

Matthew 10:16-25

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Date: 25 November 2018

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[0 : 00] And his work and his plan for his people. And so this comes in the context of the Lord commissioning his people for.

It's fear. Fear of awkwardness or fear of insults. Fear of not knowing what to say. Fear of missing out on perhaps a promotion. Our nation has largely looked kindly on Christianity throughout its history, which is not normal in world history.

But right now that attitude is decreasing. Sherylane doesn't have a church office, so I do much of my work at the library or in a coffee shop. I was speaking to a barista a week or two ago about church.

And she said, well, I guess we have to tolerate everyone. And by that she meant, I object to Christianity and to you being a Christian.

I dislike it and I'm pretty sure I dislike you. But because I am committed to tolerance, I have to put up with you. And I think that we often don't share the gospel because we're afraid that that barista's reaction is maybe the kindest one we'll find.

[1 : 40] In this passage, Jesus reveals himself to be the antidote to that kind of fear. Let's go to him in prayer.

Father in heaven, this is a hard passage. It's not the one I would pick. But Lord, it is the one that you have spoken by your son.

And so, Lord, will you open our ears to hear him? Will you open our eyes to see him? And Father, will you change us? Will you glorify yourself in us this day?

I pray. In Christ's name. Amen. For the last several months, a Nigerian pastor and his family have been staying in our home.

They just moved out. And thanks to Phil Mee, who's still with his family, celebrating Thanksgiving, for helping us move out, move them out just two weeks ago. They just moved out, but we still get some of their mail.

[2 : 47] Probably been in a similar circumstance if you've ever moved. Which means we need to look very closely at each letter that comes to our house so that we're not opening up someone else's mail.

Last week, we paid a lot of attention to that kind of question. Whose mail was chapter 10, verses 1 through 15?

In one sense, it was very timeless. God's mission has never and will never change. There were principles for all time that the gospel is the free gift of God. We preach Christ.

There's so much that was the same, but also there was a sense in which it was old mail. In fact, the apostles themselves who received that commission in verses 1 through 15 get a different kind of commission.

Same mission, but a different expression of it by the time Jesus leaves them and ascends to heaven. In verses 1 through 15, he told them to do the mission themselves.

[3 : 45] But later, the leaders of the church are commissioned to equip the whole church for the work of ministry. Here, he instructed them to go only to Israel, but after his resurrection, he expanded that call and told them to go to the nations.

And that, the mission to the nations, is exactly what we see in this passage. Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocents as doves.

Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors governors and kings for my sake to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.

Governors and kings looks to non-Jewish rulers outside Israel. Bearing witness to the Gentiles means going beyond the borders of Israel to the whole world.

And so, this week, we are not reading old mail. This is instruction for the church after Christ's ascension. So, this is a word for you and for me today.

[4 : 58] Now, I'm wondering if you guys are still stuck in a turkey coma because if this is for us, that should terrify us. And you don't look terrified.

Friends, if this message is for us, Jesus begins saying, Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.

So, we ask, what kind of shepherd sends his flock to the wolves? The main job of a shepherd is protecting his flock.

You know, he has other duties. He feeds them, he waters them, he keeps them from wandering off, but none of that matters if they're dead. Right?

You can't do any of the other jobs if they aren't living and breathing. And so, this looks like terrible shepherding, doesn't it?

[6 : 07] Shepherds keep the flock together, Jesus is sending the flock out, shepherds fight off predators, and Jesus is sending the sheep to the predators. We should be upset that this passage is for us.

Rico Tice, the British evangelist, says, we make lots of pictures of the Psalm 23 shepherd. You're probably familiar with that passage. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. Tice says, we make lots of pictures of the Psalm 23 shepherd. We don't make pictures of the I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves shepherd.

What does he mean when he says, I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves? Now, the sending out is the same as last week.

He sends out the church to preach the gospel. Jesus died on the cross to bear the wrath that is due sinners like you and me and rose from the grave to offer new and everlasting life to all who repent and believe.

[7 : 16] the in the midst of wolves part is what's new. This week, the location team met with a listing agent.

He was kind of impressed that our church has grown in numbers and he said, you must have a good message. I said, it's the best one there is. And that's absolutely true.

There is no better news. There is no better news than God sent his son to die in your place and offers you forgiveness and adoption and unending life for the low, low price of it's a free gift to all who put their trust in him.

No better message. But Jesus is telling us that it is precisely that message that people hate. That message turns people into wolves.

Why? Because embedded in that message, the gospel says, you aren't okay. That's why Jesus had to come.

[8 : 30] Because the gospel says, you are not good. That's why Jesus had to die. Because the gospel says, you owe obedience to a king.

king. That's who Jesus is. Because the gospel says, you can't go your own way. He is the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the father except through him. The gospel offers salvation and how great is salvation, but not on my terms, not on your terms.

And so the ultimate message of grace can feel like an accusation or an attack to those who don't want to confront that truth. The bright light of the gospel hurts our eyes.

And so we'd rather not look at it. So what kind of shepherd sends his sheep to wolves? Answering that will become the outline of this sermon.

[9 : 42] First, the shepherd who sends his sheep to wolves is a shepherd who prepares his flock. Second, the shepherd who sends his sheep to wolves is a shepherd who will be with his flock.

And third, the shepherd who sends his sheep to wolves is a shepherd who cares for his flock. First, in verse 16, he is a shepherd who prepares his flock.

The first half of the verse, Jesus says, Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Even that statement prepares his people for what's to come.

Our Lord is not naive. He knows what's in store and he's prepared for it. In other words, he knows what he's doing. Opposition to the church and to missions is not a surprise to our God.

Perhaps that's not much of a comfort to you, that Jesus isn't surprised by opposition. Perhaps that makes you wonder, well, if he knew about it, why not prevent it?

[10:52] We don't send our children into dangerous situations. So what is God? God? Now, I can't give you the complete answer because I don't know the mind of God.

But I can tell you that I do know the most important part. It's not because he's cruel. It's not because he's unloving. It's not because he doesn't care.

I know that for sure because Jesus, the one who is telling us this, went to the cross for us. He knew that he was going to suffer.

That was his plan. That was his main plan. When he contemplated the cross, Jesus said in John chapter 12, for this purpose, I have come.

He knows what it is to be opposed and persecuted to the uttermost. He did it willingly and on purpose for you.

[11:52] and for me. So whatever God's purposes are in permitting his people to suffer, it is not because he doesn't understand that suffering.

He died for you. And it's not because he doesn't love you. Because he died for you. So when he calls us to uncomfortable uncertain, painful obedience, this does not come from an unfeeling, uncaring, distant master.

This comes from a king who drank the bitter cup for us. and so he is actually no different than the shepherd of psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. The psalm continues to say, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, not because he lifts it, for you are with me.

and he walks through that valley with us today because 2,000 years ago he walked it alone to its very end, bearing a cross.

[13:18] Friend, if you don't know Jesus yet, but if that resonates with you, if you're coming to find that beautiful, a king who took the blow for his enemies, enemies, that's God's at work in your heart, not me, I'm a sheep, I can't do much.

That's God at work in your heart, converting it from a heart of a wolf to a heart of a sheep. Friend, turn away from self and sin to the great king who made the great sacrifice to redeem your soul from death and make you his own.

So Jesus isn't blind he knows the opposition and he knows the tool he's giving them. Specifically, he's sending them with the words that can turn wolves into sheep.

The message they preach, the message we preach, is for the conversion of the whole world to Christ. And conversion is not our doing. Sheep don't accomplish much.

Conversion is a miracle of God. Enemies made family, dead ones made alive. which also prepares us by reminding us that there is, there is in fact a difference between sheep and wolves.

[14:34] There is supposed to be a difference between Christians and the world. That's because our salvation, friends, your salvation is more than just the pardon of your sin.

It is that and it is more. It's also your new birth in Christ, or regeneration, or life from above. The Bible has a lot of pictures of it.

And that is where God transforms our hearts, from the heart of an enemy to the heart of his child. And he renovates our hearts. And he begins the process of sanctification, where he aligns our desires with his desires.

desires. And so this prepares us by prompting us to ask this question. When we're among non-Christians in our neighborhood, in our workplace, in the store, does our life look different from those around us?

Would anyone know that we are sheep and not wolves? You see, the easiest way to avoid the troubles that Jesus is talking about here is to dress up as a wolf. If you act and speak and prioritize, like the unsaved world around you, you'll fit in.

[15:55] And no one will insult you for the name of Christ. But, if you do, you will feel the guilt and the pressure of living a double life, until of course, that un-Christian life becomes the only life you have.

You will bring discredit on the name of Jesus. Jesus, you won't be involved in his mission, the mission where he died for you, as well. And do you see how in verse 20, he promises that God, the

Holy Spirit, will be active in the life of a believer when they defend the faith?

You'll miss out on that, too. If you say you want to feel God at work in your life, but you avoid the circumstances, you'll in which he has said he'll work, is it any wonder that you're still waiting to see his power at work in your life?

And so Jesus prepares us by letting us know that trouble awaits us on the mission. He prepares us by reminding us that we sheep are actually different. And he prepares us by giving us a playbook. As we'll see, it's his playbook. Which brings us to the second half of this passage's first verse. So at this pace, we should be done around 3.30 this afternoon.

[17 : 26] So what I'm going to need is for some volunteers to relieve the children's ministers and shifts. What we'll find, I hope, is that like painting a room, most of the work is preparatory.

And that having laid this groundwork, we will get through the rest of it quite quickly. Jesus turns then to the second half of verse 16 and he says, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

That's our playbook. In fact, that's his playbook. What does it mean? Just like today, in the ancient world, the serpent was said to have a kind of wisdom.

Not wise like a sage, not wise like the Proverbs, more of a cunning or cleverness. That's probably the way we should understand it. But it's not a manipulative kind of cunning that our king wants from us.

That wouldn't be innocent as doves. And so here, again, he's reminding us not to lose our kingdom identity. There's no place for underhanded or sinful conduct in the life of a believer.

[18 : 43] The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 says, Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil. That's innocent as doves. But in your thinking, be mature.

We must not turn off our brains when we come to Christ. And so our Lord wants us to be clever and kind, cunning and clean.

How? What does that look like practically in the life of a believer? Well, I said this is his playbook. And so that's what the next two sections are about. They show us what it's like to live this out and we'll also look to Jesus' example as well.

So, what kind of shepherd sends his flock to the wolves? First, a shepherd, verse 16, who prepares them.

And then secondly, he is a shepherd who will be with them. Verse 17. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flock you in their synagogues.

[19 : 51] And you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say.

For what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the spirit of your father speaking through you. This cannot mean that the apostles and that we become puppets in God's hands.

If that were the case, Jesus wouldn't tell us to be wise. You don't tell a puppet to be wise. You tell a puppet to be limp.

And so God wants us actively engaged. This is not a call to let go and let God. This doesn't mean don't prepare. This doesn't mean don't think.

He has been preparing them all along as he's trained them in ministry. And he is preparing them in this moment by telling them this. In fact, we're commanded in 1 Peter chapter 3 to always have an explanation of our faith prepared for just such a time.

[21 : 05] And so Jesus didn't say don't think about what you speak or say. He said don't be anxious about it. Why?

Because God the Holy Spirit truly indwells his people and empowers us for his mission. God is with us. The Holy Spirit will give us words to remain faithful to our profession of faith.

So what does it look like to be, one, wise as serpents, two, innocent as doves, and three, dependent on the Holy Spirit when you share your faith?

That's what's in view here. What does it look like to do all those things? Jesus gives us the example, I think, in his ministry.

His life shows us what it looks like. I'll just point to maybe two passages. In Matthew chapter 12, we'll see that the Pharisees don't have a really big playbook.

[22 : 10] They kind of go back to the same thing over and over again. They've already accused him of casting out demons by the power of the devil. They're going to do it again. Matthew 12, 24.

When the Pharisees heard it, they said, it is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons. Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

I think that is all those things, all together, all at once. He doesn't back down.

He isn't anxious. He's innocent in his approach. He doesn't sin against them. And he's clever in his words. He points out that their argument doesn't work.

It doesn't even make sense. And friends, if Christianity is true, we don't need to fear any argument against it. Because our faith will prove true.

[23 : 13] If not, then don't believe it. Right? Jesus was innocent as doves. We don't say, oh, you know, you're a terrible person, therefore your argument is wrong.

That's called an ad hominem attack, and you probably see it on Facebook a lot. We can't discredit a person's argument based on how much we do or don't like them, or what they do, or what they represent.

I'm sure Hitler had true views about arithmetic. And if we are being wise as serpents, we'll be ready to see that same fallacy in others when they aim it at us.

There's an apologist named Greg Kukul in the United States. One of his favorite responses to objections to Christianity is one word, a one-word question.

So? What he means by that is, does that objection that you just raised actually affect our faith?

[24 : 24] For instance, someone says, well, you know, I don't believe in God because I believe in evolution. Now, I can't say so without sounding condescending, and maybe your mileage may vary, but you could say something like this.

Why do you think evolution would make me disbelieve Jesus? Right? Well, doesn't that disprove your faith?

Well, my faith doesn't hinge on how God made the world. It hinges on one thing. Jesus died for my sins and rose again.

His tomb is empty. That's what my faith is all about. There are Christians who believe in evolution and those that don't. We all share one faith. God has forgiven us and given us eternal life in Jesus Christ through his cross and empty tomb.

And here's what Jesus, the one who rose from the dead, promises. You don't need to be fearful about those encounters. He will, by his Holy Spirit, empower you to speak when you step out in faith to share the gospel.

[25 : 41] So, friends, let us test him in this. I'll share one more passage, Luke chapter 20. In the face of a challenge to his authority, Jesus is again wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove.

One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, tell us, by what authority do you do these things?

Or who is it, or who it is that gave you this authority? He answered them, I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?

And they discussed it with one another saying, if we say from heaven, he will say, why did you not believe him? And that's because John said that this Jesus has authority.

This Jesus is the coming Messiah. And so we say from heaven, he will say, why did you not believe John? But if we say from man, all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.

[27 : 02] And they were correct in that. So they answered that they did not know where it came from. And Jesus said to them, neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

And so we see here again, Jesus being innocent and wise. He extinguishes his opponents, verbal attacks with calm and pointed questions.

What kind of shepherd sends his flock to the wolves? A shepherd who prepares them. A shepherd who will be with them, who says, your father's spirit at work in you will be with you to prepare you and to empower you in your witness.

And third, he is a shepherd who cares for his flock. Starting in verse 21.

Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and the children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake.

[28 : 16] But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. For truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before

the Son of Man comes.

A shepherd who prepares his flock. A shepherd who is with his flock. And one who cares for them. He cares for our safety. Verse 23, he says, when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. Jesus cares for you. He died for you. He doesn't want you to needlessly risk your safety. Now, you and I are blessed to live in a time and place where physical persecution is incredibly rare.

Now, we may be ignored or rejected. We may be mocked. We may be taken to court because we won't bake a cake. And that's okay.

The laws of this land protect us from physical violence. That's awesome. We should be so thankful to our Lord. That is not the case in all the world or in all of history.

[29 : 30] That may someday change. Or the Lord may take you to a place where the law is different. See, God does call Christians to missionary service in closed countries where the preaching of the gospel is illegal, punishable by death.

Places like North Korea. And he calls Christians to missionary service in difficult places where the preaching of the gospel is legal but may bring persecution nonetheless.

Places like Indonesia or northern Nigeria. And he may be calling you to that dangerous work. And if that is the case, your church family here at Shoreline will support you in that work.

But even for those missionaries who go into dangerous places, this instruction holds true. They are precious to Jesus. All his children are precious to him.

He bought them with his blood. So he calls them, even within a dangerous context, to not be careless with their safety. He concludes in verses 24 and 25.

[30 : 50] A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher or the servant like his master.

If they have called the master of the house, Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household? First, let's make sure that the world hates us for Jesus' sake, not because we're jerks. But we need to recognize that this world is not our home. And places of safety may not actually be so, right?

For these men, the synagogues were the places of community and religious life, a place where they met with God. And now Jesus says to them, you'll be flogged there.

Aaron and I knew a missionary to Muslims.

[31 : 59] He was a former Muslim, former Muslim, came to Christ, became an apologist, an evangelist. He's no longer with us, but when he converted to Christ, his family basically abandoned him.

That's what Jesus is talking about here. Many Christians find themselves the weird ones in their families. That term Beelzebul, well, in Matthew chapter 12, we read it earlier when they accuse Christ of being in league with Beelzebul.

They say, you know, the enemy. It's probably a play on words for a Philistine deity, not just an evil one, but kind of a filthy or polluted one.

And so it probably means something along the lines of Lord of Flies or Lord of Dung. And I think that similar names are hurled at Christians.

Shame heaped for being bigots or intolerant. Sometimes justly. And let us not be just in that.

[33 : 14] The question I want to ask is, Jesus promises us that we will be despised for his name. Is it worth it? Is it worth it?

To be rejected by men, but loved by Christ. There's no better trade. If you were with us this summer as we walked through the Sermon on the Mount, you'll remember in Matthew chapter 5, he said, blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. He cares for our souls.

He was willing to suffer slander and the cross for our sake. What kind of shepherd sends his flock to wolves?

The one who says, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Friends, let's pray.

[34 : 37] Lord, this is a hard word. But we thank you that our Lord, who sends us out as sheep among wolves, is the lamb.

Who was slain and lives forever. Lord, what we can see in front of us might be hostility or maybe unfounded fears.

But Lord, will you help us to look heavenward and see him standing in victory and know that we need not fear. Father, will you make us willing to share and risk needing the Holy Spirit's help.

And Lord, will you prove true to your promises. Lord, make us wise and innocent in that moment. Will you help us to cultivate hearts that are wise and innocent.

Lord, will you give us success in the task. So Father, I pray that you would burden each one of us this week to speak your name to those who do not yet know you.

[35 : 55] Lord, I lift up our missionaries, those we know and those whose names we don't know who are laboring near and far for the expansion of your kingdom.

Will you make them wise and keep them innocent. Will you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, empower them for great ministry and witness.

And Lord, will you preserve their safety. Will they heed the words of verse 23 to take their safety seriously because they are precious to you.

And lastly, Father, we lift up our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ around the globe. Father, will you strengthen them by the power of your Holy Spirit.

Will you use their witness and their suffering as a light to the nations. Lord, will you be their comfort and their guide.

[37 : 00] And Father, will you be glorified as you have sent us out with the one message that turns by the power of your Holy Spirit, wolves into sheep.

Lord, will you be your comfort and their life to the Lord. We thank you, Father, for all these things and praise your name in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.