Jesus by his followers under pressure or persecution or opposition has had

significant impact.

It's had impact on unbelievers who've been converted by the testimony of the very people they are persecuting, and it's had great encouragement for believers like us as we hear the testimony of those who face extraordinary opposition or even death for being simply Christian.

[9 : 58] Back in the time of the Reformation in England in the 16th century, when the daughter of Henry VIII, Mary I of England, was putting to death many who upheld the Bible's truth about Jesus.

Two famous bishops were burnt at the stake in Oxford. We remembered the 450th anniversary of them a couple of years ago when in October 1555 they were burnt.

Bishop Latimer had been the Bishop of Worcester. Bishop Ridley had been the Bishop of London. And as they were lighting the fire around them with the crowds gathered, Latimer said to Ridley, Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle in England as I trust by God's grace shall never be put out.

They're famous words. I remember them from school, from studying British history, as well as from Reformation studies at Theological College. A great encouragement to Christians who are listening and Christians who ever since have read those words and been steeled in a sense against the persecution of those who follow Jesus.

A few weeks ago I mentioned in the course of the sermons the Nigerian teenager whose father I've met who's an Anglican clergyman in Nigeria. When there were riots in Kaduna, north of Nigeria, about seven or eight years ago, this teenage boy, 16 or so I think, was surrounded by a gang of Muslim youths with machetes who said to him, renounce being a Christian or we'll kill you.

[11 : 40] He said, I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and they killed him. I wonder how many 16 year olds would be as brave as that. But that unknown Nigerian teenager's testimony to his faith has been a huge encouragement to a number of Christians around the world.

A very significant way in which God encourages us through the testimony of believers under persecution. One of the best Christian autobiographies I've read, I read many, many years ago called Forgive Me Natasha.

I think it's also published under a different name the name of which I can't remember. It's a story of a Russian KGB agent who in the early 1970s was persecuting Christians in I think the far east of the Soviet Union.

One woman, young woman called Natasha was repeatedly found with Christians gathering against the law, beaten, persecuted, imprisoned and so on. She never responded with hostility.

She smiled and prayed for those who were persecuting her. And this so unsettled this young KGB man that he was converted. To faith in Christ. And he jumped ship when he was on a ship in the North Pacific in the Navy of the Soviet Union, swam into Canada, survived for a while, wrote the book, was eventually apparently murdered by the KGB in Canada.

[13 : 02] But what a great powerful testimony from that young woman that led to his conversion. Jesus is saying here, do not underestimate the power and significance of testimony to the gospel when you are opposed, reviled and persecuted.

Because God brings great good from those who are persecuted. Now opposition to Christians does not only come from authorities. Much more dangerously, insidiously, it comes even from our families.

Jesus predicts, in a sense, in verse 21 and 2, brother will betray brother to death, a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death.

And you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Jesus is not saying family division is a great thing.

Indeed, the Bible teaches us to honour our parents and to promote good family life. But, when Jesus confronts the world, the world divides around him.

[14 : 11] And that division can happen in the midst of families. Indeed, many of you will know the experience of that. There are certainly families or at least, yes, certainly families in other parts of the world where somebody has become a Christian and they are disowned by their family.

A Jew might become a Christian today in some parts of the world and the Jewish family will hold a funeral and basically excommunicate, disinherit the member of the family who's become a Christian.

Of course, some lives are under threat in some Muslim countries. If somebody converts to Christianity, the hostility may mean their life is under threat. And we know of many stories in history,

in recent history, where Christians who've been converted recently have been put to death for their faith.

Not just in Muslim countries but in Hindu and others as well. And even in our own country, though it may not be death, there are many who've been converted in their teenage years or young adult years who face great hostility and pressure or ridicule from their parents or other family members. And some of us have experienced that in our own lives as well. Jesus is not saying families disregard them. Families are good and important. But they're not our God.

[15 : 30] Though so often they're one of the gods of our world. Jesus is saying there is a prior commitment to Jesus above and beyond our own families. Notice too that Jesus does not promise escape from persecution or its pain or suffering.

He says at the end of verse 22, the one who endures to the end will be saved. That is, the one who perseveres through the persecution to the end might even be at the loss of their life.

That's certainly an implication of what Jesus is saying in this verse. That's why he says don't be stupid about facing persecution. Flee it. If they persecute you in one town, he says in verse 23, flee to the next.

Not because you're a coward to escape it, but so that you can continue to give testimony from other places. And then he says at the end of verse 23 in words that are a little bit controversial in understanding, for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

Now one could argue that the whole of the land of Israel has had opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus and yet the Son of Man has not come. But some would say that this language of Son of Man which picks up an Old Testament picture is maybe more referring to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus after his death than to his second coming.

[16 : 53] But either way, the point is if you face opposition and persecution, fleeing it is not a bad thing to do. Indeed, Jesus commands it here and go on to other places for the sake of the testimony of the gospel.

A bit like what we saw last week in verse 14 above. If they face opposition, keep going on. There's plenty of the harvest that is plentiful. So don't necessarily stay in the midst of where opposition or persecution remains.

Well, like teacher, like student, Jesus says a disciple is not above the teacher nor a slave above the master. It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher and the slave like the master.

Jesus, of course, is the master. He is the teacher. The disciples are his disciples or slaves. And what he's saying is what's good for me is good for you.

I'm the one who will be persecuted ultimately to death. Don't expect anything different yourselves. If they've called the master of the house Beelzebul, a name alluding to Satan, literally meaning Lord of the Flies, how much more certain will they malign those of his household?

[18 : 05] And we saw two weeks ago in chapter 9 that they called Jesus' power from the performing miracles as coming from the prince of demons. Jesus is saying if that's what they say about me, the son of God, well you can be certain they're going to say similar things about you.

If they persecute me, well you can be sure they'll persecute you. Don't be naive to think that somehow you'll escape all the persecution and opposition.

If you're a follower of Jesus Christ in this world, if you're faithfully following him, then you will expect opposition. to you and your faith throughout your life.

In some places and parts that may mean death. In other parts it may mean ridicule, hostility, some form of economic deprivation or disinheriting.

All sorts of possibilities. If we faithfully follow Jesus, then we, amongst all his followers, ought to expect opposition persecution and persecution.

[19 : 11] Like teacher, like student. So he sends us out as sheep among wolves. Defenseless, vulnerable, attacked, opposed, even by the closest and dearest.

That's why he says you need to be as wise as serpents. Wise, knowing the persecution will come. Knowing that it will come from even within your own family.

Wise, to endure persecution, to be saved in the end, as he said in verse 22. But not only wise, innocent, as doves.

Not naive, but innocent, as in pure. So that your pure lives will not give added reason for opponents.

You see, sometimes we Christians, because we fail, people look for any opportunity to attack us and sometimes the attacks are justified. So if we do something wrong, simply because we're a Christian we may be attacked for it, but because we've done something wrong, that actually is justified.

[20 : 27] Jesus is saying live pure lives so that the opposition that you will attract as a follower of Jesus will simply be because you follow Jesus. Not because you do other stupid things or wrong things.

Sheep among wolves, wise as serpents, innocent as doves. Despite the threat of this persecution, that all the followers of Jesus ought to expect, Jesus says, don't fear.

Don't fear. But the persecution in history and to our current day is significant. Christians who are tortured and beaten and imprisoned and deprived and murdered and executed around the world. As most of you know, there were more Christian martyrs in the 20th century than all the centuries before it around the world. Our so-called civilized society, our humanist society that proudly boasts about the advances of humanity has put to death more Christians in the last hundred years than the 1900 years before it.

And yet Jesus says, do not fear. In verse 26, so have no fear of them. Verse 28, do not fear. Verse 31, so do not be afraid.

[21 : 50] Five reasons not to be afraid. Firstly, because as Jesus has said, persecution is expected. And often we fear the unknown. Jesus is saying, this is not an unknown.

This is a known. Not that I want to get into the Donald Rumsfeld complicated speak that you might have heard from time to time. There are known knowns and unknown knowns. Basically, persecution is known. It's not an unknown.

We are not to be afraid of it because it is something that we know and expect, predicted by Jesus under God's sovereign will. Secondly, as we've already seen, one reason for not fearing is because when we are called to account, God's Holy Spirit given to us will strengthen us and speak through us, bearing testimony to the gospel of Jesus.

That's the second reason. We saw that in verses 19 and 20. But now three more reasons not to fear. Third reason is that God is the ultimate judge.

Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.

[23 : 04] Behind that slightly obscure saying, Jesus is saying that at the end of time, God is the judge and he knows and sees the secrets, the hidden things that are done or said against you.

So don't fear. Often persecution is thoroughly unjustified, complete injustice, but ultimately there is a justice day and God will bring such people to account.

So don't fear. God is the judge and God will reveal his truth and the truth of his gospel publicly for all to see on that final day.

A fourth reason. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him, that is God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Don't fear the one who can destroy only the body. what Jesus is saying there is that you may lose your life for being a Christian.

[24 : 12] But don't fear. It's only your life. It's only your body. We might think it's valued it a bit more than that. But not so.

What matters even more is our spiritual destiny. Being put to death, so what? It is God alone who has the power to cast into hell and that's the ultimate death and separation from God.

If you're a faithful follower of Jesus, this life on earth is very brief, very transient. In one sense it's not that much at all.

So don't fear those who can take your life, take your body. Martin Luther captured the sense of this passage brilliantly in the very famous hymn that he wrote in the 16th century.

And though the world were full of things all lurking to devour us, we tremble not, nor fear their bands, they shall not overpower us.

[25 : 14] The prince of this world's ill may scowl upon us still, he cannot do us harm. To judgment he has come, one word, from God that is, can swiftly fell him.

The word they must allow to stand, for this they win no merit. Upon the field so near at hand he gives to us his spirit, as we've seen in this passage.

And though they take our life, goods, honour, child and wife, though we must let all go, they will not profit so. To us remains the kingdom.

kingdom. That is, they can take our life, but nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. We've got nothing to fear. Eternally, they cannot deprive us of our eternal relationship with God.

The things we fear reflect our values.

[26 : 19] If we fear, above all, failure, it's because we value, above all, success. If we fear, greatly, our embarrassment, it's because we prize the acceptance from other people.

If we value our life more than our relationship with Jesus, then we will do anything to stay alive. And that would mean giving up our faith, if it was under threat of death.

I've just read the new Tim Winton novel called *Breath*, and it's an older man reflecting about his teenage years. And he used to go surfing with a friend and an older guy who was a former surfing champion.

And they cajoled him and stirred him into taking on one day the most threatening waves of all, when the weather was particularly threatening. He was terrified of this wave, but he went out and paddled because he was more afraid of losing face and being ashamed of chickening out and what his friend and this older guy would say.

That is, our fears expose our values. And here we're being told three times in this paragraph, do not fear. persecution that may even take your life because there is a greater value that we must hold on to and that is the treasure of knowing Jesus as our Lord and following him.

[28 : 02] But if our gods and values are different from that, then persecution will bring us unstuck and we will not endure to the end and be saved.

the fifth reason is because God cares for you. It may not look at when we read, you are sheep being sent out in the midst of wolves.

But Jesus says in verse 29, are not two sparrows sold for a penny? A mere pittance really.

They're cheap. Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. God's sovereignty extends even to the littlest, most unimportant sparrow.

And even the hairs of your head are all counted. Well, that's quite a difficult thing for some of us. For others of you, it may be easier. But it's saying that God has even counted every hair on our head.

[29 : 08] That's an amazing sovereignty. But then, of course, the contrast, if God is that concerned about a hair on our head or a tiny little sparrow, don't be afraid, for you are of more value than many sparrows.

That is, people matter most to God. And if God's care of just tiny little things is evident, be assured of his care for you. It may not mean that we escape persecution and opposition.

It may not mean that we'll escape ridicule or mockery from our friends or family because we're Christian. It may not mean that we escape the peer pressure and the sort of taunts because we're a Christian at school or university or in the workplace.

But God cares for us, even through death. The greatest value that we should have, our God, is God.

Not keeping our life, not the value of being accepted by other people, but rather winning and keeping the favour of God for eternity.

[30 : 15] So do not fear, not because the opposition is weak, it's strong, not because your life is not under threat, it is sometimes. But do not fear because God is sovereign and he cares for us and our souls are safe with him for eternity.

He alone is the one who has the power to destroy both body and soul, as Jesus says. The good shepherd does protect our souls for eternity, and that's what matters most.

What all this leads to then is the division of humanity. Do we respond with faithful allegiance to Jesus or not?

Everyone who therefore acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

This passage leads us to question ourselves. First question is, do we genuinely acknowledge Jesus as our Saviour and Lord?

[31 : 28] Lord? If we acknowledge him, that means confess him, declare him, even under pressure, then he will acknowledge us before his Father in heaven.

But if we deny him like Peter, not so. Will we be like the Nigerian teenager or like Peter? That's the question. Do we have the courage to declare Jesus even when we're opposed?

Second question, do we love Jesus more than even our dearest and closest? Jesus says in verse 34, do not think that I've come to bring peace to the earth.

I've come not to bring peace but a sword. I think here meaning metaphorically the sort of division of humanity. For I've come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter in law against her mother-in-law and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

That is, Jesus confronts the world and the world divides around him. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

[32 : 39] Do you love Jesus more than your dearest and closest? I remember a man who'd been bereaved a while ago saying to me, I loved her dearly and I miss her terribly but I love Jesus more.

What a wonderful Christian perspective that is. Our deepest love is to be reserved for Jesus. Yes, love our parents, love our children, love our families and our friends.

Love Jesus more. Third question, do we love Jesus even more than we love ourselves and our own lives? Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. We trivialize the expression to take up our cross. I've got a sore toe, it's my burden to bear, my cross to bear.

Or I've come from a broken home or this, that or the other, that's my cross to bear. That's a trivialization. When Jesus said these words, his disciples knew exactly what he was saying. Be prepared to die.

[33 : 51] The cross was an execution. Be prepared to die as a follower of Jesus Christ. Do we love Jesus more than we love our own lives?

But notice too the promise, those who lose their life for my sake will find it. Because the good shepherd guards for us our eternal life with him and with our heavenly father, for eternity.

Our earthly life, our bodies, they're relatively inconsequential. But Jesus guards our souls for eternity. Be prepared to lose our earthly life for his sake, knowing that we will find our eternal life safe with God.

That's very radical, radical even for modern Christianity, which is all on about living a self-fulfilled life on earth. All the benefits that knowing Jesus can bring to you now. But the eternal perspective is what Jesus is directing us to here.

And then the fourth question, do we welcome God's followers even if it puts us at danger? I think that's the thrust of the last verses of the chapter.

[35 : 07] Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me. whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.

And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple, truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward. I think Jesus is using slightly picture language here to say, be a welcomer of followers of Jesus, even if it's costly, even if it puts you in danger. Because if you welcome them, you welcome Jesus, and you welcome our heavenly father. This is a demanding passage, but it demands of us a searching heart.

Do we genuinely acknowledge Jesus before others even when on trial and opposed? Do we love Jesus more than our dearest and nearest? Do we love Jesus even more than our own lives?

Do we welcome God's followers even if it costs us? When Jesus confronts the world, the world divides around him. Most of us tend to shy away from confrontation.

[36 : 26] But if we shy away from the confrontation the gospel brings, then it leads us down a path of compromising our faith, of denying our saviour, and of forfeiting our own life.

Rather, do not fear. Do not be afraid. Do not fear. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Do not be afraid for you're of more value than many sparrows. Those who find their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

UST ask. Thank you.