

Introduction

I sometimes hear Christians speak of their lives as being hard. Right choices are hard. Sorrow after sinning is hard. Standing up for Christ in a world that rejects him is hard. Enduring affliction is hard. Wrestling against the flesh is hard.

That living life as a believer in Christ is difficult should not surprise us. Jesus never painted a picture that would communicate that living life as his follower would be easy. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorted the listeners to "enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is EASY that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is HARD that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

If Jesus wants us to know that living life as a follower of Christ in general is challenging, he certainly wants us to know that obeying his charge to carry the gospel to the nations is difficult as well. In fact, the endeavor to which Christ calls his followers can involve incredible pain and suffering flowing from a world that is outright hostile. This becomes quite clear in the text we are studying this morning. Jesus had painted a picture of the lost world as a plentiful harvest. He then called to himself the twelve, and he sent them out into that harvest.

For the last two weeks we have been observing in verses 5-15 the instructions Jesus gave as to how they were to work the harvest. Now that Jesus has told the disciples what they are to do as they go out, he wants to tell them what it will be like for them as they go. And it is not a pleasant picture. Yet from this picture we learn what we ourselves should expect and how we should respond as we go.

[Read Text; Pray]

So Jesus warns the disciples that though they go in peace, they should not expect that kind of reception from everyone in the world as they proclaim

the kingdom. In fact, they will experience malice which at times will be quite intense. The hostility is summarized in a vivid word picture. Jesus says, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves."

Wolves are predators. Sheep are prey. Sheep eat grass. Wolves eat sheep. Wolves are fast and stealthy and vicious. Sheep are dumb, clumsy, slow, and defenseless. About the only defense a sheep has is to run away, but they cannot even run fast. Jesus is telling his disciples that as they go out into the world to preach the gospel and gather in new believers, they are going to encounter people who will look at them as wolves eye-ball their next meal. They will want to consume them. They will see themselves as superior. They will be their mortal enemy. And as sheep, the disciples will be vulnerable to attack. They will not be able to escape. They will not have the strength or the wits to be able to do so. Not only will the enemy hunger for the death of the sheep, they will attack. Sheep will be at best wounded and in some cases brought to death.

From the outset we might wonder why. Why would God determine to invest his plan for building the church, his plan for rescuing the perishing, in the efforts and abilities of the human equivalent of sheep and send them out into the human equivalent of a pack of wolves? There is a clear method to his apparent madness. Reaching people with the gospel of Christ is not about wolves going into the sheepfold and dragging people into the kingdom. Rather it involves the peaceful appeal to people so that they willingly determine to enter the kingdom of heaven despite all kinds of worldly obstacles.

From the human and worldly standpoint there is little to commend the kingdom. They are nothing more than a flock of sheep. They are not powerful and mighty. They do not appear threatening. But that is just it, isn't it? Coming into the kingdom of heaven is about the kingdom of HEAVEN. Heaven values the righteousness of God. Heaven values the power of God. Heaven values the glory of God. It is not of this world. And it is not about the things this world values.

And so the power displayed when people do embrace the gospel and come into the kingdom is not the power of the preachers or the witnesses or the

ones who share, but it is the power of God. The Apostle Paul spoke directly to this fact. In his second letter to the Corinthians chapter 4 he explained: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying in in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

So this is why Jesus uses sheep. He does though the most unlikely tools what only he can do to show that the power at work is not ours but his. Glory to his name! So acknowledging that Christ's people are sheep and the world is a pack of wolves is the starting point. It will be helpful for us to look at this text in terms of hostility in the harvest. Jesus instructs about three aspects of that hostility—from whom it will come, in what form it will come, and how to handle it when it does come.

I. From Where the Hostility Will Come.

As we look through this text, we notice several various ways in which Jesus denotes from where hostility comes.

A. First, he points out that it comes from men. The word he uses refers in general to humanity. Jesus is emphasizing that the danger comes from people. The wolves who threaten the sheep are people. They are fellow members of the human race. People, some of whom walk a lot like you and talk a lot like you and look a lot like you will in fact be instruments of hostility to you. Prepare yourselves as you go to offer God's gospel of peace that people will oppose you.

B. Jesus also depicts the hostility as coming from all kinds of people, maybe even some you would not have thought of.

First there is people in general. "Beware of men because they will deliver you over to courts." The general masses will be a source of the hostility against the sheep of Christ. They will try to use courts to silence you.

Second, there are religious people. Jesus mentions those who will “flog you in their synagogues.” People who care enough to go to church would be peaceable wouldn’t they? People who claim to be righteous will be among those who antagonize and attack those who obediently go to peaceably offer peace with the king of kings.

Third, there are political people. “You will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake.” Governors and kings are supposed to keep the peace and insure that one group of human beings is not misusing and abusing another group, but they will be among those who will attempt to curb the harvesting activities of the disciples of Jesus.

Fourth, there is family. Yes, a person’s own flesh and blood will bring hostility against him and against her. Jesus warns, “brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents.” So the enmity and strife that will be upon Christ’s disciples will come from those who do not know them and it will come from those who have power over them, but it will also come from who know them and who supposedly loved them. It is one thing to be hated by people that you do not know. America is full of hate. It is everywhere. People are quick to hate those they do not know. But usually people will love their own.

Few things are thicker than blood. People will often fight within family but will turn completely hostile against anyone who threatens the very family member with whom they were fighting. But when disciples of Jesus attempt to make other disciples of Jesus those from their own family will rise against them in the most extreme of ways.

This reality is shocking. It is astonishing. Jesus starts this whole section with the word “Behold.” That is because it is a reality that is amazing and startling. One of the startling realities about the hostility of the harvest is that it comes not just from the devil and demons, but it comes from people even those who once were close to you.

II. In What Form the Hostility Will Come.

Just as there were several kinds of people who would bring the hostility, there are also several ways in which the hostility will come.

- A. It will come through deliverance over to courts or councils. Wolves will seek to engage governing bodies to silence the lambs.
- B. It will come through flogging—physical abuse.
- C. It will come through being called to answer before the highest ranking of earthly governmental officials. Those will deal with you however they desire.
- D. It will come through killing. Brother will deliver brother over to death.
- E. There is a single word that distills the form in which hostility comes upon the sheep sent out by Jesus. It is the word HATE. Jesus tells his disciples, "And you will be hated by all for my name's sake." Here is the root from which the hostility springs. They will not simply think something is wrong with you. They will not act with pity toward you. They will despise you. The message that Christ's disciples bring will not be welcome and neither will be the messengers. The Old Testament had already proven this. The Israelites despised the true prophets of God. They mistreated them and they killed some of them. At last God sent his own Son. This is he. And they even killed him. And it was motivated by hate.

Hate fills the heart of Satan. Hate fills the hearts of people whose consciences are enraged by the suggestion that they are rebels against God, that they are not good enough on their own to measure up to the demands of God. They are enraged by the law of God and the gospel of God. These bring upon the sinner the weight of guilt. He hates the messenger because he is the one who has uncovered the guilt. And the sinner is convinced if he can silence the messenger he can silence the guilt. The hostility of the harvest does not arise from a minor philosophical disagreement. It is not it is not even a major philosophical disagreement. It is from an exposure of truth. The truth exposes the vanity of the lies they believe and they remain still unwilling to believe though they know they are false. It is foolishness to the full extreme.

F. Finally, the hostility comes in the form of insult. Beelzubul was a Jewish reference to Satan. They took the name of a Canaanite god and which

referred to the "Lord of the Flies" and changed it ever so little so that it meant "Lord of Dung" or "Lord of Filth." It was a pun of sorts to express a particularly contemptible way of referencing the devil. It reeks of contempt. Jesus was saying to his disciples, they are going to refer to you the way they refer to me. If they call me the devil, Lord of Filth, that is what they are going to say about you as well.

We should recognize that the world is not going to call Christians good people that it simply does not like. No, the world is going to hate Christians and it is going to associate them with the devil in his most contemptible form. It is going to say they are bad. The world will believe they are doing the world a favor when they put Christians down and put them out. In fact in John 16:2, Jesus warned his disciples that "the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."

G. We should point out that these warnings Jesus gave came to pass. They came to pass for Jesus himself. He was brought before the courts; run out of a synagogue; brought before officials and the governor Pontius Pilate. And he was delivered over to death. This is how the world treats the true king. But of course God is at work in and through it all to accomplish his purpose of redemption through the death of Jesus. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might be forgiven, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

These warnings also came to pass for the disciples of Jesus. They came to pass vividly in the ministry of the Apostle Paul. And they have come and are coming to pass in varying degrees ever since then. Paul warns Timothy that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. You can depend on it. In fact in line with what Jesus says here, the more you are like Christ the more you will be persecuted. If Jesus were physically here today he would be just as maligned as he was two thousand years ago and to the extent that you emulate him, the world will hate you and persecute you too.

It really raises the question of how closely you and I are emulating Jesus. He said, "it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher." How is your

life conformed to the image of Christ? To the extent that it is, the world will treat you and me as it did him.

III. How to Handle the Hostility in the Harvest.

Jesus is warning his disciples about the fact of hostility and how it will come on his disciples. And he also provides help for handling it. Again as we move through the text we find several specifics.

A. First, be prepared. Be ready. Know that it is going to happen. Weather warnings are all about an attempt to prepare people for what is coming. If you know a big snow storm or a thunder storm or a tornado is coming your way, it will affect what you do. Jesus is providing this warning to his disciples so they will be prepared. He uses the word beware. The idea is watch out. The knowledge of what is coming should not change your behavior, but it should make you wise.

Jesus says, "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Exercise wisdom and never stop doing what is right. One great temptation of the enmity of the world and the realization that it is fueled by Satanic hostility is to feel justified in talking back, in condemning, in being caustic and hostile ourselves. That is not right. It is not the way Jesus handled himself before his accusers. As a sheep before its shearers is silent so Jesus opened not his mouth. Colossians 4:5 seems to speak to this same situation. There Paul writes, "walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time." MacArthur comments "it is neither brave nor wise, and neither spiritual nor loving, to needlessly incite anger or court trouble."

The world will try to lure you into behaviors and statements on the basis of which it can turn around and accuse you. So watch what you say. Watch how you say it. Keep a pure mind and keep pure in your motives and speech. Remember the wise counsel of James, "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger."

B. Second, remain assured that God is on his throne. Jesus warned that his disciples would be dragged before governors and kings for his sake. But he also indicated that this very sinister intent would only accomplish the purpose of God. This was in order that they might bear witness before

them and the Gentiles. Being dragged before politicians is a divine opportunity to spread the gospel even more. Through the years God has used Christians who were standing trial for their faith to proclaim that faith among those leaders and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

The lesson here is that when the world seems most out of control and the scoffers of the gospel are raising their voices of antagonism the loudest, be assured God is just as sovereign as he was the day Jesus was crucified. Things are not out of control; they are actually being orchestrated to most gloriously manifest the power of the gospel. So do not lose hope. Do not lose heart. Be faithful to the end. Sometimes God's will carries directly into trouble, but we may not shrink back.

I think of that NT prophet by the name of Agabus. Led by the Spirit, Paul was making his way to Jerusalem and Agabus came up from there. He met Paul in Caesarea warning him that if he went to Jerusalem, the Jews would capture him and turn him over to the Romans. Everyone around began begging Paul not to go. But Paul would not be deterred. He spoke to the brothers, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Paul knew what we must affirm. Sometimes obedience is risky; sometimes obedience is dangerous in terms of earthly things. Danger and threat and hostility do not necessarily imply disobedience on your part. They may in fact be proof of obedience.

C. Third, rest assured not only in God's providence but also in his provision. Says Jesus, "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."

Now that is quite an assurance. In the Bible we can recall how the Lord kept his word when Paul stood before Festus the governor and King Agrippa. Hearing Paul's testimony Festus said, "Paul, you have gone crazy." But Agrippa said, "Paul you almost persuade me to become a Christian." Paul replied, "I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."

I think of another day almost 500 years ago when Martin Luther was summoned to stand before an Imperial Diet of princes and religious rulers who called upon him to recant the truths of justification by faith and the necessity of repentance. He replied with Holy Spirit strength: "I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the council, because it is as clear as noonday that they have fallen into error and even into glaring inconsistency with themselves. If, then, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons, if I am not satisfied by the very text I have cited, and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God's word, I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be either safe or honest for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me!"

What Jesus is saying here does not give disciples license not to be prepared to enunciate the gospel and the truths of the scripture, but it does assure us that if we follow him, he will take care of what we need when we need it.

D. Fourth, keep on keeping on. Don't stop believing and don't stop proclaiming. He who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town go to the next. When you face opposition and when you face even the threat of death, hold on! And keep on. The time is short. The coming of the Son of Man to which Jesus refers in verse 23 is I think either his crucifixion and resurrection or the judgment on Jerusalem in AD 70. His point is to say the coming of the kingdom which you are announcing is happening soon so don't get bogged down and don't stop going from one town to the next.

What a testimony to the world when Christians hold on in the midst of persecution! It has actually been where the persecution has been the greatest that the gospel has flourished the most. It says something about Christ that people who follow him are unwilling to part even when their lives are threatened and unwilling to slow down then either. And we should be doing so with the same kind of urgency that the disciples were to exhibit. Laying before us is the consummation of the kingdom that is coming. Jesus will soon part the sky and that will be it. No more opportunities to share with the lost. It will be on the judgment.

F. Finally, just make it your goal to be a faithful disciple of Jesus. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher. No one should try to behave in such a way as to try to elicit persecution. Jesus did not try to be persecuted. He just obeyed the Father. That's what every disciple of Christ should do as well. Our concern should be following. The world's response will be what it will be. The more we are like him the more we should expect it will hate, but it is not up to us to stir the hate, just shine the light.

Conclusion

Jesus went about ministry in a much different way than much of contemporary (what I even feel uncomfortable calling) Christianity. It draws you with overtures tuned in to your emotions often through the appeal of music that excites the external without the necessity of a transformed heart. It appeals to the flesh. It assures you that you can have your best life here. It welcomes you with your sin. It stands perfectly at home in what is politically correct in today's society. When you approach ministry like that, the world will love you. Behave like the world, adopt the world's ethics and standards, just add a little church on top, mix in the name of Jesus; the world will welcome that kind of religion. However, what Jesus says in Matthew 10 would indicate something is clearly quite wrong. This is a terribly skewed brand of so-called Christianity.

Real discipleship will not sit well with the world and it will not concern itself with orienting itself to please the world. Rather it will put its trust in God and be committed to the things he has told us to be committed to—the pure worship of God, the frank, straightforward proclamation of and stand for the truth.