

Fear Not the Threats of Man

Matthew 10:1-31

Matthew chapter ten brings us to a turning point in the story of Christ and his followers. In the first nine chapters, we have learned about our Lord's miraculous birth, his baptism, his temptation in the wilderness, and the launching of his ministry.

We also have a record of the Sermon on the Mount, which can be taken as a Christian manifesto, so to speak, a statement of kingdom life and what members of the kingdom of God will become through character transformation.

No sooner has the sermon ended and our Lord descended the mountain, than he launches into a veritable whirlwind of ministry. There is a frenzy of healing, curing, restoring, and transforming in chapters eight and nine. If the *character* of the kingdom has been on display in the Sermon on the Mount, then the *power* of the kingdom is now made manifest. Chapter nine ends with these words: ***“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field”*** (9:37-38).

Immediately, as we launch into chapter ten, we see Jesus gathering his disciples around him into this tight little group and giving them authority to do the things that he has been doing. He sends them out into his harvest field, of which he has just spoken (9:38). Now, mark this, a careful reading of the text reveals that our Lord has two things in his sightlines. First there will be a short-term mission to the lost sheep of Israel (vs. 5-6). Our God is a covenant-keeper, and he has not forgotten Israel. Because this is a short-term mission, Jesus instructs his disciples to travel light. They are not to encumber themselves with all sorts of supplies. Just go! Don't take extras! You will be taken care of! These are the master's instructions.

As we move deeper into the text, however, it becomes obvious that our Lord is looking farther down the road to a long-term mission, a mission that will include the Gentiles. Beginning in verse 17, the disciples are warned to be on guard against men. Not only will they be arrested and flogged in synagogues, but they will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles (vs. 17-18).

Now we know from reading the Bible in its totality that the church **is** a mission. And true disciples of Jesus must learn to think of themselves as *disciple-missionaries*. That doesn't mean that every believer is to be a missionary to foreign lands; we can be missionaries to neighbors or even relatives right here on the home front. Jesus came from Heaven to Earth as the Divine missionary to seek and save the lost. Now we are His Body, His spokesmen and spokeswomen. Our calling is to be salt and light to a lost, dying, and decaying world (Matt. 5:13-16).

But there is a great deterrent to becoming disciple-missionaries. We've all experienced it. It is the problem of fear. We have all been held in the grip of fear at the mere mention of words such as “witnessing” or “evangelism.” We know what the common fears are: fear of loss of friends or colleagues if we try to speak to them about Jesus, fear of loss of reputation, prestige, position or status, fear of ridicule or persecution. So many of us feel unqualified and ill-equipped to be on mission for Christ.

There can be no doubt that this is why our Lord repeats over and over again the same thing – do not fear! Do not worry when they arrest you (v. 19). Do not be afraid of them (v. 26). Do not be afraid of those who kill the body (v. 28). Do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (v. 31).

Fear is a debilitating enemy of man. We have been afraid of one thing or another ever since the Fall when Adam and Eve hid from God Himself. Ever since then God has been wooing us back to Himself with the admonition that we are not to fear.

What we need to realize is that we have powerful weaponry at our disposal with which to overcome our fears. Just consider all that Jesus made available to this little band of disciples.

The Authority of Christ

First, he gave them his authority. This is the same Lord who would later say, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ...” (28:18-19). When we go out into the mission field we are “sent ones,” and it no-one less than the King of kings and Lord of lords who sends us. There is no higher authority than our Lord. We do not go on behalf of some earthly king or queen, prime minister or president, but at the bidding of the supreme ruler of the universe.

The Power of God

Second, we go with the power of God at our disposal. Look at verses 19-20. “***But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.***” This doesn’t mean that we are to be lax in our preparation. Of course we are to study the Word of God; we are to take it into our minds and hearts; we are spend time in prayer and communion with the Lord. The idea is that as we prepare to the best of our own ability, we will be infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. God will not leave us alone in our preparation, but will come to indwell us, bringing His Word to life in us. He will speak through us!

What did Jesus say to the disciples shortly before Pentecost? He told them to wait for the gift that the Father had promised (Acts 1:4). No doubt they waited in prayer. But He also told them this: “***You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth***” (Acts. 1:8).

The Message of God

Not only did they venture forth into the mission field with the authority of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, but they were given the message of God. They were to preach that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. It is as near as Christ Himself. This is what they preached. The Book of Acts records that after Pentecost, Christ was always at the centre of their message. The compelling theme of Acts is that Christ was crucified, but he has been raised from the dead and salvation is found in him and in him alone. He is available to all who will reach out to him in faith. He is not far away, detached, and disinterested. He is at hand and so is the Kingdom of God.

This must be our constant message as we venture forth into the mission field of the twenty-first century. We go with the same authority, the same Holy Spirit power, and the same message.

Our Confidence

But there is more! Precisely because we go in the authority of Christ and in the power of the Spirit and with the message of God we can be confident. Look at verses 26-27. What our Lord is saying here is that truth cannot be caged forever. This has particular relevance for us. We live at a time when truth is being suppressed and the existence of absolute truth is denied. But Jesus says that which is hidden will be made known. What we are told in the dark we are to proclaim in the daylight. What He whispers in our ear we are to proclaim from the rooftops. Our God will simply not allow truth to go into extinction, nor will he allow Satanic deception to prevail.

We are to speak the message clearly and openly, confident that in the end the truth of God will eclipse every Satanic lie, and the light of God will pierce the darkness of this age.

But not only will our Lord not allow the truth to go into extinction, he will not allow us to go into extinction. In verses 28-31 we are told not to be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell. This is a reminder that we serve a God who is a great King and who has no equals and no rivals. It means that if we learn to fear God properly, then we need never fear anything else. But if we do not fear the Lord, then we may well end up fearing everything else!

Our God is sovereign. He knows when a sparrow falls to the ground. In fact, such a simple thing as that cannot happen apart from our Lord's permissive will. And we are worth more than many sparrows! This has astounding implications for the servants of God. The great missionary Henry Martyn said this:

“If God has work for me to do, I cannot die.”

He considered that he was invincible and immortal until the work God had for him was done! When we feel threatened by the world's hostility let us remember that we are doing God's work, and he will empower us and protect us until our work on earth is done. Let us say with the disciples of old, ***“Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus”*** (Acts 4:29-30). After they prayed this the place where they were meeting was shaken. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the Word of God with great boldness.

From 100-300 A.D. the church grew from about 25,000 to 20 million! They did it without any of the things we think are necessary for church growth:

- Christianity was an illegal religion at that time.
- They had no church buildings as we know them.
- They had no Bible as we know it.

- They had no institutional church as we know it.
- They had no professional clergy as we know it.
- They had no “seeker-sensitive” services as we know them.

They had nothing that we think is necessary! Nothing that we have! Perhaps we should ask ourselves if they had something we no longer have here in the western world where the Church is in decline.

In 1970 there were an estimated 2 million Christians in China. Then Mao Tse Tung did everything humanly possible to wipe out Christianity in China. He closed their churches, burned their Bibles and imprisoned their pastors. Everything that we think is indispensable to be the church was taken away. But over the last thirty years the church in China has grown from 2 million to between 80-90 million!

It seems that the common denominator between the early church and the church in China is persecution. The more Satan takes the flower of the church in his hand and tries to crush it, the more fragrant she becomes. It seems that persecution has a way of intensifying the sweet aroma of God's people.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we should close our buildings, get rid of our leather-bound Bibles, and dispense with the clergy. That would be foolish. Nor am I suggesting that we should invite persecution for the sake of persecution. What I am suggesting is that the church in the western world has lost what the early church had and what our colleagues in China have. We no longer seem to go forth with the authority of Christ, in the energy and power of the Spirit of God, and with the message of God. We need to get back to the forgotten ways. We need to tap into the old wells. We need to go back to our roots. We need to speak clearly and boldly in the name of the Lord and in the power of His Spirit. Let us begin in prayer right now!