

Matthew 10:16-23

¹⁶“Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. ¹⁷Be on guard against people. They will hand you over to councils, and they will whip you in their synagogues. ¹⁸You will be brought into the presence of governors and kings for my sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹Whenever they hand you over, do not be worried about how you will respond or what you will say, because what you say will be given to you in that hour. ²⁰In fact you will not be the ones speaking, but the Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you.

²¹“Brother will hand over his brother to death, and a father will do the same with his child. Children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. ²²You will be hated by all people because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved. ²³And when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. Amen I tell you: You will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”

Here I stand!

I.

People like to be liked. When Jesus sent his disciples out into the world to proclaim his message, he knew that they would *not* always be liked. Despite the fact that “gospel” means Good News, he knew that there would be fierce opposition to the spread of this Good News.

He told his followers: “You will be hated by all people because of my name” (Matthew 10:22, EHV). Soon they would learn that this was *indeed* the case. Stephen was the first martyr, Paul was frequently in chains for the gospel, Peter was reputedly executed on a cross hanging upside down.

At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther learned it too. In his day, the gospel had become obscured. The people had been taught they must *earn* their salvation by their own good works. The church of that time had come up with the idea of indulgences — pieces of paper by which people might literally *purchase* salvation, or buy their relatives’ way out of purgatory. When Luther began to preach against such perversions of the gospel, he was threatened.

“They will hand you over to councils, and they will whip you in their synagogues” (Matthew 10:17, EHV). Previous attempts at reformation had resulted in death for those who sought to preach the pure Word of God. This fact was constantly on Luther’s mind as he debated with church officials. Yet he realized that the Word of God was too important for him to cave in to pressure, so he continued on despite any fears he might have felt. “Here I stand” were his famous words when the church demanded he retract all that he had written. If no one could show him that what he had said was wrong, there was nothing to retract.

We don’t *seem* to have the same kind of problem that Luther or early Christians had. We are not being threatened with death because of our faith. Enshrined in our Constitution is the freedom of religion — the government is not to restrict our ability to preach the gospel. Though we are free from official physical persecution because of our faith, hatred still exists because of Jesus’ name. Society marks Christians as unloving, uncaring, or intolerant.

II.

“Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves” (Matthew 10:16, EHV). Jesus was sending his disciples out with a purpose. They were to preach this great Good News of what Jesus had come to do far and wide. The opposition would be fierce, but they were to continue no matter what the odds because the message of salvation in Christ Jesus is so important. At times they were fearful and were tempted to keep silent. Easter Sunday and the following Sunday were good examples of this when the disciples locked themselves in the upper room for fear of the Jews.

Although Jesus was sending out the 12 disciples in today’s Gospel, his words apply to his disciples, or followers, of every age and generation. He sends us all out as sheep among wolves.

Luther understood he was going out as a sheep among wolves, too. He knew that church councils and kings could silence him forever by putting him to death, but he overcame those fears and did not let that stop him from preaching the Good News about Jesus.

Even though our constitution gives us religious liberty it still feels as though we are sent out as sheep among wolves, doesn’t it? Christianity is openly mocked in many ways. That label of “intolerant” can intimidate us into silence. “Brother will hand over his brother to death, and a father will do the same with his child. Children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. ²²You will be hated by all people because of my name” (Matthew 10:21-22, EHV). While Christians in our country today are not being handed over to the authorities to be sentenced to death because of our faith, some experience ostracization within their family for believing in Jesus.

“Here I stand.” After Jesus’ ascension the disciples became much more bold in their proclamation of the message about Jesus.

“Here I stand.” Luther took on councils and kings and emperors as he stood unmoving at the Council at Worms. He refused to be intimidated then, or ever.

“Here I stand.” Let it not be with lips unmoving for us. “Here I stand.” Don’t stand in a corner, unwilling to contend for the truth or speak for the truth of God’s Word. As timid Christians we have to admit that we have not always confessed Christ the way we should. God grant us the boldness of Peter and Paul and Martin Luther to continually confess the Christ that we have come to understand as our Savior.

III.

It was *that* understanding — the understanding of what Jesus has done for us — that kicked the Reformation into high gear. It was when Luther had his epiphany reading in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans: “The righteous will live by faith” (Romans 1:17, EHV). It is natural for a human being to focus on our own actions. That will either lead to false pride, thinking that we have been pretty good, or to despair when we realize that we have utterly failed to be perfect as God requires. It is *Jesus’* actions that make people righteous before God because of faith in him alone.

“You will be hated by all people because of my name” (Matthew 10:22, EHV). Hated because of a name? That sounds unusual, doesn’t it? Yet it is absolutely true. The name Jesus, or the name Christian, inspires hatred from many. But why? What’s in a name? The name of Jesus indicates everything he *is* and everything he *has done* for us.

Though he is God from all eternity, the one named Jesus took on the form of a human

being, being born as a baby in Bethlehem. He did this because as God, he was not subject to the moral law since God created the law. He became truly human to live under the law of God in our place. *We* have never been able to keep God's law perfectly, but *Jesus* lived without sin for his entire life. Innocent of any wrongdoing, he allowed himself to be put on trial in our place and was executed on a cross. Because he took the humanity into God, as the Athanasian Creed confesses, he is both truly 100% human and truly 100% God. In this way, his trial, execution, and resurrection were done not just for some, but for all people.

It is because of Jesus' name and what it stands for — our salvation — that we are forgiven for the times we have acted like timid sheep and doves. Jesus' name and all it stands for is what gives us the courage to stand, even before governors and kings to this very day.

IV.

“Whenever they hand you over, do not be worried about how you will respond or what you will say, because what you say will be given to you in that hour. ²⁰In fact you will not be the ones speaking, but the Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you” (Matthew 10:19-20, EHV). The disciples clearly thought about these words of Jesus often in the days and years following his Ascension. At Pentecost, Peter and the others spoke boldly about what Jesus had done. They were clearly *given* the words to speak, so that the gospel of Jesus could go out to many people who would fan out across the known world.

Luther also must have thought about this passage often. “Do not be worried about how you will respond.” Over and over again he would have to refute false claims made against his works. Over and over again he would have to point others to Scripture as the only source and norm for Christian teaching. He would have to say: “unless you can show me from Scripture that what I have said is incorrect, I cannot recant. Here I stand!”

Our Lord Jesus promises us the same thing. As we study his Word, we will become more and more adept at knowing exactly the right thing to say as we speak God's Word to others. The most important thing that *anyone* can hear is what Jesus has done for them. God will help us to say the words we need to say so that others may hear the most valuable Good News that has ever been told. It is with the same zeal Martin Luther had for the Word of God that we have as we go about doing things for the Kingdom of God.

“Be on guard against people. They will hand you over to councils, and they will whip you in their synagogues” (Matthew 10:19, EHV). Jesus does not say that you will never have any problems or challenges in speaking the gospel. Though you may not face physical torture in this country, you may still face persecution in various ways, but the Lord Jesus and his Holy Spirit will be with you. Of that you can be confident.

“Here I stand!” God grant that we always stand strong and firm in the faith until our Lord Jesus returns for us at the end of days. God grant that the 500th anniversary of the Reformation will stir our hearts once again to dig in deeply to the Word of God — the only source and norm of doctrine, and the only source and norm for our faith.

By grace alone. By faith alone. By Scripture alone. That is how we are saved. To God alone be the glory for all things. Amen.