

+ Matthew 10:24-33 + Do Not Be Afraid + 5th Sunday after Pentecost + 13 July 2014 +

Jesus has hard words for us to hear today, doesn't he? Perhaps you caught them when you heard the Gospel Lesson just a few minutes ago. These are not words that are easy for 21st Century Christians to hear. Jesus is telling us what the Christian life is really going to be like. It's not puffy clouds and rainbows and unicorns. No, Jesus speaks of slander and blasphemy, attacks on God's people and attempts to silence them—things that can stir fear in the hearts of the strongest Christians.

Jesus has hard words for us to hear. ***“A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!”*** In the verses before our text, Jesus warns his disciples of persecution and harassment they would endure because of him. Before they could object and consider themselves undeserving of such treatment, Jesus reminded them that if people treated the Teacher this way, they could expect the same. If Jesus' enemies called him ***“Beelzebub”***, basically the spawn of Satan possessed by Satan, then his followers should expect no less slander and blasphemy. Hard words!

Jesus has hard words for us to hear. ***“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”*** Suffering? Dying for my faith? That thought likely crossed the minds of the disciples and most of them would one day experience such a martyr's death. Such fear of physical threats against following Christ could lead his followers to hold back in faithfully serving him, even to compromise with the enemies of Christ crucified. To do so, however, loses sight of what is most important. In the end, which is better—to hold back and save your skin only to lose your soul or to faithfully serve and maybe even lose your life, but save your soul? Hard words!

Jesus has hard words for us to hear. ***“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will also disown him before my Father in heaven.”*** What do our words and actions and priorities say to the world? Do they show we follow Christ as the God who saves us or do they show that we really lack trust in the true God and are in danger of cutting ourselves off from his grace? Are we serious about being Christ's witnesses or do we put him away when it's inconvenient? Hard words!

Yet the hardest words that Jesus has for us today are really the ones that also give us the most comfort. You see, three times amidst all these hard words Jesus says, ***“Don't be afraid.”*** Beautiful words of comfort, but aren't they the hardest words of all to hear? They're so hard to hear because they are so easy to deny. “Don't be afraid”? Jesus, that's easy for you to say when people ridicule me or put pressure on me for my faith or threaten my life or livelihood because I follow you. ‘Don't be afraid’? Jesus, that's easy for you to say when you already know what's going to happen in my life, when you know how hard it is for me to be your witness among people who don't care about you. You have hard words to say, Lord, and then you tell me, ***‘Don't be afraid’?*** How can I believe that?”

Jesus' words become harder when your sinful nature starts winning the battle for your soul. As much as we would like to believe that when you become a Christian your life gets easier, the truth is, if Christ himself endured slander and blasphemy and attacks, surely we his followers should expect nothing less. Will there be attacks on your faith? Yes, of course! Will you have to endure persecution of some kind? Probably!

Now by God's grace we live in a land where physical persecution is not a reality yet, but the pressure to conform or else is constantly increasing on those who confess Christ and hold to his teaching. We live in a society where the immoral, the shocking, the unethical, the sinful, and the blasphemous are not only accepted, but celebrated. Those who hold to Christ and the true teaching of his Word are regarded as backwards, foolish, uneducated, and bigoted. We hear it from strangers, from neighbors and co-workers and classmates, from friends, even from family. Jesus' words for us can be very hard to hear.

We are sorely tempted to concede. “I've heard and endured enough! What's a little compromise?” How tempting it is to hold back faithful service to the Lord in the face of hostile pressure or to withhold confessing Christ out of fear of hostile reaction! We've all been there and it causes us to wonder if we really can be Christ's witnesses to the world. How tempting it is to do what's easy and go along with the culture around us or the sinful nature within us. How tempting it is to let fear reign!

Now you might not be shaking in your boots, but when you hear how it's becoming more and more challenging to be a confessional Christian, a little doubt starts creeping into your heart. Does God really care about me?

Can God really change hearts when they're so hostile? Does God really have power over all things in this world? Is God's grace really enough? Will God have the final victory or will his enemies win out? Soon fear takes root and grows within your heart and chokes out the desire to confess Christ to the people around you, but then you hear Jesus speak hard words. **"Whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven."** The doubt that leads to fear can lead to death.

...But Jesus doesn't just have hard words for us to hear today! Listen closely. **"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."** Are you worth more than many sparrows? Of course! At first glance, that may not seem very comforting, but these are words of healing! If God our Father cares even about the life and death of the smallest, most insignificant bird, shouldn't we realize that we are worth more to him than that? If God our Father has that much care for the sparrows, surely he cares more about you than them because he sent his Son to suffer and die not for sparrows, but for you. God knows what's going on in your life. God cares about what's going on in your life and he cares about you. That's why he sent his Son—for you!

Remember who was rejected and slandered and attacked first! It was your Savior Jesus. His enemies branded him a son of Satan and a master of satanic arts, when in reality Christ came to be Satan's ultimate enemy as the Apostle John wrote, **"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."** (1 John 3:8b) His message defies the satanic message that people have to earn their way into God's favor and into God's heaven. Christ came to endure rejection and slander, suffering and death to destroy the devil's work for us so we could be sure of his forgiveness for our unbelieving fear, so by grace we could live with him forever in heaven.

Wonderful, healing words from our Savior! God really does care about you. See that love, that care in the manger, on the cross, and in the empty tomb. See it in the nail marks and spear mark on the Savior's own body. See that love as God really does change hearts through his Word. See that love as God changes hearts through the water and Word of Holy Baptism as he crucifies our sinful natures and raises us anew. See that love as God changes hearts with forgiveness through his Holy Supper.

It's true—God really does have power over all things! Even when everything seems to be out of control in your own little world, God is still in control and works all things for the good of those who love him. God's grace really is enough. When you are at your weakest, has he not promised, **"my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"**? (2 Corinthians 12:9)

The Son of God came to overcome the darkness of unbelief with the daylight of his Gospel. He came to teach what had been hidden and rejected for centuries—the one message that disperses the darkness of sin and guilt and death. Now in his grace he gives us that good news to proclaim everywhere! **"So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs."** What is that long-hidden news? Our God has already won the final victory. You see, when Jesus cried out from the cross, **"It is finished"** (John 19:30), he guaranteed victory over Satan and his minions. That means that one day the struggle and the pressure and the attacks on our faith will come to an end, because Christ has already won the victory for us.

Until that time, we hold to the promise that by grace the Lord will confess before his heavenly Father those who confess him and will acknowledge those who acknowledge him before others. That means God calls us to be faithful to him with his Word. That means Christ promises to be faithful to those who remain faithful to him. So we serve the Lord with everything we have with all our best gifts all our life long. Our lives become living sacrifices to God's glory.

"Don't be afraid!" Jesus' repeated promise doesn't sound so hard to your ears anymore, does it? In Christ, then, do not be afraid when your faith comes under attack or you feel the pressure of this world. In Christ, do not be afraid to proclaim him and his saving Gospel from the rooftops, finding courage in Christ to be his witness. In Christ, do not be afraid because you are so precious to your heavenly Father that he sent and sacrificed his only Son for you and won the final victory for you. My friends, in Christ do not be afraid! Amen.