

Warning the Twelve

Part Two

Sheep & Wolves, Serpents & Doves

*Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves,
so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

Matthew 10:16

As we see here, Jesus knowingly sent the Twelve out into a dangerous, predatory world. They were carrying the precious message of hope for the lost, the good news of the restoration of God's people. The problem was that God's people – as were ALL people – were also God's enemies, trapped in rebellion and dead in sin. Jesus sent His men out as *sheep in the midst of wolves*, as prey into the midst of predators. Their job was not to sneak through that dangerous territory as quietly as they could, and get out as soon as possible. It was to go right up to the wolves and tell them that they, too, could be made sheep.

That task would require both wisdom and character. They needed to be *wise as serpents and innocent as doves*. Serpents are symbols of intelligence and cleverness. Doves are symbols of purity and simplicity. The two really don't go together; in fact, we might think that someone was either as *wise as a serpent* or as *innocent as a dove*. So this is really a powerful, intriguing combination of traits.

As Jesus' disciples went out into Galilee, they needed to keep their eyes open and pay attention to what was happening around them. They weren't to blindly stumble from place to place. They had work to do, and He wanted them to approach that work intelligently and prudently. They also needed to keep their motives and intentions pure. That's why they weren't to charge for what they did, but to accept what was given to them.

They were to be wise, so that no one could deceive them; they were to be innocent, so that they

weren't deceiving anyone. They were to be wise about the motives of others; they were to be innocent regarding their own motivations.

Jesus gives them full disclosure about what this mission trip, and the remainder of their lives, would be like. He is also giving us full disclosure: the world is a dangerous place, but we are to be Christ-like and pure in our relationship to the world. He begins by telling them to beware of those they go to reach.

Beware of Men

*Beware of men,
for they will deliver you over to courts
and flog you in their synagogues,
and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake,
to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.*

Matthew 10:17-18

They were going out as *sheep in the midst of wolves*. Who were the wolves? Demons? No. The wolves were the very ones they were sent to reach with the Gospel. Some, certainly, would hear and believe. But others would betray them as they had betrayed Jesus Himself. That betrayal could take any number of forms.

Religious courts would oppose them. On that particular day Jesus was speaking about the Sanhedrin, the ruling court of Israel. But religious courts would continue to persecute His people throughout the centuries. In a perverse twist, sometimes those religious courts would claim to represent Jesus. In the west, the greatest persecution of true believers for centuries came from the Roman Catholic Church. In the east persecution came from Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. It is only in the last century or so that the greatest persecution against Christians has come from communism, socialism, and fascism.

Synagogues would oppose them. Almost every time the book of Acts describes the Gospel being preached in a synagogue, the people of the synagogue eventually rejected it, sometimes

violently. The apostles faced reviling insults, mistreatment, and violent mobs. And ever since Christians have been mistreated by the wicked, even when those wicked claim to be religious. We may not see violent mobs as much as once happened, but reviling insults, false accusations, and mistreatment still take place.

Kings and governors would oppose them. Governors like Felix and Festus, and kings like Herod and Nero, would use their power to oppose, silence, and dominate Christians. Jesus says His people would be “dragged” before governors and kings; they didn’t make an appointment; they were forced to appear before these secular leaders.

Here’s the amazing thing. All of this opposition – from religious courts, false believers, and secular leaders – has been ordained by the Lord Jesus to give a singular opportunity: to bear witness of Him before these people. The actions of the Sanhedrin and the Spanish Inquisition and the Roman Catholic Church and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and secular governments have always served to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the open. Their suffering, and ours, is intended for Jesus’ sake. Every time a Christian suffers for his or her faith, wolves have an opportunity to hear the Gospel, and the sheep are proven to be genuine.

This is all very frightening, of course. How do you prepare to stand for Jesus Christ against potentially deadly opposition? Jesus told them, and us.

Servants of the Lord

*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.
For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*

Matthew 10:19-20

Because of the purposes of God, who works in mysterious ways, every arrest was an opportunity to reach those who were otherwise unreachable. These were truly difficult circumstances, yet the Father didn’t abandon them in those moments. In fact, the Spirit of God –

the Spirit of the Father, as Jesus says – would speak through the apostles as they stood on trial.

They didn't need an advance plan of how to speak to Herod, or Nero, or Felix, or Festus. They didn't need to memorize a five-step plan for evangelizing an enemy. What they needed would be granted to them in that moment by the Spirit of God.

Now, the apostles had a unique relationship with the Lord Jesus. He revealed much to them during His earthly ministry, and far more after His ascension. By the power and leading of the Holy Spirit they put down in writing all that the church would need to know until Jesus comes for us.

We have the same revelation they did: the Holy Scriptures. We have the same Holy Spirit to strengthen us and guide us and bring the Word to our remembrance.

The book of Acts records several episodes where God's people were delivered up and spoke to their persecutors. In Acts 4 Peter and John speak before the Sanhedrin. All the apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin in Acts 5. Stephen was dragged before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7. In Acts 9 Paul, newly converted, preached boldly in Jerusalem, enraging the Hellenistic Jews. In Acts 13 Paul and Barnabas were opposed by Elymas the magician. Over and over again Paul spoke the Gospel in synagogues. Paul and Barnabas were stoned by Gentiles in Lystra in Acts 14. Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi. They were chased out of Berea by men from Thessalonica. There was a riot in Ephesus in Acts 19. In Acts 21 Paul was arrested in Jerusalem after a mob rose up against him. In Acts 23 Paul spoke before the Sanhedrin. A plot to kill him led to Paul being sent to Felix the governor in Antioch. He ended up speaking before Felix and his successor, Festus. Circumstances led Paul to appeal his case directly to Caesar Nero. Before being taken to Rome he appeared before Herod Agrippa II and his wife Bernice.

In every case the Gospel was preached and sinners were warned to repent and believe. The apostles didn't follow the same memorized talking points. They didn't recite the same liturgy. The Spirit of God brought truths to mind, and each one spoke as the Spirit led, always of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, always of repentance of sin and the judgment to come, but never in a pre-planned, memorized script.

In the same way we are partners with the Spirit of God in all evangelism. Evangelism is largely a divine activity; our part is the smallest part. We simply speak the words of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit does the primary work of making our words effective, softening the sinner's heart, granting that person faith, forgiving sin, granting them Christ's righteousness, putting their sinful flesh to

death, enlivening their heart to God, granting them repentance from sin, and causing them to grow in obedience.

In evangelism, as in every aspect of ministry, and every aspect of life, we are servants of the Triune God. We have a single, small, but very important, role to play: tell the Gospel to someone else as the Lord provides the opportunity. That small role can be very costly, however.

For Jesus' Sake

*Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child,
and children will rise against parents and have them put to death,
and you will be hated by all for my name's sake.
But the one who endures to the end will be saved.
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.*

Matthew 10:21-23

The opposition faced by the apostles was not theoretical; it involved the closest of relationships. They would be hated by all kinds of people, by close family members as well as by complete strangers. It's one thing to be mocked and hated by a stranger; it's far more difficult when that opposition comes from someone you love. Jesus' own brothers did not believe in Him (John 7:5). Mark names four brothers of Jesus: James, Joses, Judas, and Simon. Jesus also had sisters, who are not named. As far as we know, only James and Judas (or Jude) became Christians.

Persecution would arise in the homes and relationships of the apostles. These close family members – brothers, parents, children – would deliver them over to death. This is because the hatred of wolves for Jesus Christ is stronger than any human connection.

Jesus tells them why they faced that sort of rejection: it's because of His name. It is because they preach in His name, and heal in His name, and live in His name.

What should the apostles have done when they faced that opposition? What should we do? Remain silent? Renounce Christ for the sake of human relationships?

Absolutely not! Just a little further in Matthew 10 Jesus calls us to the highest possible loyalty: “Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” (Matthew 10:37). Does Jesus really mean that we should give Him priority over our closest relationships? Yes, He does. I’m not interpreting that verse, by the way, I’m just reading it. I’ve seen parents compromise their faith because of their children, and I’ve seen parents stand firm in Christ in spite of their children.

Parents who compromise their faith because of their children end up offering their children nothing to return to. In fact, they prove to their wandering children that there was never anything meaningful about faith in Jesus Christ.

But, parents who will not compromise their faith in spite of their children’s actions, and continue to follow Jesus faithfully, while they love their faithless children, continue to offer hope of salvation to their kids.

Quit your job for your kids if you need to; quit your hobbies; give up your expectations about their careers or interests.

But don’t quit Jesus Christ for anyone. Remain faithful to Jesus for His sake, for the glory of His name, and you offer the best possible help to those who are apart from Him. Jesus never changes, and so our beliefs and values and hopes should never change. We should remain anchored to Jesus as He intercedes for us behind the veil. That’s what it means to endure until the end.

What applies to a town applies to a person. We owe the Gospel to those we meet, but if they reject it and abuse us, they relinquish the right to hear it again, at least from us. Remember what Jesus said just before this passage: “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. 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.” (Matthew 10:14-15).

In all of this we must remember that God is sovereign. The apostle Paul started out as a persecutor of the church. “Formerly,” he says, “I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.” But he received mercy from the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit can soften and break and

remake the hardest of hearts, and He doesn't need much help from us. We share the Gospel, and then get out of the way.

Bringing it Home

A disciple is not above his teacher,

nor a servant above his master.

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?

Matthew 10:24-25

We end today where we began last week.

Jesus Christ is the Teacher, and we are His disciples. How people respond to His teaching is how they will respond to us.

Jesus Christ is the Master, and we are His slaves. How people respond to His majesty and authority is how they will respond to us.

The Gospel is a simple message. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and as a result deserve judgment. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life.

As simple as all that is, we will never present the Gospel perfectly. In fact – this is my naturally suspicious side talking – every time someone I've spoken to has claimed a sudden, amazing conversion, they were lying to get something from me.

But the Holy Spirit gives us tremendous hope. The power to save is not in our ability to convince someone, but in the Spirit's power to cause someone to be born again.

We trust in the Father to elect a people for His name's sake; that means evangelism succeeds

perfectly, every time. The result is NEVER due to you or me, it is ALWAYS due to the Father's will.

We trust in the Lord Jesus to save His people perfectly; no one will ever find that some of their sins didn't get washed away, or that Jesus only partially saved them.

And we trust in the Holy Spirit to cause the worst of sinners to be born again as lambs of God; no one, no matter how wicked or hard, is beyond His power.