

Matthew 10:16-25  
Part 1: Persecution  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
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What tremendous morning of worshipping God and expressing our gratitude for what he is doing in the lives not only of these 6 people, but the life of this congregation. And does it seem, just a little like Matthew's text is something of a wet blanket to the excitement of new belief and renewed purpose?

Well perhaps...if our perception of the next step in our faith sounds something like the marketing materials for million-dollar short term mission trip industry. Listen to a few of the marketing slogans I pulled from a quick internet search

- Come and discover the world
- Come and have a wonder making experience
- Come and discover your true potential in an action-packed experience overseas.
- Discover the real you as you serve the Lord overseas.

Add a few glossy photos of communities with dirt huts and cute children, and back it up with a video featuring a western looking person who spent their summer in Mozambique, throw in some sight-seeing and culture experiences and it makes for a really exciting experience. It's no wonder that people are queuing up to take part in this sort of thing. If you're sensing a bit of cynicism in my voice don't worry, I'm a Gen Xer, it's what we do.

Perhaps Matthew is not a wet blanket, but something of a reality check.

Looking back at what Mark Preached on last week in verse 1 it says that Jesus gave us authority to heal disease, cast out demons, then in verse 8 he says go heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers. That sounds amazing right?

Then he says, don't take any provisions with you, no bag, bread, money, etc. Less amazing Jesus, but ok. Verse 1-15 is the bold print for mission and sending, verses 16-25 is like the fine print.

This is where we get into some of the sobering realities of following Jesus, a three dimensional read in time in which our perceptions of being a disciple is informed by celebrity culture, mega ministries, and a media persona that are sometimes literally and figuratively two dimensional and flat.

What Jesus is doing in these verses is giving us a sense of what it will mean to live as his sent people in an inhospitable context. There are wolves out there, they will challenge, confront, and diminish this budding and emerging faith growing inside you. Jesus discusses all sorts of ways in which culture, politics, society, will attempt to divide, isolate, confuse, and introduce uncertainty into your life. And there is no template for what this will look like in your life, so I'm not going to attempt to say more about what this might look like with story or example, since it will look differently for everyone. But what I do want to do is draw our attention to a story from scripture of a person who lived faithfully in hospitable circumstances.

There is a heartening and authentic picture of faithfulness in the midst of persecution found in years after Jerusalem was decimated by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 587BC. Jeremiah, the young prophet witnessed as his people were not only brutalized and carried off into a foreign land, but also saw perhaps what others did not, the psychologically decimating persecution in the form of cultural dilution. The Israelite history, culture, religious practices becoming convoluted as they were mixed with Pagan Babylon. There was a very real danger of Israel losing its identity entirely. You want to talk about wolves, cunning and crafty—Babylon had a way of persecuting God’s people without shedding a drop of blood.

But Jeremiah receives a word from God and writes to his people from his own imprisonment in Jerusalem about how to live in inhospitable contexts, while at the same time maintaining faithfulness to God and integrity of their identity and character.

In short God tells Jeremiah to tell the people of Israel living in Babylon, be good students of culture, pay attention to the people and events going on around you, be wise, don’t remove yourself from, but at the same time don’t allow your identity to be diluted by the foreign context in which you find yourself. This is your home now.

Jeremiah gives this remarkable advice to his people, advice that in Jesus would one day reiterate in strikingly similar terms. Jeremiah says in chapter 29 starting at verse 4:

**“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. <sup>8</sup>For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>9</sup>for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.**

Eugene Peterson puts it this way in his wonderful little book of sermons on Jeremiah, *Run with the Horses*: You are not camping, this is your home; make yourself at home. This may not be your favorite place but it is a place. If all you do is sit around and pine for the time you get back to Jerusalem, your present lives will be squalid and empty. Your life right now is every bit as valuable as it was when you were in Jerusalem, and every bit as valuable as it will be when you get back to Jerusalem. Babylon exile is not your choice, but it is what you are given. Build a Babylon house and live in it as well as you are able (Peterson, 149).

The circumstance that feels like persecution, and may well be just that, is not your choice. Lord, do I resonate with that...

When Jesus sends his disciples out, he makes it clear that we are salt and leaven. That means that disciples of Jesus fundamentally change the composition of the environment in which they’re in while still maintaining their unique quality. Not only make others feel and experience the rising of God’s Spirit or the saltiness of our lives. But by the mere presence of you simply being salt and doing the thing that salt does carrying out your salty life, you will be a witness. Later Jesus, in what’s called his high priestly prayer in John 17, he prays to God on our behalf asking God to protect us as

we are in this world but not of this world. To be sent out as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves means that we must be able to navigate and understand culture without accepting it wholesale in a way that changes our identity.

So how do you live as wise and innocents around people who don't believe what you believe or live how you live? That's a good question, right? What do you do when the manager at your work place recommends you cut that corner or fudge the numbers, it will be alright; or the classmates who invite you to partake in substances that are damaging to you, or in conversation that is toxic; what do you do when that friend begins to pass a piece of particularly juicy gossip and invites you to go on the offensive towards that other person with them.

How do we live among wolves? We want to live as a part of their lives, but we don't want to enable things that are harmful. This is a tough question, because we are invited join Jesus, and we're invited to be his witnesses, but we're not invited to participate in every aspect. Jeremiah and Jesus call us to move into the public square, to be an active member of our surroundings while maintaining this unique distinction, as in but not of.

I want to share with you three things we're not to do, and then one thing that we do do.

1. Cloister – They're not good, we're good, let's build a wall to keep the unfamiliar out. We do this too by gravitating towards those who are similar to us. Similar families, similar ethnicities similar socioeconomic circles, similar faith values or politics. Cloistering is not a bad thing in and of itself, but Jeremiah calls us to move out into the city and be among it, not a part from it.
2. Compromise
3. Compartmentalize

But this text also says that despite our cultural sensitivity, or our willingness to understand and engage without compromising our stances, we will be persecuted—it doesn't mean we look for opportunities to have our rear ends dragged before the authorities. But it will happen, you will all face some level of persecution—be it in your friend groups in their scorn or scoffs at that faith you hold to; could be in your workplace where you might feel pressure to act unethically; it could be in the voting box where a deeply held faith ethic is challenged by a candidate you feel pressured to support, or as a part of a family or community that has always voted one way, but you just can't bring yourself to do it again. Jesus says, you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake.

Here's how he teaches us to respond, not as the defense council, not as the prosecuting attorney, definitely not as the judge, but as the witness. Later in Acts 1:8 the resurrected Jesus will say "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

A witness as you well know only responds to the question presented to them by the prosecution or defense. As Peter will later say in 1 Peter 3:15 always be ready to give an account for the faith which you hold. It doesn't mean a theological treatise; it means simply telling the story of what Jesus has done in your life.

We all have scripture verses and stories from that have landed on our hearts and bury themselves deep into our hearts. Jesus says, don't worry about what you will say, because when you tell your

story of what God has done in your life, it will spring up from the very deepest place where the Spirit of God resides. The scriptures that reside on the shelving of your heart, where Jesus has made his home will flow out of you as naturally as the act of breathing. So don't worry, a witness only tells about what she sees with her own eyes, and experiences as true with her own heart.

The persecution will come, yes. But take heart, because, as the old King James says, Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.