

The fact that today our Christian brothers and sisters are being persecuted in parts of the world invoke feelings in us like nothing else can. Let's think about it: People who read the same Bible as we do, who believe that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior as we do, and who sing, "*Because He lives I can face tomorrow,*" as we do are being persecuted in ways we can only imagine in dark corners of the world.

I think of the heartbreaking images of a line of handcuffed men in orange jumpsuits being paraded out for the world to see. The men were Christians from Egypt working regular jobs in Libya when they were kidnapped by ISIS. Each condemned man was held at the collar by the hand of his ISIS executioner, who was dressed head to toe in black and carrying a knife. The ISIS executioner then forced each man to kneel and prepare to be executed. And what was their crime? According to ISIS, they were sentenced to die because they refused to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ. If they had renounced Jesus Christ their lives would have been spared, but they wouldn't so they had to be killed because they are "People of the Cross."

### **We Are the People of the Cross**

As People of the Cross, we are united for eternity with these martyrs by the same beliefs. My faith and baptism may be the same, but my experiences couldn't be more different. I have never been persecuted for what I believe; not even close.

Maybe you are like me: You have never been persecuted, but you have been hurt by people's responses to your faith. Maybe you worked up your nerve to ask a friend to church, or to a concert or Bible discussion and your friend gives you a blank look before awkwardly declining your invitation. Your relationship continued with that friend, but you could sense that something had changed. Maybe you have openly been teased and mocked for what you believe by a family member, neighbor or co-worker. You have been hurt. Rejection hurts! Maybe you have felt patronized. You share with someone that you go to church and you get, "How nice you have that in your life to meet your needs." Maybe you have felt marginalized at work, or passed over for a promotion because as a person of the cross, someone felt uncomfortable around you. You have gone public with your faith and people have hurt you.

My prayer is as People of the Cross we would find encouragement and get equipped for whatever form persecution may take as we seek to be mature followers of Jesus. So our big idea this

morning is: People may hurt us because we follow Jesus, but we are equipped to stay faithful through it all because he is victorious.

If you remember last week in the first part of chapter 10, Jesus gives his disciples instructions to go out to the people of Israel and tell them that the Kingdom of God has come. Then he gave them authority and power to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, and even raise people from the dead. He tells them to travel light and move from town to town as God opens up opportunities.

The setting here in chapter 10 is the mission of the 12 disciples, but the principles are general ones relevant to Christians facing persecution in any situation. And for 2,000 years, the People of the Cross have found encouragement from our passage this morning.

### **We Can Expect To Face Persecution When We Follow Jesus**

**"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues."(verses 16–17)**

The reason that they would be flogged in the synagogues was that they were preaching an unpopular message of repentance and surrender. Those in places of power are threatened by this kind of message. The message says, don't bow to Caesar, don't bow to the gods of the culture. It hit me this week that I have generally escaped wolf-like treatment. Not because I am better, smarter, or nicer, rather I am an exception to Jesus' words in the chapter. And this should give all of us pause to ask ourselves, are we actually engaging? Is our message so defective or so non-existent that wolves don't even notice us? As People of the Cross, shouldn't there be some wolf-like response so we would have to be snake-minded and dove-hearted? And speaking of wolf-like responses Jesus said,

**On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (verses 18–20)**

Jesus told his disciples and us the same thing back in chapter 6: Do not worry. When you witness for me, the Spirit will be active to inspire your speech.

**“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.” (verses 21–22)**

The point is that Jesus doesn't promise anyone that they will escape persecution. What he promises is the path to get through is to stand firm on our faith in Christ. It's so important for us to be equipped for hardship by remembering that God has this plan that is so much bigger than our own corner of the world.

**When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (verse 23)**

Verse 23 is not an easy verse to understand. I know my natural inclination when I see the term, “Son of Man comes.” I think of the future return of Jesus Christ, as the Son of Man, to return from his throne in heaven to set up his new kingdom on earth and eventually his new heaven and new earth. But that doesn't fit the context here. It seems like this Son of Man event will happen very soon in the lifetime of the disciples before they even finish evangelizing the local towns of Israel.

Many respected commentators view Jesus' words here as based on Daniel 7:13–14, *“one like a son of man coming with the clouds in heaven.”* The best interpretation is that Daniel 7:13–14 is not talking about The Son of Man coming back to earth in the future. The best interpretation is that The Son of Man after his own suffering and death will be resurrected and he will ascend up to heaven with the clouds to claim his rightful throne.

It's a beautiful picture of Jesus, who after having been persecuted, put to death on a cross, and then buried in a tomb, will be resurrected, will ascend into heaven and be vindicated before all who previously persecuted him. And The Son of Man will rule and eventually fully carry out judgment on the world.

This is a beautiful picture of our future as the People of the Cross. Daniel 7:14 says that people from all nations, tribes and tongues will join in. So that means that all of those who suffer persecution for following Jesus will also be resurrected and vindicated and live forever in heaven as the people of God.

I hope that encourages you today. Every day we have opportunities as People of the Cross to imitate him. If we are called to imitate him by sharing in his sufferings we will also be allowed to share in his vindication.

**“The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! (verses 24–25)**

If you're fearful by now, thinking about facing persecution, I think these next words of Jesus are right for you. He gives us three reasons to not be afraid.

### **We Can Fight Our Fear of Men, and Find Comfort When We Fear the Lord**

**“So do not be afraid of them, for 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.” (verses 26–27)**

#### **Truth will triumph**

At the final judgment those who persecute the People of the Cross will be exposed as the wicked people they are. So don't keep secret what you have learned about Christ. Speak out what you have learned from Jesus. And speak it even if it is unpopular because in the future you will be vindicated.

**“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.” (verse 28)**

#### **Our soul matters more to God**

Jesus is saying, be brave. At the worst, the rulers of this world can only kill the body; they can't kill the soul. If we are going to be afraid of anyone, it should be God, because he is the one who will determine our final destinies.

This is the verse that inspired Martin Luther as he stood before the religious authorities at the Diet of Worms. Worms was a city in Germany where Luther stood up to defend what is at the heart of our gospel: that through the work of Christ we are saved by Christ alone, by grace alone through faith alone. Knowing that others were executed for speaking boldly about the need for reform, Luther stood before the religious leaders on April 16, 1521. He said, “Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.” And later he wrote his classic hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.

*Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;  
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still;  
His kingdom is Forever.*

And finally, do not be afraid. God loves us and cares for us. Jesus continues with his third “do not be afraid” statement.

**“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (verses 29–31)**

#### **God loves us and will care for us**

I love that in this passage Jesus never uses the word God for God. Every time he wants to tell us something about God he uses the title Father. If your Father cares for insignificant sparrows, how much more would he care for his children, who he values so

much more? “The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.” Oswald Chambers in *The Highest Good*.

I know people who are great dealing with personal rejection. They are the best people at sales. I would be terrible at sales because I don't deal well with personal rejection. To me in my small fragile world it hurts and I need tools to deal with it.

### **We can remain faithful despite personal rejection**

Our fear of men could cause us to fail to acknowledge Jesus before men because we fear rejection. Jesus sees the need to stretch us to remain faithful and not fear rejection.

**“Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven. Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (verses 32–34)**

What happened to the Prince of Peace we talked about last Christmas? What happened to good will toward men? This doesn't fit our view of sweet Jesus in the manger. First of all he doesn't speak of literally wielding a sword. He never wields a sword in the gospels. Remember, when he told the disciples to travel light on their mission trip, he certainly didn't tell them to bring a sword. He is using the sword as a metaphor, as a symbol.

A sword is an instrument of division. It's an instrument of violence. Remember, he told Peter to put away his sword when Peter pulled it out to defend Jesus. The key to understanding this is the word peace. The word used here may be familiar to some of us, it's *shalom*. The word *shalom* doesn't just mean peace in the sense absence of violence. It's a peace that comes from wholeness. Jesus is saying, I came to bring the opposite of wholeness. “I did not come to bring wholeness and unity, but division.” The image here for sword is to divide, cut, sever in half.

The writer of Hebrews describes the Word of God as *“sharper than any two-edged sword, able to divide spirit from soul”* (Hebrews 4:12). Jesus is saying, I came to divide. I came to turn the world upside down.

**“For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.’ “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (verses 35–36)**

This is pretty wild. What kind of person would be so bold, so outrageous as to step into another person's life and say, “You have to love me more than your own children, more than your own mother and father.” One might say, “Only a true Messiah or a

true maniac would say something like this. Is he exaggerating to make a point? The bond between a parent and a child is one of the strongest bonds possible. This seems so unnatural.”

Maybe we can consider it this way: If there really is a God and if he is the creator of all things, if he created you and me, if we are infinitely dependent upon him for our very existence every moment, every second of our lives, if this connection we have with God will exist for eternity, then does it not follow that our relationship with the creator should be supreme above all things? Though we love our mother and our father and our children, our connection with them is not eternal.

What Jesus is asking us is this—Do you recognize the supremacy of God over all things? Doesn't the one who created your mom and dad and daughter or son deserve your allegiance more than they do? Do we recognize the supremacy of God over our lives? Because those who do not are... what does Jesus say here? They are unworthy of God because they have given their allegiance to lesser things. I'm not recommending you go visit some family after church today and get into some weird conversation with them or tell them you are not going to value them as much. Don't do that! Remember, wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Ultimately Jesus' message is about peace, true peace. Our message to the world about finding peace will be unpopular to many because true peace that leads to true wholeness is only found when we make peace with God, when we accept his gift of forgiveness of sins.

He continues to drive home this point in this very challenging and tough text. He drives his point home with a second metaphor. He used a sword, now he uses a cross.

**“Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.” (verses 38–39)**

A cross is a symbol of death. He is saying we must be willing to sacrifice ourselves, to die to our desires, dreams, goals and ambitions and put Christ first. Those who do are worthy of me. So when is self-denial ever a popular message?

I remember one time when I was in the midwest I went to an estate auction. Guys in my church liked to go, so I went along too. After we had looked over everything that was going to be auctioned, the auctioneer got up there and did his thing. The guy I was with said to me, “Don't scratch your nose at the wrong time, Dan. Always remember this: whenever you go to an auction sale, make sure you know your upper limit price. One time I scratched my itchy nose and ended up buying a tractor.”

I will always remember the lesson from that. The great danger for us is that we walk into the Christian life with a clear upper limit price in our minds. Jesus does not allow his followers to set an upper limit. How do we know that? Because he says to us, “If

you save your life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for my sake and the gospel's, you will keep it." Our calling is to a life of obedience and the price is unknown.

We all want to be people of the manger, but we don't want to be people of the cross. At the heart of true Christian discipleship is this paradox: If we fight to maintain control over our lives, we will in fact lose the meaning to our lives. If we lay down our lives, we will find real life and real meaning. And real meaning comes as a privilege.

Our passage this morning ends on a positive note. When we turn over our lives, he gives us the privilege of being able to represent God on earth as his ambassadors, as his sons and daughters representing our Heavenly Father.

**"Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward." (verses 40–41)**

Anyone who welcomes Jesus welcomes the Father... Anyone who welcomes a prophet receives a prophet's reward... Anyone who welcomes a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. You see, it's a progression receiving Jesus, then a prophet, and then a righteous man.

**"And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward." (verse 42)**

You know what this means to us? The faith story of every single follower of Christ, big or small in this auditorium today, is important and recognized by Jesus. And to love and serve the followers of Christ—and might I say especially those who are persecuted around the world—is worthy of a reward. People may hurt us because we follow Jesus, but we are equipped to stay faithful through it all because he is victorious.

Kayla Mueller was a college student who was involved in her campus ministry group at Northern Arizona University. That was where God led her to become an aid worker to war-torn Syria. Soon after, every parent's nightmare came true. Kayla was captured by ISIS. In the spring of 2014 as a captive she wrote to her family. The letter begins with Kayla's assurance that she has been treated well and is "in a safe location, completely unharmed + healthy." The 26-year-old aid worker goes on to apologize touchingly to her family for the suffering that she has put them through

because of her captivity. Then comes her central proposition: "I remember mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator because literally there was no else."

She goes on to relate how "by God + by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall." She adds: "I have been shown in darkness, light + have learned that even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful. I have come to see that there is good in every situation, sometimes we just have to look for it." She concluded, "Please be patient, give your pain to God. I know you would want me to remain strong. That is exactly what I am doing. Do not fear for me, continue to pray as will I. By God's will we will be together soon. All my everything, Kayla."

On February 10, 2015, U.S. officials confirmed that Muslim extremists had murdered her while she was in captivity. Kayla, while giving a cup of cold water to the least of those in Syria, gave the ultimate sacrifice. And this young woman, this woman of the cross, is with Jesus now. As Jesus reminds us, she will certainly receive her reward because Kayla believed the promises of God.

I know the words of Jesus have made many of us uncomfortable this morning. I want to warn you—If we take Jesus at his word we will be wounded. Many of us here today feel the wounds of following Christ every day. May the word of God and the love your heavenly Father has for you keep you in this good fight; you will receive a righteous person's reward.

And there are many of us who have never engaged in the fight. You don't have any wounds and God has got your attention. There are others of us here who have avoided the fight because the cost of discipleship has just seemed too high. Maybe Jesus is asking you this question, Is there anything about me that is worth fighting for?

I want all of us to stand before Jesus some day, and on that day when we gaze on Jesus surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses filled with The People of the Cross, including Kayla, we will see his wounds. We will show him our wounds and our wounds will be instantly healed. He will say to us, "Well done good and faithful People of the Cross. Because you acknowledged me before others, let me introduce you to my Father in heaven."

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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