

“A Dangerous Association”

Matthew 10:16-25

This week, while reading my favorite news publication, *The Babylon Bee*, I came across an article entitled “Christians Should Be More like Jesus, Who Was Loved by Everybody and Never Divisive.” (Be advised that *The Babylon Bee* is a satirical publication, which means that though its content is fictitious, it contains profound and thought-provoking truth in the form of sarcasm or embellishment.) The article, purportedly written by Jon Mallow, a professional sign twirler and a verified twitter user, begins like this:

Christians these days are just the worst. They are always taking stances on divisive issues like abortion and marriage and constantly have a lot of people angry at them. This is so unlike the person they're supposed to be emulating -- Jesus, a cool dude whom everyone loved.

Now, I've never read the Bible (I think Jesus would agree not to waste time on really old books when there are much lighter, more uplifting alternatives available on Audible), but my impression is that He was this really nice guy who went around giving everybody great self-esteem, telling people, “Hey, keep doing whatever you're doing. You're great and are going to Heaven.” That's why everyone loves Jesus: because He told people they're all great the way they are and don't need to change. I don't know where Christians got this idea that people need to sacrifice their old way of living and follow some exclusive Savior to get to Heaven, but it doesn't sound very Jesus-like to me.

In fact, if Jesus were around today, I'll bet He'd tell Christians to “chill out” on all their narrow morality that upsets people and accept whatever people feel like doing because it's all good. The only thing He might challenge people to change is to try more socialism. The main thing to keep in mind is that if you're making people upset, you're not being like Jesus, who only made everyone happy.

Whatever happened to Him? I assume He got a book deal and ended up on whatever was the ancient equivalent of Oprah.

The wonderful thing about satire is that even though you know it's not true, there is enough truth in it to make you blush...or cringe. And the truth in this article is that we all know people who have devised a concept of Jesus in which He is this affable, laid back, super nice guy who gets along with everyone and accepts everyone just the way they are. For this Jesus, everyone is cool, and everything is chill—kind of like a California surfer.

But that's not how Jesus is...or was when He was living on this earth. Seven hundred years before He was born Isaiah predicted that He would be *“despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not”* (53:3).

That doesn't sound like someone with a bubbly demeanor or an endearing persona. It's describing someone toward whom people have a strong *negative* reaction. The word “despised,” used twice in that verse, is an even stronger word than “hated” and refers to a person people don't like and don't want to be around.

As we progress through our study of Matthew's Gospel we are going to see this prophecy fulfilled. We are going to see a rising crescendo of hatred and hostility toward Jesus that will culminate in His murder. But in the passage we are looking at this morning Jesus makes a prophecy of His own. He predicts that His followers, because of their association

with Him, will also be the objects of hatred and hostility.

Look at **Matthew 10:16**. ¹⁶ *“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”*

In verses 5-15 Jesus gave some specific instructions to His disciples about their imminent short-term mission to Jews in Galilee. But beginning in verse 16 Jesus changes from the present tense to the future tense, which signifies that He is now addressing a distinctively different future ministry. And as we will see, this is about their long-term mission of going throughout the world as His ambassadors to proclaim and expand His kingdom. So what Jesus says in this passage has direct relevance not only to His twelve disciples, but to all of His followers, then and now.

Whereas in the previous section the disciples could expect a fairly friendly reception and be provided hospitality from their hosts, Jesus now tells them that they can expect to be treated with hatred and hostility. He begins by comparing His sent ones to sheep in the midst of wolves.

Earlier, in verse 6, Jesus likened the Jews around Galilee to *lost* sheep—sheep that wander off from the shepherd and go astray, which is a common characteristic of sheep. But the characteristic of sheep that Jesus wants to make in verse 16 is that His sent ones are vulnerable and defenseless in the midst of fierce opponents who want to do them harm. The fact that they are surrounded by these “wolves” means that they are in a place of extreme danger with no way of escaping.

This metaphor suggests that there will be serious trouble ahead for those who are sent out by Jesus and represent Him in the world. But that doesn’t mean that they have to be anxious or afraid, for Jesus goes on to give some instruction and encouragement that will enable them to bear up under these difficult circumstances. He says in the last part of **verse 16**, *I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

The term “wise” means sensible, cunning, or shrewd and refers to a practical wisdom in the sense of knowing what to do and how to respond in a dilemma or a difficult situation.

As you know, sheep are not known for being smart, and so Jesus associates this quality of sensibility with serpents, a creature known for its shrewdness. In Genesis 3:1 we are told that the serpent was craftier than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. Of course, we know that Genesis 3 is the passage that describes Satan inhabiting the serpent and deceiving Eve into eating the forbidden fruit.

But that’s not the kind of shrewdness or craftiness that Jesus is talking about in Matthew 10. He makes it clear that He doesn’t want there to be any deception or malevolence in the disciples’ behavior. Which is why He goes on to say, *“Be innocent as doves.”*

A dove, because of its gentleness and because of its chastity (it is faithful to its partner for life), was a symbol of both peace *and* purity in the ancient world. The word translated “innocent” literally means *unmixed* or *untainted* and was often used with reference to pure motives or intentions. So Jesus is instructing His disciples to have *integrity* in their dealings. That combination of shrewdness and integrity are absolutely crucial when dealing with difficult people in dangerous situations.

If you want to know what these qualities look like in a person read the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. It was the combination of shrewdness and integrity that enabled Him to thrive in several situations that were the result of injustice and ill-treatment. As a slave in

Potiphar's house, as a prisoner in Egypt, and as Pharaoh's right hand man.

In the same way, if we are to effectively exist as sheep among wolves then we must have the same qualities. We have to be *smart* sheep, sheep who don't panic or lose their heads with people who attack us or are out to get us. And we have to be sheep who have a strong moral compass and who treat even people with evil intentions with absolute integrity.

And if we lack either of those qualities we can go to God and get them, because the combination of these qualities is the definition of wisdom in James 3. And James tells us that if any of us lacks wisdom we can ask God for it, and He will give it (Jam. 1:5).

Jesus goes on in verse 17 to describe the reaction some of their fellow Jews will have to His followers because of their association with Him. *17 Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues...*

The word translated "courts" is *sanhedrin*, which is not only a reference to the supreme Jewish court in Jerusalem, but a reference to local Jewish courts that convened in local synagogues to administer justice. In other words, the "men" in verse 17 are Jewish leaders in a community who have authority to convene a court, pronounce a sentence, and administer justice. Jesus prophesies that His followers will be publicly maligned and flogged in these houses of worship.

And, notice, He talks about these places of worship as "*their*" synagogues. Not "our" synagogues or "your" synagogues. Jesus is hinting here that a day is coming when Jewish synagogues will represent a religious system that is opposed to Jesus and His kingdom, and will do everything in its power to quash it.

But it's not just Jewish leaders. Look at **verse 18**. *18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.*

This is another evidence that Jesus is referring to a distinctively different mission than the short-term mission He was talking about in the previous section of Matthew 10. There, He forbid His disciples to preach to Gentiles because He wanted to give Israel the first opportunity to respond to the invitation to enter the kingdom. But in this future, long-term mission, Jesus anticipated that His kingdom would spread throughout the world, and that those preaching the kingdom would experience hostility and hatred from their audience. The fact that they are "dragged" before Gentile rulers suggests that they have either been arrested or imprisoned and are standing on trial.

"Governors and kings" indicate that the message they are preaching is offensive and disruptive enough that it has come to the attention of the highest echelons of civic leadership, and warrants a governmental crackdown. As you know, the Book of Acts records several incidents in which the early church leaders were initially called before Jewish officials of the national council, later before the ruling authorities in Israel, and finally before rulers of the Roman world, including Caesar himself. This suggests that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a perceived threat to the stability and longevity of these governmental structures.

And, indeed, it is! Which is precisely why it is illegal for foreigners to preach the gospel or to proselytize in many countries today. Because the leaders of those countries want to preserve their own cultural and religious distinctives, and they don't want the kingdom of Christ (which is what the gospel is all about) to interfere with their customs and values, or erode their historical identity, or create confusion or division that might lead to change.

By the way, the gospel *does* lead to change! The gospel is transformative, not only for an individual person but for the community and the culture. So in a very real sense these civic leaders have reason to be concerned about its impact. But that should not in any way

deter His followers from going out and proclaiming the gospel in unwelcome or even hostile environments. That is our commission. That is our calling. And we are doing it for Jesus' sake. It's not our message we are proclaiming or our agenda we are promoting. It's His! And Jesus asks us to bear witness to Him, and suggests that these arrests and imprisonments that bring us before civic leaders will actually be God's method of proclaiming His message and expanding His kingdom.

So, if we find ourselves arrested and dragged into court to face charges for Jesus' sake, how should we feel? Afraid? Intimidated? Inadequate? Don't forget, Jesus is addressing a group of disciples, most of whom were illiterate and uneducated, which was also the typical profile of members of the early church. For them, and for many of us, the thought of being interrogated and cross-examined by skillful, professional prosecutors could be terrifying. But Jesus says there is no reason whatsoever to be afraid or intimidated. Look at **verses 19-20**. ***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.***

Jesus is saying that those who represent Him need not be anxious when they stand before earthly councils. They don't need to be concerned about how they will respond or what they will say. They don't even need to prepare their defense in advance. For Jesus says that God will give them words to say—His Spirit will be speaking through them.

The grammar of verse 20 is noteworthy. The phrase, "for it is not you who speak" is not nearly strong enough. It is literally in Greek, "Not for you are the ones speaking..." and the word order in Greek is relevant to its meaning. The emphasis is, "*Not you!*" You don't need to try and come up with something to say; indeed, you will not even be speaking. Instead, it will be "*the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*"

In other words, Jesus' followers will merely be conduits through whom the Holy Spirit will speak. That which will come out of their mouths will have a divine origin, and that means it will be accurate, it will be exactly what is necessary to communicate, and it will be far better than what they could ever say on their own.

This *may* be what the Apostle Paul was talking about in Ephesians when he asked the church to pray for him that whenever he opened his mouth words may be given him that he may fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel (6:19). This is what scholars call "the divine passive." God will give His ambassadors the exact words they need to say at such a time, so that what comes out of their mouths are God's thoughts and words.

Now, that is no guarantee that those words will be received well by those who hear them. Those words might very well be rejected or reviled. Nor does it mean, necessarily, that the heat will be turned down or that the hostility will subside. It just means that those who are sent out by Jesus are ambassadors of Jesus, and He will make sure that He communicates exactly what He wants to communicate through them in that particular setting.

And Jesus *is* talking here about a particular setting. He's talking here about trusting the Lord when we are thrust into situations where we have to make a public defense of the faith, and the context is specifically talking about being hailed before hostile tribunals. Jesus is not saying that His followers in ordinary situations do not need to organize their thoughts or to carefully prepare to communicate them.

I've discovered in my travels to Africa that this is a favorite verse of pastors who don't want to do the hard work of sermon preparation, and who often stand before their congregations unprepared and say, "The Lord has given me a word for you today..." Which,

being interpreted, means, “I’m not prepared so I’m just going to wing it.”

For those who are called to preach and teach the Word of God Matthew 10 should never be a proof text to stand behind the pulpit unprepared. Our mandate comes from Timothy who said, “Do your best to present yourselves to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed but who accurately interprets the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

But having said that, I have been in a few situations in my life and ministry where I have experienced first-hand the truth of Matthew 10:19-20. There have been times when I have been asked to bear witness for Christ to a less-than-friendly audience and haven’t had opportunity to prepare. And what has come out of my mouth has been far more profound and far more effective than anything I could come up with on my own.

I want to close our time by telling you a story of how this happened one time. In 2008 I traveled with Mike Silva and a few other people to the San Blas Islands off the coast to Panama so we could preach the gospel to the Kuna Indians. At the same time, on the same island, the forty nine chiefs of the forty nine islands had convened for their semi-annual congress, and when we arrived by canoe, they didn’t seem too happy to see us. We met with these chiefs in the stifling heat of a large, thatched roof hut where the head chief spoke to us for three hours about how the Kuna Indians had been exploited by Europeans and Catholic missionaries and almost every other non-Kuna people group to ever visit the region.

“Our culture changed radically in 1492”, he said, referring to Christopher Columbus. “Ever since then everyone who has come into our region has been taking, taking, taking from us. They have taken our gold and silver, our land, our livelihood, and our dignity. They have even taken our photographs and made money off of them.” As he told story after story of five hundred years of injustices that had been committed against his people, he remained calm, speaking in a monotone voice, yet the hurt was clearly visibly in the lines on his seventy-three year old face.

“We will not let people take advantage of us any longer”, he said, looking at us warily. “We will welcome you if you can convince us that what you have to offer is going to help us and improve the quality of our lives.” But he made it clear to us that they would not accept anything that would interfere with their sacred customs and beliefs. He closed by saying, “We want your help, but we don’t want your religion.”

Mike promised that we would bring our proposal the next afternoon. That night, under the stars, Mike preached the good news about Jesus Christ to the inhabitants of the *Isle Tigre* (Tiger Island). All forty-nine chiefs were among those in attendance. They sat throughout the presentation with little expression or emotion. But as Mike invited them to receive God’s provision for eternal life by putting their faith in Jesus, the head chief was one of the first to stand to his feet and raise his hand.

When the chiefs reconvened the following afternoon to hear “the proposal”, the atmosphere was tense. The council secretary told us later that they had been arguing with each other all morning about whether or not to even meet with us. Some were vehemently opposed to the preaching they had heard the night before, insisting that the message was incompatible with Kuna beliefs. Some felt that we were introducing a new religion that would erode Kuna culture.

The secretary told us how, after several hours of arguments, the big chief had stood to his feet and said, “I do not clap my hands for Mike Silva or any man. I do not clap my hands for a religion. I clap my hands for my Creator. The rest of you can choose for

yourselves who you will clap your hands for, but as for me, I choose to follow Jesus even if I do so by myself.” And then he sat down.

The chief’s speech was enough to convince the others to meet with us that afternoon. We informed them that the proposal we had come to offer was not land or gold or an opportunity to be vindicated from past injustices. It was a personal relationship with their Creator. We explained how God loved them enough to send His Son into this world to die on a cross for their sins, and how, by rising from the dead, Jesus had conquered our greatest enemy, death, and given us an opportunity for eternal life.

At the end of our presentation, Mike invited the chiefs to open their hearts to Jesus and receive God’s provision for forgiveness, joy, peace, and eternal life. He asked them to indicate their desire to do so by standing, but he urged them not to stand just because others were standing and they felt “pressured” to do so.

FORTY-SEVEN OF THE FORTY-NINE CHIEFS STOOD AND PRAYED (out loud, in unison) **TO RECEIVE CHRIST!** As we placed our hands on each one, we saw, for the first time since we had been there, wide grins on their faces. Many were wiping tears from their eyes.

After this, we gave each of these forty-seven chiefs a “proclaimer” to take back to their respective islands. These proclaimers were audio Bibles in the Kuna language produced by *Faith Comes by Hearing*.

That night, we had another assembly with all the chiefs and all the islanders in the center of the village. This time, there was unrestrained joy and uninhibited expressions of delight even before we began to worship Jesus Christ. These hundreds of Kuna Indians had already received word that their chiefs had given their lives to Jesus, and they were anticipating what was going to happen to them, too. When the gospel was preached, the vast majority of them responded.

“A Dangerous Association” **Matthew 10:16-25**

Main Idea: Followers of Jesus can expect to experience hostility and hatred because of their association with him, but have been given the resources to thrive in such conditions

Interaction with Hostile Opponents (16-23)

Compared to Sheep among Wolves (16a)

The nature of wolves

The vulnerability of sheep

Survival Techniques (16b)

Wise as serpents

Innocent as doves

Widespread Opposition (17-20)

From fellow Jews (17)

Public shaming before in court

Public flogging in synagogues

From Gentiles (18-20)

Dragged before kings and governors (18a)

Bearing witness before kings and governors (18b-20)

Confidently unprepared

The perfect Defender

Pastor Stan Myers
July 21, 2019

From Family (21)

From Nations (22-23)
Universal rejection (22)

Instructions to keep moving and spreading (23)

Reasons for Hostility and Hatred (24-25)
Relationship of Teacher and Student

Guilt by Association