

Loyalty Tested

JESUS IS WORTH EVERYTHING.

Several years ago I was teaching a course on the Letter to the Hebrews. On this particular day we were discussing persecution, specifically how we were to apply the teaching in Hebrews to our lives. Most of the students were middle class and had lived in the U.S. for all of their lives. Their concept of persecution was obviously influenced by their life experiences. In defining persecution, the students mentioned things like being laughed at for trying to share their faith and losing friends or promotions for speaking boldly about their faith.

When the conversation began to slow, two students from different countries in Africa began sharing their experiences. Both students had been arrested for proclaiming their faith. Both had spent time in prison for refusing to deny their faith. The room became very still. Without belittling the experiences of the U.S. students, it was evident that the two African students had experienced persecution at a different level than the other students.

Today's session covers Jesus's instructions to His disciples who were preparing to embark on a preaching mission. Some would not be welcomed in homes or towns. Some would be flogged in the synagogues. In both cases Jesus was expecting fearless proclamation of the gospel.

► UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT ◀

Matthew 10:1-42

This context for this session begins with Jesus giving His twelve disciples authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and the power to heal every disease and illness (v. 1). After Matthew's list of the twelve disciples (vv. 2-4), Jesus gave them instructions before sending them out into God's harvest (vv. 5-15).

This mission was to be directed to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 6). The disciples’ were to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven had come near (v. 7) and to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the leper, and drive out demons (v. 8). Jesus stressed the necessity of them depending on God to meet their needs. They were not to accumulate money, taking only the bare necessities, nothing more. If they were welcomed in a home, they were to let their peace be on that house. If they were not welcomed, they were to shake off the dust of the town as they left. Those towns would be in worse shape than Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment (vv. 9-15).

Jesus’s instructions continued but His tone shifted. The previous instructions fit the context of a short-term preaching mission. The second set of instructions detailed how believers were to act when flogged in the synagogues and when they were brought before kings and governors. The conflict would also involve family members betraying other family members. When believers were persecuted in one town, they were instructed to flee to another (vv. 16-25).

Jesus’s instructions shifted again as He told His disciples to fear no one but God (vv. 26-31). These believers were to acknowledge Jesus openly so that they would be acknowledged by Jesus before His Father in heaven (vv. 32-33). For the second time Jesus highlighted conflict within the family (vv. 34-37; see vv. 21-22). Those who are worthy are the ones who love Jesus more than father, mother, son or daughter, and who are willing to take up their cross and follow Jesus (vv. 37-39). Something as small as a cup of cold water given to one who was a disciple because he or she was a disciple would result in a reward that will never be lost (vv. 40-42). When Jesus finished His instructions to the twelve disciples, He Himself went from town to town teaching and preaching (11:1).



Snakes and Doves (Matt. 10:16-20)

Before sending out the Twelve, Jesus warned them they would experience rejection. They would need to be “shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves” (v. 16). However, this persecution would provide opportunities for the disciples to bear witness to the truth of the gospel. The Holy Spirit would give them words to say.

VERSE 16

“Look, I’m sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves.”

Jesus prepared His disciples for the persecution and death that would follow Christians after Jesus’s return to the Father. Jesus referred to the disciples as **sheep**, and the point of comparison was the vulnerability of the sheep with respect to **wolves**. There can be no question that the persecution envisioned would be severe.

Jesus used two phrases to indicate how the disciples were to succeed in the midst of wolves: they were to **be as shrewd as serpents** and **as innocent as doves**. This may be a proverbial saying, without the reference to serpents and doves. The Greek word translated *shrewd* means understanding that is associated with wisdom and insight. The word can also be translated into English as “wise” (ESV) or “wary” (NASB).

The second phrase features a dove with the admonition to be as *innocent as doves*. The Greek word translated *innocent* means to be unmixed and, therefore, to be pure. It specifically refers to purity of intention. The vulnerability of the sheep is offset by Jesus’s call for His sheep to be “smart sheep, sheep who use our heads, sheep who don’t overestimate the benevolence of wolves.”¹

VERSE 17

“Beware of them, because they will hand you over to local courts and flog you in their synagogues.”

In the previous section, the harshest reaction that the disciples would receive would be a refusal to welcome the disciples into a home (vv. 12-14). In this section Jesus made it clear that the reaction on future mission journeys would be much more severe. Jesus issued a command to stay alert: **“Beware of them”** (“Beware of men,” ESV, KJV; “Be on your guard” NIV). The men in question were probably the people in authority who were responsible for passing judgment on the believers. The Greek word translated **hand . . . over** is often used as a technical term for turning someone over to the police or courts to pass judgment.

The Greek word translated **local courts** (“local councils,” NIV) is the transliterated word “sanhedrins.” The plural form of the word was a reference to the smaller courts (councils of twenty-three men) found in towns and villages outside of Jerusalem (“Sanhedrin” singular referred to the supreme religious court in Jerusalem). The smaller courts handled smaller, local issues. On a first offense the parties causing the offense

were warned and released (Acts 4:18). On a second offense, the offending parties were flogged (5:40). No more than thirty-nine strokes could be given in the synagogues (see 2 Cor. 11:24).

VERSE 18

“You will even be brought before governors and kings because of me, to bear witness to them and to the Gentiles.”

While Jesus had earlier given instructions on what to do when the disciples were not welcomed into a home, here He instructed them on what to do when standing before **governors** and **kings**. Jesus’s focus switched from the preaching tour on which His disciples were about to embark to mission trips that the disciples would make after Jesus returned to the Father. The Greek word translated *governors* referred to men in a position like that of Pilate (Matt.27:2,11). It could also refer to Caesar.

All of these appearances would be because of Jesus (“**because of me**”). The disciples would not be persecuted because they were criminals but rather because of their relationship to Jesus and their proclamation of His gospel. Jesus viewed these trials positively; the trials would provide opportunities for the disciples **to bear witness to them and to the Gentiles**. *Them* refers to the governors and kings. The addition of *to the Gentiles* indicates the spread of the disciples’ witness outside the courts to the people.

VERSE 19

“But when they hand you over, don’t worry about how or what you are to speak. For you will be given what to say at that hour,”

The presence of persecution was certain, even if the timing was not (**when** not “if”). The Greek word translated **hand . . . over** is the same word that was used in verse 17 and has the same technical sense of “hand one over for trial.” The first reaction many disciples probably had was anxiety. Jesus commanded them not to **worry**. Another reaction may have been a strong desire to strike back, not remembering that their primary goal was to preach the gospel not to defend themselves. Their lack of anxiety would be due to God giving them both the **how** and **what** they were to speak before kings, governors, and councils. Both the content of what they were to say as well as the manner in which they were to say it would be given to them **at that hour**. God would give Jesus’s disciples the defense they would need when they would need it.

Some Bible teachers have applied this text to the act of preaching or teaching in the church. But Jesus was talking specifically about facing a hostile situation where the disciple's very life might be in danger. Jesus was not advocating laziness when preparing to preach or teach believers, but He was challenging believers who were in difficult situations to rely on God for their defense (Luke 12:11-12).

VERSE 20

“because it isn’t you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father is speaking through you.”

The reason that the disciples were told not to worry would be because they were not the ones who would be speaking. **The Spirit of [their] Father** (“Holy Spirit,” Mark 13:11) would speak through the disciples. The phrase *the Spirit of your Father* appears nowhere else in the Greek New Testament. However, John recorded a similar phrase: Jesus would send “the Spirit of truth” from the Father to the disciples (John 15:26; 16:13). Jesus regularly spoke of God as His Father, but there is a sense in which God is the Father of believers as well. Jesus taught disciples to pray “our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). Jesus connected God as the Father of believers and the Holy Spirit as the Father’s Spirit. Jesus also promised, “for I will give you such words and a wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (Luke 21:15).

The persecution would extend to the believer’s own household (Matt. 10:21). Jesus quoted the Old Testament prophet Micah, who described a similar situation where “a man’s enemies will be the members of his household” (Matt. 10:35-36; see Mic. 7:6). In some cultures, converting to Christianity is viewed as bringing shame to a family. In many cases the only perceived recourse to restore the family’s honor is to turn over the believing family member to the authorities.



Explore Further

Read the article “Flogging” on pages 579–580 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How might Jesus’s statement that believers would be flogged in synagogues affect the way His disciples carry out their mission?

Sparrows and Hairs (Matt. 10:26-31)

Jesus encouraged His disciples to not be afraid of their persecutors, reassuring them of the Father's care. They are both known by and valuable to Him.

VERSE 26

“Therefore, don’t be afraid of them, since there is nothing covered that won’t be uncovered and nothing hidden that won’t be made known.”

Therefore refers to the reason why the disciples would be treated as they were. They would be treated no better than their Master, Jesus; the things that authorities did to Jesus would be done to His disciples as well (vv. 22-25). **Them** whom the disciples were not to fear refers to those who were persecuting both Jesus and later the disciples. Jesus repeated the command not to fear three times in this section (vv. 26,28,31).

The disciples were not to fear because those things that are **covered** and **hidden** will be **uncovered** and **made known**. Some Bible teachers view this as a reference to the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus primarily had been teaching His disciples and not the masses, so His teaching was in that sense *covered* and *hidden*. The secrecy would soon be a thing of the past and gospel would be boldly and openly proclaimed.

Other Bible teachers have suggested that the reference is to the last judgment when God will reveal all the secrets that people thought had gone unknown. Believers in God will be vindicated and those persecuting God's children will be punished. The disciples should not be afraid to preach the gospel Jesus had declared to them. Paul went on to say that the saints will be involved in judging the world (1 Cor. 6:2). Choosing between the two options is not easy, and both have an element of truth.

VERSE 27

“What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light. What you hear in a whisper, proclaim on the housetops.”

The disciples received their message from Jesus (“**What I tell you**”). They were responsible for the proclamation of the gospel, but the content came from Jesus. What they heard **in the dark** was what Jesus had told them **in a whisper**. The disciples were responsible for maximum publicity. The large, flat roofs of most homes were commonly used to proclaim important messages. The approach of the Sabbath was signaled

by a trumpet on a rooftop. The workers in the field would know when to stop work and come in from the fields. What was to be spoken **in the light** was to be shouted from **the housetops**. Jesus's point was that His gospel message was to be proclaimed fearlessly.

VERSE 28

“Don’t fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

The verse begins with the second “do not fear” command—**“Don’t fear those”** and gives the reason why persecutors are not to be feared. The disciples had nothing to fear from the ones who persecuted them because those persecutors were capable only of killing **the body**. They could not kill **the soul**. Martyrdom was a real possibility for the disciples; however, those who could kill only the physical *body* had no authority or power over the *soul*. God **“is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”** God is omnipotent. Only God has control over a person’s ultimate fate. Therefore, only He should be feared. When Jesus spoke of God being *able to destroy both soul and body*, He was not speaking of the total annihilation of the person. Rather He was referring to the loss of everything that makes life meaningful, the loss of everything good and right. This destruction will take place *in hell*, another reason why Jesus was not referring to the total cessation of the person’s being. The Greek word for *hell* literally refers to the “Valley of Hinnom” (*geenna*), a ravine south of Jerusalem containing constantly burning garbage fires which were likened to the eternal punishment of the wicked (Matt. 5:22,29-30).

VERSE 29

“Aren’t two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s consent.”

Jesus transitioned into the worth of the person by comparing the worth of a sparrow and the worth of an individual. **Sparrows** were the least expensive animal sold in the market and were considered cheap food for the poor. **Penny** refers to a Roman copper coin worth about one-sixteenth of the daily wages of a manual laborer. Five sparrows were sold for two pennies (Luke 12:6). Jesus’s point is that God has intimate knowledge of and control over all of His creation. Nothing happens **“without your Father’s consent.”** God is in control of His creation, even the most minute parts.

VERSES 30-31

“But even the hairs of your head have all been counted. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

God knows even the smallest details of our bodies, even the number of **the hairs of your head**. The God who is sovereign over history is sovereign also over the hairs of our heads. The language of the hairs on one’s head was frequently used to indicate protection of an individual from harm (1 Sam. 14:45; see also 2 Sam. 14:11; 1 Kings 1:52).

The first two commands not to fear focused on specific objects. First, Jesus instructed His disciples not to fear those who persecuted them, be they of the government or one’s own family (v. 26). Second, the disciples were warned not to fear those who killed the body but were not able to kill the soul (v. 28). The third command appears at the end of this section and has no specific object that disciples are not to fear. Rather, the command is a general admonition not to fear: **“So don’t be afraid.”**

Throughout this short section Jesus had relied on the “less than, greater than” argument. Even though **sparrows** are insignificant from a human perspective, they are still the objects of God’s concern and care. If this is true of the sparrows, how much more does God care for humans. Jesus said that people are **“worth more than many sparrows.”** Two things stand out in this section. First, God is sovereign over everything. Second, for that reason we have nothing to fear.



Explore Further

Read the article “Fear” on pages 559–561 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is the difference between fear of God and fear of one’s enemies or a particular situation?

Peace and Swords (Matt. 10:32-34)

Jesus’s teachings would bring opposition and conflict. Armed with the assurance of the Father’s care and a lasting reward, the Twelve were to remain loyal to Jesus even in the face of hostility and division.

VERSE 32

“Therefore, everyone who will acknowledge me before others, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.”

Because we have nothing to fear, we should **acknowledge** Jesus publicly. The Greek word translated *acknowledge* can mean to agree on something, to commit oneself to, or to acknowledge something—specifically to publicly profess allegiance to Jesus. The mission on which Jesus was about to send His disciples, as well as their future appearances in courts, provides the context in which the disciples were to acknowledge Jesus publicly. The disciples would appear before governors and kings because of Jesus (v. 18); they would be hated because of Jesus’s name (v. 22).

The disciples’ acknowledgment of Jesus on earth affected Jesus’s acknowledgment of the disciples in the last day **“before my Father in heaven.”** In Matthew, Jesus referred to God the Father as *“my Father in heaven”* seven times (7:21; 10:32,33; 12:50; 16:17; 18:10,19). He also used the phrases “your Father” (thirteen times) and “our Father” (once, 6:9).

VERSE 33

“But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven.”

This verse is practically identical to the preceding verse with the exception of one word: **denies/deny** instead of the word “acknowledge.” The two choices lead to different outcomes, acceptance by Jesus and God the Father or rejection by them. The Greek word translated *deny* can mean to refuse to consent to something, to disdain. It can also mean to disclaim association with something or someone, to repudiate or disown. Disowning Jesus leads to being disowned by Him. In the final judgment Jesus will speak for or against a person based on whether they accepted or rejected Him. John made the same point in his first letter (1 John 2:22-23).

Jesus responds to people at the final judgment who claim to have had prophesied in His name, driven out demons in His name, and done miracles in His name, telling them, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!” (Matt. 7:23). Jesus is the one who determines whether the confession of a person is genuine, coming from the heart (John 2:23-25).

VERSE 34

“Don’t assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Jesus warned His disciples that things would not be the way that they might expect them to be. **Don't assume** ("Do not suppose," NIV) introduces a repeated parallel clause which emphasizes Jesus's commitment not to bring **peace**. Jesus promised His disciples He would give them peace: "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful" (John 14:27). Later Jesus again promised peace: "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world" (16:33).

Matthew 10:34 must be understood in the context of Jesus's other statements on peace. The peace that Jesus referred to here was more than the absence of conflict. God's peace rests in knowing that in Christ we are forgiven all our sins, reconciled to God, and have received eternal life. "And that means war with evil and accordingly hostility against those who support the ways of wrong . . . his coming presents a challenge to which people respond differently. And emotionally, for some who oppose Jesus do so passionately, as do those who become his followers. And where strong and opposed feelings are held, conflict is inevitable."²

In the Old Testament, **a sword** often symbolizes the judgment of God (Jer. 12:12). The presence of God's sword means peace for no one. In the context of Matthew 10:34, the sword fits best with the conflict within the families described in the following verse. The sword is a symbol for that which divides a family against itself. Matthew 10:35-36 echoes the situation in Micah's day (Mic. 7:6). "Turn" ("set . . . against," ESV) in Matthew 10:35 means to cut completely into two parts.

Jesus listed three situations in which the person involved was not worthy of Him: loving father or mother more than Him (Matt. 10:37a), loving son or daughter more than Him (v. 37b), and not taking up one's cross to follow Jesus (v. 38). The only way to find one's life is to lose one's life for Jesus's sake (v. 39).



Explore Further

How does Jesus bringing a sword affect the way that we proclaim the gospel and our expectations of how people will respond?

1. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 253.

2. Ibid., 266.