



Like Sheep Among Wolves

Scripture: Matthew 10:14 - 25

Sermon Series: Matthew

Topic: Jesus, Hell, Persecution, Evangelism

Matthew 10:14-25 (ESV)

¹⁴ And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

¹⁶ "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, ¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹ Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²² and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ²³ 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.

²⁴ "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and 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.

Introduction

We have been considering together the instructions that Jesus gave to the Twelve disciples on the occasion when he first shared his authoritative message and ministry with them and sent them out as apostles into the Jewish towns and villages surrounding the Sea of Galilee. These instructions are found in Matthew chapter 10. We will continue to consider these instructions this morning.

We have seen that some of the instructions Jesus no longer apply to the followers of Jesus today, while some still do. Today we will hear Jesus' words, "*I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves,*" and see six pieces of advice that Christians today should keep in mind when sharing the gospel.

Behold (v.16)

The first piece of advice is to know that *those who go out carrying Jesus' message, go out with Jesus' authority.*

Matthew 10:16 (ESV) "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

"Behold, I am sending you out." The first word in this phrase, *behold*, grabs our attention. Matthew uses this word 40 times in this gospel. It is his way of altering just to something that is very important. Jesus says, *"Behold, I am sending you out..."*

The emphasis is upon "I." The one sending these apostles out is non other than Jesus himself, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus himself sends out his disciples into the world to carry his message and do his ministry. Jesus shares his authority with his disciples. *This was true of the Twelve and it remains true of all his disciples today.*

Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV) ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus sent out and still sends out his disciples into the world to carry his message *"to all nations."* As long as there those who are not yet disciples of Jesus in all nations, then Jesus' followers are to keep teaching and preaching in his name.

The authoritative message of Jesus is the message that *"the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Mt 10:7). *"The kingdom of God has come near"* (Lk 10:9). The authoritative ministry that confirms the message is the miraculous power of the kingdom. Jesus gave his messengers the authority to perform miracles in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of the message that kingdom had truly come.¹ As we saw last week, miracles are qualities of the kingdom of heaven and not merely characteristics of the twelve apostles.² The power of the kingdom of heaven is greater than that of the kingdom of darkness because Jesus has conquered the devil and all his demons.

The Danger of Rejecting the Kingdom and the King

The kingdom of heaven, through the person and work of Jesus, has truly come among us. Thus, to reject this truth is catastrophic.

¹ See Luke 9:2, 6, 10; cf. 10:9, 13, 19; Mark 16:15-18.

² This was the point of last week's sermon.

Matthew 10:14-15 (ESV) ¹⁴ "And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. ¹⁵ Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town."

Jesus is explaining the *rejecting the gospel of the kingdom will result in spiritual condemnation on the the day of Judgment*. What Jesus is sending his disciples out to do, carries eternal consequences. Jesus is standing in the present, speaking to his apostles and sending them out to proclaim his message and perform his ministry, but in his mind he is perceiving the end of time, the final "day of judgment." Those who reject Jesus' messengers, his gospel message, and refuse to receive his ministry, will be condemned on the day of judgment.

On the day of judgment God will be more lenient in sentencing the people of Sodom and Gomorrah than he will be on those who rejected the messengers of Jesus. To reject the message and the messengers of Jesus was to reject Jesus himself. This is an amazing warning. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of their own sin, but they neither saw the message nor the ministry of Jesus and his messengers. Therefore their judgment will be less severe than will be those who saw and heard the gospel of Jesus and still sinfully rejected him. "*To whom much is given, much will be required*" (Lk 12:48). The one who sees and hears much of the kingdom of God, will be judged more strictly than the one who does not. Later Jesus said about some cities who rejected his messengers and his message,

Luke 10:13-14 (ESV) ¹³ "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. ¹⁴ But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

Those who have heard of Jesus, of who he is, and of all that he has done in the world, and still reject him, will receive the greater condemnation in hell than those who did not hear of him nor see him. Hell is a very real place, which already in this gospel Jesus has spoken of it three times (Mt 5:22, 29, 30). He even mentioned it in this speech (Mt 10:28). Hell exists for the purpose of punishing sinners.³ Every human being is a sinner and thus, every human being deserves hell, including sinners who have never heard of Jesus. But as Jesus said,

Luke 12:47-48 (ESV) ⁴⁷ And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required...

³ Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 16:18; 18:9; 23:15, 33; 25:30, 41, 46; Revelation 14:9-11; 20:10.

Yes, there are degrees of punishment in hell. The whole world knows that there will be a Judgment Day. Every religion, even Godless ones, include some notion of judgment. Even climatologists have a conception of "judgment day."⁴ No human being can claim ignorance of the fact that there will one day be an ultimate day of reckoning. The question is will we "**get ready and act accordingly.**" The apostle Paul proclaimed, "

Acts 17:30-31 (ESV) ³⁰ "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Judgment day is a day that has been "fixed" by God. The good news of the gospel of Jesus is that there is a way to escape God's just condemnation of our sin. The only way of escape is through Jesus. The punishment for sin is death. Jesus died for sinners. Jesus had no sin of his own and so his death can atone for the sins of all who have faith in him, because he was sinless when he died. And we can be certain that his death has satisfied God's wrath against sin, because when God's wrath was satisfied, then God raised Jesus from the dead. Thus, proving that eternal life can be given to all who have faith in him. This is the gospel.

Don't reject Jesus and his gospel message. This message must be proclaimed. This ministry of restoration must be performed. The sad fact is that not all sinners want to hear this good news. Nevertheless it still must be proclaimed. Greater condemnation awaits those who do.

But there will be a cost to proclaim it. This fact what we must "behold."

The Cost of Proclaiming the Gospel

"Like sheep in the midst of wolves." Jesus said to his disciples that he was sending them on a dangerous mission. He admitted that he was sending them out into an environment like **"sheep among wolves."** This must certainly mean that sharing the gospel message will mean being attacked. Wolves seek to devour sheep, thus those who reject the gospel will seek to devour the messengers of the gospel. Thus, being attacked because of the message is to be expected.

"Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." The messengers cannot attack back. It is a sin to attack messengers who love and care deeply for the souls of those who are attacking them, but when attacked the messengers must not respond sinfully, but rather **"innocently as doves."** In proclaiming that hell will harm the soul of those who reject the gospel, the gospel messengers will sometimes be assaulted, but they must never seek in return to harm those who seek to

⁴ See Ted Toadvine, "Climate Collapse, Judgment Day, and the Temporal Sublime," <https://puncta.journals.villanova.edu/index.php/puncta/article/view/2819> accessed 2 December 2023. See also David Attenborough, "Climate Change Our Greatest Threat," <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-46398057> accessed 2 December 2023.

harm them. Gospel messengers must never sin in proclaiming the message. As I said two weeks ago, we must “be polite proclaimers, and never pushy protagonists.”

“*Being wise*” mostly likely means knowing when it is time to leave. When a person has heard the gospel and rejects it and begins to attack like a wolf, then it is time to leave that person and the conversation and harmlessly move on to the next person or town.

Summary: Behold, there a real place called hell. It burns hotter for those who hear about Jesus’ message and ministry and yet still choose to reject him and his messengers. Proclaiming the message that Jesus is the only way to escape God’s just condemnation of unrepentant sinners sometimes will get you attacked. Gospel messengers must expect the attack and refuse to respond in sinful ways. They must wisely know how to maintain their innocence and when it’s time to politely move on.

Beware (v.17-18)

The second piece of advice that Jesus offers is regarding further warnings. Jesus says to his disciples, “*beware.*”

Matthew 10:17-18 (ESV) ¹⁷ “Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, ¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.”

The first word is “*beware.*” Jesus sounds a warning. Here we find Jesus looking out beyond these Twelve messengers alone, to all those who would carry the gospel message in the future. Just as on the night of his betrayal, Jesus prayed for his present disciples, so also he prayed for all future disciples who would believe the gospel message (Jn 17:20). The Twelve had been limited to Jewish towns only, but here we find Jesus foreseeing a future mission to “*governors, kings, and Gentiles.*” We are those future disciples, thus, this word is for us.

“*Delivered over to courts and flogged in synagogues.*” Jesus warns his messengers that some of them will be arrested and beaten. Some will lose their freedom by being *arrested and dragged into court.* Many of the messengers of Jesus will become well acquainted with the legal and judicial system under which they live. Some will be found guilty and *physically beaten.* The proclamation of the living message and miraculous ministry of Jesus is worth the court costs and medical bills. The result is greater than the means.

“*To bear witness before them.*” Perhaps this is the only way for judges, jailers, and magistrates to come into contact with the living message and ministry of the resurrected Christ. This was the will of Jesus for the apostle Paul. “... *he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel*” (Acts 9:15).

Notice what is required. All that is required is to *“bear witness before them.”* Messengers need not be great and eloquent speakers or mighty apologists. All that is needed is to *“bear witness.”* We simply have to share what God has done in our lives.

A Kingdom Witness

Since we have been praying for God’s kingdom to come among us, I have heard so many instances that I’m now convinced that I should occasionally share a brief testimony of what God is doing among us. With permission I will share what I received from someone this week.

For most of my adult life, I struggled periodically with anxiety and a trypophobia (a fear of clusters of tiny holes). Every time I looked at something like that, I would feel extreme anxiety, my heart rate would go up, I felt like I wanted to scream. I would clench my toes and fists. I would get angry because I couldn’t stop thinking of that image. It would mess with my concentration.

My anxiety worsened over the course of last year due to difficult life situations. I was unable to eat. I didn’t have energy to do anything fun anymore. I even saw psychiatrist and a therapist, but they assured me that I was ok, and that talking to therapist would help me get it under control, but nothing was helping. Then a wonderful friend from Hope church offered to pray for me. As she was praying, I felt calm and every time she mentioned the name of Jesus, my heart felt light. I began to feel a sense of relief that I had desperately been seeking. I felt comfort, warmth, and peace flowing into me. I can say that I literally felt like evil spirits were being pulled out of me by Jesus.

As soon as she finished praying, I burst into tears and cried uncontrollably. I felt delivered from my phobia. I was healed. I was amazed at how great our God is. How powerful prayer is. Over the next few days I noticed drastic changes in my thinking and my body’s response to things – no stream of constant worry, no racing heart, no breaking out in cold sweats, no panic attacks.

Now, I won’t tell you that I have never had an anxious moment since then, but I will tell you that I believe that something miraculous happened in me as a result of that time of prayer. I am literally a new person. I know there was a spirit of anxiety that was ripped out of me that day, and it has never returned. I am happier and more peaceful. Never give up hope in God and never stop praying.

If you have seen the kingdom of God come among us in powerful ways. Send me an email and let me know about it. We need to continually praise God for all that he is doing among us.

Gospel messengers need only speak of what they have witnessed. This is what Peter and John said, "...we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20) For "The God of our fathers raised Jesus..."⁵ from the dead, and "we are witnesses of these things..."⁶ You don't need to have all the answers in order to be a witness for Jesus. You don't need a theological degree either. All you need to simply the willingness to talk about what you have seen and heard. Simply be willing to bear witness before any who will listen.

Be Calm (v.19-20)

Third, Jesus commands calmness. First, behold, second, beware, now third, be calm. Jesus offers instruction on the inward disposition of his disciples when they share the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus basically says **Be calm**.

Matthew 10:19-20 (ESV) ¹⁹ "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. ²⁰ For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

"Do not be anxious." When you are called to testify and bear witness about the message and ministry of Jesus and the gospel of the kingdom, "**do not be anxious.**" Do not inwardly nervous about "**how you are to speak or what you will say.**" Do not worry about words. When you are called upon to talk about what you've seen and heard about Jesus, then be calm. Do not let your heart be troubled. Be calm in Christ.

Speaking from the Spirit. The calmness comes from Jesus' promises that "**in the hour**" what you need to **speak**, the "**Spirit of your Father**" will give you the words you need. If good earthly fathers give their children what they need when they need it, then how much more will the heavenly Father give his children the words they need when they are called upon to speak on the Father's behalf?

When you are called to or have opportunity to bear witness about the gospel of the kingdom, then worry not for in the hour that words are need, the Sprit of your Father will give you what to say and how to say it. Be calm in this precious promise.

Be Enduring (v.21-23)

The fourth piece of advice Jesus gives his disciples is that they must **be enduring** in the face of the future.

Matthew 10:21-23 (ESV) ²¹ "Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²² and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

⁵ Acts 5:30.

⁶ Acts 5:32.

²³ 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."

Jesus continues looking out into the future as he foresees what will become of his "sheep that he is sending out as wolves."

Family division (v.21). Gospel messengers are called to endure much, including the division of their own families. This may be among the most acute of all pain. When you are not and cannot agree with the members of your own flesh and blood, this is most grievous. Yet Jesus calls his disciples to love him more than even the love for biology family (see 10:35-38). Jesus, his message, and his ministry will become so divisive that fathers will be divided from children, children will take sides against their parents and even consent to see them executed. The good news of the kingdom of heaven will not be good news to everyone. Deep division will come as a result of the name of Jesus.

"Hated by all" (v.22). Jesus' name will eventually lead, not merely to division, but even to active hatred. There will come a day when everyone who carries the name of Jesus or who bears the name of Christ, will be **"hated by all for his name's sake."** Later, Jesus even goes so far as to say **"Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God"** (Jn 16:2). That day is here. There are many in our world today who believe that killing "infidels," whether they be Jew or Christian, is exactly what pleases God.

"The one who endures to the end will be saved" (v.22). Jesus is explaining that the gospel messenger who **"endures to the end will be saved."** This means that the follower of Jesus must be willing to persevere through many difficult and hard events and circumstances. The one who would be saved must, *for the sake of Jesus and his kingdom gospel*, endure attacks from wolves—brutal and vicious, innocently, not sinfully, arrest, imprisonment, and beatings, legal fees and medical bills, bearing witness before many, the temptation to anxiety, waiting on the Holy Spirit to supply the needed words, family division, and finally, hatred by all and persistent persecution, "from town to town." But the one who faithfully endures all these things **will be saved in the end**. The end will come for us all, but will we be faithful until that time? Salvation is the reward for those who do.

"When persecuted in one town, flee to the next" (v.23). Persecution is sure to come. There is no doubt about this. It will happen from town to town. Jesus tells his disciples not to stay in a town in which they were not wanted. If they were rejected in one town, then they to be off to next. There's no martyr complex here.

"Truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (v.23). This verse is noted, almost universally by commentators, as among the

most difficult to understand in the entire NT.⁷ Multiple explanations have been put forth and pages upon pages have been written striving to bring clarity.

It seems clear that Jesus is saying at least two things. First, he is calling his disciples to a continuous ministry that will take them through all the towns of Israel, from those that received them to those that reject them. The message and ministry of the kingdom of heaven is intended to permeate the whole land of Israel. Second, at some point in the future, Jesus will be revealed as the Son of Man⁸ who is God's chosen Messiah. Jesus himself can help us understand since on another instance he used almost identical wording.

Matthew 24:13-14 (ESV) ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

Jesus spoke these words in the days immediately preceding his crucifixion. Here Jesus once again calls his disciples to *be enduring*. Perseverance is required of the follower of Jesus. Perseverance seems to be a necessary quality of those whom Jesus calls to take " *the gospel of the kingdom to all nations.*" Jesus sends his disciples on a global mission. This mission will be successful. The gospel " *will be proclaimed throughout the whole world*" and only after that aspect of the mission is accomplished, " *then the end will come.*"

Summary. Christians must be enduring. Some Christians will endure family members who will reject them because of their devotion to Jesus, and some will even kill the members of their own family. Some Christians must endure this. Some Christians must also endure hatred by kinds of people because of their connection to the name of Jesus. Some Christians will endure persecution from place to place. Jesus calls his followers to be faithful to his name through such tense and difficult season. But the promise is that those who love Jesus more than all these things and faithfully endure to the end can rest in Christ's promise that he will save them.

Be Like Jesus (v.24-25)

The fifth piece of advice to his followers is, *Be like Jesus*.

Matthew 10:24-25 (ESV) ²⁴ "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and 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."

" *A disciple is not above his teacher*" (v.24). It is a good thing for the student to be like his teacher and for a servant to be like this master. Whatever the teacher must endure, so must the

⁷ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 250.

⁸ This is Jesus' favorite self-designation. It is found in the NT 82 times and all but a handful are found on the lips of Jesus as he is speaking about himself.

student. If the master must endure mockery, then so will the servant. If teacher is made fun of, then the faithful student should expect the same.

"If they called the master... Beelzebul, then how much more will malign the servants?"

Beelzubul is the name of the OT god of Philistines. Later the name was used to refer to the prince of demons. Thus, it is another name for Satan. Jesus is referring back to the time when the Pharisees claimed that he was casting out demons by the power of the devil (see Mt 9:34). If the Master of the house is thought of as being demonic, then should the children of the house expect to be treated differently? If the sinless Leader was thought to be evil, then how much more will the sinful followers be maligning, criticized, belittled and rebuked?

Summary. The followers of Jesus must expect to be treated the same as the leaders. If the Holy Son of God was referred to as being evil, then so also will be those who follow in his footsteps.

Conclusion

Jesus has entrusted his message and his ministry to his followers. He first sent out the Twelve and then later sent out all who would follow him to go into all nations. The magnificent message of the gospel of the kingdom of God must be shared. Its news is too good to be kept to ourselves. But sharing this soul-saving message will be costly. Therefore, **behold** the cost.

Jesus said, *"I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves."* Nevertheless, those who carry the message must go out. Hell is a place to be avoided and Jesus is the only one who has the authority to save souls from going there.

Please hear this message. Receive this sweet, suffering Savior. Repent of your sins today. Run to Jesus in faith. Do not reject him. Only through the blood of Jesus can your sins be washed away and new life be given to you. This is a message that must be proclaimed.

Beware. Sharing this truth will be costly. Many will attack you for talking like this. Many will say that you are evil to speak like this. But do not let this stop you from bearing witness. **Be calm** and tell of all that Jesus has done for you. Do not be anxious, but rest in Jesus. **Be enduring.** Those who endure to the end will be saved.

In everything you do, **be like Jesus.** Receive his Holy Spirit, be filled with His Holy Spirit, and wait upon Him to give you the words that you need in the hour that you need them. Do not be surprised when people call you evil for being like the holy Son of God. Neither be angry with them, for blind people are often mistaken in what they think they see. Be as wise as can be and be as innocent as Jesus in sharing the gospel. Be polite, not pushy, and when one person rejects you and the gospel message, just politely move on to the next person.

Discussion Questions

1. Did anything of what Jesus said in this passage surprise you? If so, what?
2. Why did Jesus say to his messenger that he was “send them out like sheep among wolves?” How does hearing this make you feel?
3. What does such a statement (i.e. “I’m sending you out like sheep among wolves”) reveal about the message with which the disciples of Jesus are being sent out?
4. What did Jesus mean in saying that the people of “the land of Sodom and Gomorrah” would be judged less harshly than would the people who rejected the gospel of Jesus?
5. Do you believe that hell is a real place? Why or why not?
6. If you had to explain “the gospel of the kingdom” to a friend or coworker, what would you say?
7. What does Jesus mean is saying, “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves?”
8. What should the messengers of Jesus do when someone rejects the gospel? How should they respond to that person?
9. What does Jesus say about being anxious? What is his solution to anxiety in this passage?
10. Have you ever experienced tension in your life at the hands of either family or friends because of your devotion to Jesus? What happened? How did you respond?
11. What does Jesus mean by saying, “The one who endures to the end will be saved?”
12. What are two tangible ways you can “be like Jesus” this week?