

Fear Rightly

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everybody. It's nice to see you all. If you are with us for the first time, my name is Aaron. I'm a minister here. If you are joining us for the first time, we've been studying the Gospel of Matthew, so let me just catch you up on where we are. So the first couple of chapters of Matthew's Gospel are sort of introductory stuff. We have the nativity, we have the baptism, etc. In the next few chapters, we have the giant big sermon, amazing words. It's called the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes of the Lord's Prayer, and it's just fantastic. And then the next couple of chapters, we have Jesus. So he's done a lot of teaching. Next couple of chapters, Jesus does a lot of amazing miracles. He heals people. He exercises demons. He raises people from the dead. It's fantastic. That brings us to chapter 9. Then right at the end of chapter 9, Jesus looks out on the crowds and he says, there's a lot of people, and there's one of me. We need more people. So he commissions his disciples. That was last week. That brings you right up to speed. Today's passage, you just heard it. Jesus says to his disciples, now, before you head out, all gung-ho, disciples, there's something you need to know about this thing I'm asking you to do.

And what you need to know is this. It's going to be hard. It's going to be difficult. It's going to be very difficult. Look at verse 16 there. He says, you're going to face persecution. And he gives them a little picture to describe what this persecution is going to look like. He says this, Behold, I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. And you might think, aha, yes.

Yes. I've heard this thing before in the Bible. Sheep and wolves. I know. It's terrible business. You know, there's a flock of sheep and there's wolves about. We've got to watch out for them.

No, no, no, no, no, no. That's not what Jesus is saying here. Let me read it to you again. I mean, that's quite bad, right? You've got a flock of sheep. There's a few wolves about. That's pretty bad. But no, this is worse, what Jesus is saying. Listen to it.

Behold, I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. So it's not just that there's like a flock of sheep and a few wolves about. No, it's worse than that. And it's not just like there's a flock of sheep and a pack of wolves and they're facing each other off. No, it's much worse than that.

[2 : 3 7] I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. The image that Jesus is presenting to his disciples to describe what mission is going to look like is this. There is a pack of wolves out there and I'm going to send you right out to the middle of them. That's what mission is going to be like.

And then Jesus adds these levels of examples. In verse 17, you'll be flogged in your synagogues. There's going to be local persecution. Verse 18, you'll be dragged before governors and kings.

Verse 21, brothers will hand over brothers to be killed, fathers their children to be martyred. And that last one, it just, I mean, it sounds impossible, doesn't it? I mean, surely that doesn't happen. Surely that's not true.

We have a team in India right now from St. John's. So four folks have gone to India to work with Helping Point over there. And this week I received an email from them about what they're up to and what they're learning over there.

And let me just read a short paragraph from the email I received this week. They say, what they've learned is this, when someone converts to Christianity in India, they face immense backlash from their family and community.

[3 : 50] This is exemplified in Christians being beaten by family members and strapped to trees for public display. Some Christians die as a result of this practice.

Then Jesus summarizes this little section by saying in verse 22, Now he's not saying that everyone will hate you.

He's saying that people from all facets of your life are just not going to like what you're about if you follow Jesus. Persecution's going to happen.

That's what he's telling them. Now in the past, when we've talked about this kind of thing, we've talked about what it meant for, what it means for us in Vancouver or in North America.

And you know what that looks like, the potential for social ostracization, for being sort of people just thinking you're a bit ignorant or bigoted.

[4 : 51] And it's important to talk about that, but that's not what I want to do this morning. What I'd like to do this morning is I thought it would be helpful for us to look at persecution in terms of the global picture.

In February 2013, the Harper government opened something called the Office of Religious Freedom. The stated purpose was to monitor and protect religious freedom around the world.

So they appointed an ambassador who was officially a diplomat to oversee it. His name was Andrew Bennett, a Canadian. He did his PhD in Edinburgh, religious studies.

He studied religious studies and political science. Anyway, about three weeks ago, I married a couple in the evening service. And it was great. We had a great time. The reception was fantastic.

I find myself sitting next to Andrew. So we're having this great conversation. And I say to Andrew, So tell me, who's the most persecuted religious group in the world?

[5 : 49] And he said, without pause, Christians. He says, without doubt, it's Christians. So I got in touch with Andrew this week and I said, can you point me to some reliable facts about this?

And he sent me a couple of long reports. And in the reports, I'm going to read some stats in a moment. But the reports defined persecution as hostility experienced as a direct result of identification with Christ.

So these are not people who were hurt who happened to be Christians. They're not people who went to jail who happened to be Christians. These were people who terrible things happened to them because they were Christians.

So some figures here. On average, every month, 255 Christians are killed. On average, every month, 255. 104 are abducted.

180 Christian women are raped, sexually harassed or forced into marriage. 66 churches are attacked every month. 160 Christians are detained without trial and imprisoned.

[6 : 58] These are terrible things. Terrible, terrible things. And they happen in these places far away. But the reality of them sometimes lands here.

We had a family live near us. We have a family living near us who are Christians from a country where persecution is common.

And they're a wonderful Christian family. They're refugees. And the husband said to us one night when they first moved in, they said, He said, At night, you might hear my wife screaming.

And he said, It's okay. I'm not hurting her. I'm not hurting her. It's just that she's experienced so much trauma, it just comes out sometimes at night.

we have people in our congregation here, we have people in our very congregation and church today who also know the reality of being imprisoned and tortured because of their faith and it is an immense privilege to worship with them so back to the report, the report was called Under Caesar's Sword by the way it came out of Notre Dame in Indiana back to the report, so it's really awful and incredibly encouraging reading one of the things they noted in the report though, which I thought was fascinating was the lack of international press coverage that this stuff receives the mainstream media gives little to no attention to it in fact the most attention, I track down this, the most attention it has received in recent history was in 2013 Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor was talking about the need for Germany to protect religious minorities in Germany and she said including the Christians in Germany because, and this is what she said because Christians were the most persecuted religious group in the world and of course the media eviscerated her for making such a claim the comments were she was described as being misguided and such things were just not sensible to say and the numbers she quoted were just merely occasionally rumoured numbers but she had the research to back it up and to try and suppress it to try and suppress this truth is just another form of oppression and persecution

[9 : 39] I think now you might say yes, but Christians have been persecuted too haven't they? of course they have it's true and we need to own that the church was on the delivering end of persecution for hundreds of years particularly in the Middle Ages but now, today we're mostly on the receiving end okay, well that's a that's a small window into the world wide tragedy of persecution against Christians what about us though?

I said we weren't going to go into us how it affects us though but I will just say this one thing it's more of a reality check I think no amount of PR is going to rescue the church from some people thinking that we are regressive and bigoted nowhere in the gospel does Jesus promise that if we do good things and keep our head down that the world will love us I would love it if the city of Vancouver really loved St. John's I would love that if when people when people talk about St. John's and the city of Vancouver that most people are like oh I love those guys they're a the stuff they do is amazing it's it will never happen now some people will love St. John's and they'll come to faith here and they'll grow in their trust of God and it's going to be a wonderful thing but wholesale universal praise in this city it's just it's not going to happen

Jesus promises that promises that he says you will be hated by all for my name's sake let me just close up this first little section of the sermon here by noting that the Office of Religious Freedom was closed by the Trudeau government shortly after coming to power in 2016 one of the main criticisms leveled at the office was that its leader Andrew Bennett was a Christian so let's keep moving on Matthew makes two significant points in our passage point one I'm sending you out as sheep into a pack of wolves you're going to face persecution the second point he makes is so how are you going to deal with that what are you going to do about that and Christ has several things to say about this the first thing is right at the start verse 16 behold I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves wise as serpents and innocent as doves

Christ says to his disciples you sheep and a pack of wolves be smart sheep and I love that I love that balance there wisdom and innocence we have got to navigate this incredibly complex cultural moment we have got to navigate hostility to faith we have got to navigate relativism pluralism and pluralism and how we navigate that's got to be finely balanced we need to be thoughtful and we need to have integrity and I say that and Jesus says this because some Christians are persecuted but it's not because the gospel it's because they're unwise and thoughtless that's a whole different thing we had a prominent minister in New Zealand say a few years ago that the spat of earthquakes in our country which people died as a result of the spat of earthquakes in our country was as a result of in part because of the legalisation of gay marriage in New Zealand now of course this pastor was railed against persecuted but there is a big difference between genuine persecution of our faith and just saying something stupid and being called out for it they're two different things don't be stupid be wise be thoughtful you're navigating a wolf pack avoid conflicts if you can but don't be elusive either it's a balancing act if you're public about your faith do so in such a way that if people are offended it's because of the gospel it's not because of you going back to the worldwide

Christian thing just for a moment here this report under Caesar's sword it stated in particular how Christians responded to severe persecution I find this very interesting let me share it with you they said there were three main responses survival association and confrontation I'm going to mention these as examples of wisdom and integrity so three main responses survival association and confrontation so survival looked like a number of things one of them was just fleeing just getting out of there so this is what Christians have done in Iraq and Syria and Libya and northern Nigeria in 1990 there were 1.2 million Christians in Iraq by the end of 2003 there were 500,000 the most recent thing I read was about 150,000 Christians left in Iraq so survival it sometimes looks like fleeing or it could look like just going underground doing everything in secret so this is a strategy for some places in Saudi Arabia

[15 : 21] Iran, Afghanistan Vietnam for example so the next strategy was association this is a bit more proactive so the strategy involves building partnerships in order to keep doing what you're doing so places like northern Nigeria Catholics and Protestants are building partnerships with mainstream Muslim leaders in response to Boko Haran because Boko Haran is going after everybody in Russia they talked about Protestant churches lots of them run ministries to alcoholics because churches because it's a big problem in Russia and they find if they run ministries to alcoholics they are less hassled by local government that's a smart move survival association the third strategy confrontation this is folks who just openly challenge the government knowing it could lead to death or imprisonment and they do this as a witness in each of these situations as I read these reports I thought these are thoughtfully considered these are folks who read their situation they consider what the best response is sometimes it's silence sometimes it's confrontation sometimes it's something in the middle they're wise as serpents innocent as doves this is what we have to do remember where we are in the sermon expect persecution verse 25 if they called the master of the house

Beelzebub how much more will they malign those of his household it's a great line I love this verse it says if they called Jesus the devil and he's much nicer than you you're going to face some aggression as well expect persecution our response the first response that Christ gives us is this he says be wise and have integrity the next response fear rightly verse 26 so have no fear of them for nothing is covered that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known we don't need to fear those who would hurt or slander Christians because everything will come to the surface one day this is what Jesus is saying it's all going to come to the service one day and justice will be done no hand that has ever struck a Christian will go unaccounted for after reading these reports I find this incredibly comforting now some folks feel very uncomfortable with the idea of a

God who would be wrathful who would mete out justice they feel uncomfortable with it because they think that surely people who believe that will turn Christians into an angry mob won't it no actually it should create the exact opposite response in Christians I want to quote Miroslav Volf he's a Croatian theologian he's at Yale his father was tortured in a concentration camp in communist Yugoslavia he himself spent time in prison I say that just because he's not some ivory tower academic talking philosophically about this sort of stuff here's what he says about this and I will summarize it first he's basically saying the only way for Christians to become peacemakers is to believe in a God who will settle all accounts a God of wrath here's his quote he says this my thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance my thesis will be unpopular with people in the west that's us but imagine speaking to people as

I have whose cities and villages have been first plundered then burned and leveled to the ground whose daughters and sisters have been raped whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit your point to them you should not retaliate why not I say the only means of prohibiting violence is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence that God would not be worthy of our worship so do not fear Wolf says God will make all things right and then in verse 28 Jesus says this so don't fear them but fear God and here's what he says rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell these folks they can kill your body but God he can disown you for eternity so if you're going to fear don't let it be the minor fear of people no fear the major danger of

God who is pure and holy and will pour his wrath on injustice it's very sobering stuff and if you don't like it if you don't like what I'm saying don't be offended by me I'm just literally I'm just basically telling you what Jesus is saying here Jesus then pivots and we don't have time to speak about this much so I'll summarize it quickly Jesus then pivots right at the end he's just said don't don't fear them fear God and then he pivots and he said but you know this God that we should fear rightly this God who can destroy the body and the soul that same God when the smallest bird dies our God knows about it the number of hairs on your head our God knows that number God has a complete knowledge of your life he has a complete knowledge of even the most insignificant information about each one of us so he knows what you're going through he knows your persecution he knows what people say about you behind your back you don't need to fear he says in verse 31 you don't need to worry about this stuff whatever the world throws at you because of your faith

[21 : 33] Jesus final words to us final words to his disciples before sending them out is this God is close God is interested and he cares Amen