

## Restoration Road Church

Matthew 10: 16-33

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Persecuted for Jesus

### Introduction

This morning's text is a continuation of the instructions given by Jesus to his disciples concerning their upcoming mission. In last week's passage we read and heard about the specific men selected by Christ to be sent out to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. To these men, who became his disciples, he gave power and authority to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. He gave to them specific direction on the level of faith required for this mission. Preparedness for this mission was not to be undertaken in the same way as any previous journeys they had undertaken. For this mission they would be trusting that God would provide for them what they needed, when they needed it. **9 Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics[d] or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food.**

### Persecution warning

In today's passage of study we have Christ's warning to his disciples of how they can expect to be treated as they faithfully follow his call. And even though this is directed initially toward these twelve disciples, it very much is meant for all who would ever trust in Jesus for salvation and desire to be his disciple. After carefully reading and studying this text I have concluded that this is a part of scripture never used by teachers of the prosperity gospel to advance their skewed version of the gospel. He does not promise riches or wealth, popularity, long life or good health. Rather, the disciples can expect to be hated by all kinds of people including their own family members. They can expect to be falsely accused by the religious and by the government. Scourging and even death may be in their future if they are obedient to the call of Jesus. But even in the face of the hardships and trials they were sure to face, as well as the joy and triumph of performing miracles by the power of God, Jesus gave them the real reason to rejoice. Luke tells us that after another group of 72 disciples returned from a similar mission, Jesus told them: **20 Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.**" (Luke 10: 20)

### Sheep among wolves

Jesus said he was sending them out as sheep among wolves. We know that sheep are not

known to be the smartest animals on the farm. They are among the most defenseless and helpless of all domesticated animals. They are as often panicked by harmless things as they are by the really dangerous. And when real danger comes they have little natural defense except running, and they are not very good at that. Being that defenseless, they are easy prey for predators and in the middle east that was the wolf. It was the shepherds responsibility to protect the sheep from wolves. It was normal for the wolves to come and attack the sheep. But here, Jesus is sending the twelve out into the wolves own territory, to walk right out into the midst of the enemy. In John 10: 11 Jesus says: **11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.** As the good shepherd, Jesus loves his sheep with a divine and eternal love. He knows his sheep and cares deeply for them, so why would he send them out to be attacked by vicious wolves? Because that is the way the lost sheep are to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd – through the testimony of the sheep already found. In this warning, he is letting them know before it happens, what the cost of discipleship will be. He is letting them know what pain, rejection and persecution they will face because of him. Jesus didn't attract followers by telling them how their lives would improve if only they would sit at his feet and listen to his teachings. No, even as he would face opposition and persecution from the God haters of this world, he made it clear from the very beginning that they would as well.

Too often, I believe, sinners are enticed to come to Jesus with the promise that everything that is wrong or bad in their life will go away and blessings will shower upon them in abundant measure if only they will accept Jesus as their personal savior. We are so blind to the what the true cost of discipleship has been for millions before us and what it in fact can be for us that we persuade unbelievers with promises of comfort and ease. But Jesus made no such offer. He only promises hardship, suffering and death. Yes, it's true that he offers rest for your soul as when he says, **28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest** (Matt. 11: 28). But the promise is rest for the soul, not for ease and comfort in this life.

### **Shrewd as serpents**

Some people, in their zeal to follow Christ have taken upon themselves the notion that persecution must be sought out in order to prove to themselves and others that they are true followers of Christ. But in telling us that we are to be shrewd as serpents, we know this is the wrong approach to take. In much of ancient lore, serpents were considered to be smart, cunning, cautious and shrewd. We are to emulate the serpent at least with regard to these characteristics. In other words, we should be thoughtful regarding our interactions with unbelievers and in how we go about proclaiming the gospel. As Hank Hanegraaf, the bible answer man would always say, “the gospel is offensive to the world enough as it is; we don't need to add to the offense by how we communicate it.” Paul advises us: **5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the**

**time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Col. 4:5)**

### **Innocent as doves**

He also tells us to be innocent as doves. As the most harmless and gentle of birds, doves represent the innocence and purity of the faithful disciple. This simply means that while remaining true to the word of God and uncompromising in our proclaiming of the gospel, we don't carry it out in a way that is abrasive, course, inconsiderate, belligerent, or rude. So we are to be wise and discerning while being peaceful and innocent. This is the struggle of the Christian; careful but bold, being willing to be shamed, mocked, or mistreated by others for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

Being shrewd or wise means that we sometimes avoid situations or people when you know there will be persecution. Even as Christ told his disciples to shake the dust off their feet when leaving a person who would not receive them or listen to what they had to say, or when he said **“when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next”**, we too have permission to stop trying to convince someone of the gospel when they are hostile or indifferent to it.

Another important point to consider is that Godly lives are not marked by *continual* suffering and hardship inflicted upon them by opponents of the gospel. Not even Christ or the Apostles endured endless persecution. But at various times and places during the course of our lives, to one degree or another, those who are faithful to God can expect to face the hostility of those who reject Christ and his message.

**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.**

I want to point out another thing. The only way to apply this passage of scripture correctly is to understand that the fulfillment of it was not meant to all occur during this brief mission the disciples were being sent on, but rather that it's meant to be fulfilled during all of redemptive history from that point forward. On this mission they healed the sick, cleansed lepers, and cast out demons but there is no record that on this mission the apostles raised the dead or that they suffered any real serious persecution. It was not until after Pentecost that they began to suffer persecution.

### **Persecution comes from the religious, government, family, and society**

Jesus warns that persecution will come from religion, government, family, and society in general. Jesus himself suffered greatly under the religious Jews and under the Roman

government. As the apostles labored to build the church, the book of Acts describes to us how many of them suffered at the hands of both the religious and the government. The apostle Paul describes what he endured for the sake of Christ to the Corinthians: **24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food,<sup>[b]</sup> in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches** (2 Cor. 11: 24-28).

The bible doesn't tell us how or when Paul died. However, the historical evidence is pretty good and indicates that he was beheaded in Rome under Nero sometime in the 60s. We get a good sense that Paul was preparing for his death when he wrote to Timothy: **6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing** (2 Tim. 4: 6-8).

### **To bear witness**

**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.**

The disciples were told that they would be dragged before governors and kings to bear witness before them and the gentiles and that God himself would speak through them. We see this unfolding in the martyrdom of Stephen as told in Acts 7. Stephen, who is the first of the new testament church leaders to be martyred gives a stirring testimony to the Jewish council to whom he was brought before with false charges of blasphemy. After taking them through a crash course through much of the old testament scriptures, he concludes his oratory with these potent words of rebuke to those who were preparing to kill him:

**51 “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it”** (Acts 7: 51-53).

They were so enraged by this that they ground their teeth at him, **but being filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."**

They couldn't stand to hear any more so they plugged their ears, took him out of town and stoned him. Even as the stones were striking him he cried out to God, **"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.**

The persecution of the faithful followers of Christ continued. Many thousands have given their lives for the sake of Christ. It has been said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. It has always been the case that the church has experienced the most growth when persecution has been the most severe. Amidst the persecution of the early Christians the young church exploded. Untold numbers of sinners came to believe in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. No matter how hard kings, governors, and councils tried to put a stop to the spread of gospel, they could not succeed. Faithful disciples refused to deny their Lord and Savior and pledge allegiance Caesar or to anyone else.

Many stories exist about the final testimonies of those who faced execution for their devotion to Christ. One of my favorites is the account of Polycarp from the second century. Polycarp was the Pastor of the church in Smyrna, mentored by the Apostle John. At the age of 86 he was captured, arrested and executed by the Roman authorities before a cheering crowd.

I want to share with you a few of the details concerning his death. The entire account was written by the church at Smyrna based on eye witness testimony and shared with other churches at the time. It is entitled The Martyrdom of Polycarp.

**3**But the proconsul was insistent and said: "Take the oath, and I shall release you. Curse Christ."

Polycarp said: "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

**10** And upon his persisting still and saying, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar," he answered, "If you vainly suppose that I shall swear by the fortune of Caesar, as you say, and pretend that you do not know who I am, listen plainly: I am a <sup>153</sup>Christian. But if you desire to learn the teaching of Christianity, appoint a day and give me a hearing."

**2**The proconsul said, "Try to persuade the people."

But Polycarp said, "You, I should deem worthy of an account; for we have been taught to render honor, as

is befitting, to rulers and authorities appointed by God<sup>434</sup> so far as it does us no harm; but as for these, I do not consider them worthy that I should make defense to them."

**11** But the proconsul said: "I have wild beasts. I shall throw you to them, if you do not change your mind."

But he said: "Call them. For repentance from the better to the worse is not permitted us; but it is noble to change from what is evil to what is righteous."

**2**And again [he said] to him, "I shall have you consumed with fire, if you despise the wild beasts, unless you change your mind."

But Polycarp said: "The fire you threaten burns but an hour and is quenched after a little; for you do not know the fire of the coming judgment and everlasting punishment that is laid up for the impious. But why do you delay? Come, do what you will."

It is then decided that he will be burned alive. When they prepare to nail his hands to the stake, he convinces them that God will give him the strength to be able to take the flames without the nails.

**14** So they did not nail him, but tied him. And with his hands put behind him and tied, like a noble ram out of a great flock ready for sacrifice, a burnt offering ready and acceptable to God, he looked up to heaven and said:

"Lord God Almighty,<sup>439</sup> Father of thy beloved and blessed Servant Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, 'the God of angels and powers and all creation'<sup>440</sup> and of the whole race of the righteous who live in thy presence:   **2** I bless thee, because thou hast deemed me worthy of this day and hour,<sup>441</sup> to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ,<sup>442</sup> for 'resurrection to eternal life'<sup>443</sup> of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit; among whom may I be received in thy presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as thou hast prepared and revealed beforehand and fulfilled, thou that art the true God without any falsehood.   **3**For this and for everything I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Servant, through whom be glory to thee with him and Holy Spirit both now and unto the ages to come. Amen."

After this they brought out the wood and attempted to burn him. However, the fire formed a sort of vaulted chamber around him and those around him witnessed that as he sat in the midst of the flames he was like bread baking in an oven or gold or silver being refined in a furnace, but his flesh was not being consumed. Those near him reported a noticing a smell of incense. After a while the executioners could see that the fire was not burning him so one was ordered to end his life with a stab of a dagger. After he was stabbed an inordinate amount of blood came out of the martyr so that the fire was completely extinguished. His body was then burned to ashes.

Many after him have given their lives or suffered mightily for the cause of Christ. Even today around the world in various places many are persecuted for their faith in Jesus. We, however, live in such a time and place where we do not suffer as these others do. We have enjoyed the freedom to live and believe as Christians. But these freedoms we

now possess, whereby we can freely gather this morning and publicly proclaim our allegiance to Jesus Christ, read from his word, and sing songs of praise and worship to him, will not be ours forever. As I consider the changes that have occurred politically and culturally here in only the course of my own lifetime, it seems to me that slope of moral decline has steepened drastically these past five to ten years. If you have been paying attention to current events you know what I'm talking about. Needless to say, faithful followers of Christ are going to have more and more opportunities to stand for biblical truth in the months and years to come. That is why I believe this passage of scripture is very relevant for us today as it always has been.

### **Persecution from family**

**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.**

Christ wants us to understand that there is no safety necessarily among friends or family. Even today, stories abound of persons who are isolated, abused, and sometimes killed by their family members when they convert to Christianity. This is particularly true among the Muslim populations of this world. Do not neglect to pray regularly for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who face persecution for their bold declaration of salvation through Christ alone.

### **Our persecution today**

What can we say about our situation today? How is this passage really relevant for us today if in fact we really don't have persecution in America today? I believe that it is. Let's just say that even in the small ways we may face persecution we are called to be faithful. No one in the very near future is going to face the proposition of either denying Christ or facing certain painful death, but clearly we all face situations from time to time, whether at work or with friends or family, where we are given the choice to openly declare our faith in Christ or face some consequence. It may come in the form of ridicule, scorn, disgust, or mockery. Some of the moral positions the bible teaches clearly which the church has always been united in, are becoming less and less popular in our world today. Consider for a moment so called same sex marriage. What was once a matter of clarity among all churches and even in our culture at large has become an issue where if you disagree with it you have now become an intolerant bigot. Disagreeing with such moral decline may bring further opportunities to speak about who is our authority and who we submit to over and above the laws and governors of our land. Ultimately, our calling as his disciples is to confess Christ and to not deny him as our text clearly communicates to us. The truest test of discipleship is as Jesus tells us is endurance. **But the one who endures to the end will be saved.**

## Have no fear

**26 “So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.[g]29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?[h] And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.**

Now as your hearing this I want you to understand something very important. Persecution clarifies our position in Christ. We either belong to him or we don't. What I mean is that when we stand for Jesus in the face of those who would rather we deny him, our faith is strengthened. If we find that we are unable to confess him before men, we may have no faith to begin with. Christ here tells to have no fear. Without his Spirit living within us, this is an impossibility! But if he dwell within us then He will enable us to face those who accuse us without fear. You see, fear is natural. All of us have experienced it. But the absence of fear in the face of persecution is super natural and it comes directly from God in the moment when you need it the most, just as he promised he would also give you the words to speak when you need to testify of him.

Here's what it really comes down to. If you aren't a true follower of Christ, you needn't worry about being persecuted, really. You see, disciples aren't persecuted because people don't like them. It's because Christ lives in them that they are persecuted. It's the Christ who lives in you that they hate. According to the historical record, Polycarp was a man who was well liked, even by the pagans of his day. But they hated God, and they killed him because God lived in him.

Jesus himself is the purest example of how one is to humbly face persecution in this world. Never having sinned, he was brought before councils and governors and accused of crimes he never committed. He was brutally scourged, beaten, spit upon, mocked, stripped, made to carry a heavy cross up a hill, and nailed to a Roman cross where he baked in the sun for hours. Finally, he died. As the prophet Isaiah foretold many years before:

**He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. (Isa. 53: 7)**

Finally, we get to the last verse of our text:

**32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.**

As I read this I think of Peter, who was one the twelve hearing these words for the first time. Just a few short years later, Peter had three opportunities to declare boldly his allegiance to Christ, and three times he failed. And having failed, the bible tells us that Peter went out, remembering the saying of Jesus **“Before the rooster crows you will deny me three times”**, and wept bitterly. Later, after the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, Peter has this encounter with the living Lord Jesus:

**15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” 16 He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” 17 He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. 18 Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” 19 (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21: 15-19)**

It is believed that Peter became the leader of the church in Rome and in about AD 64 under the Emperor Nero he was crucified upside down because he did not consider himself to be worthy to be crucified in the same manner as Christ.

The reason I close with these verses is because I want you to be encouraged. Jesus restores sinners. Even though Peter denied him three times, Jesus forgave him and fully restored him. So much so that he became willing to lay down his own life for his risen Savior. As Christians we make mistakes. Sometimes we really make a mess out of things. We are a lot like Peter; so willing to die with Christ one moment and then denying him the next. As the new name of our church indicates, we are all on the restoration road. He is constantly at work in us, transforming us to look more and more like him. If you are a believer, this is your hope. If you have never surrendered your life to him, come to him this morning for the first time and receive the salvation of your soul. Then, join the rest of us as we journey on this restoration road, following Jesus

wherever he leads. Warning, it may lead to persecution, suffering, or even death.