

# Expectation of persecution and engaging with it (Sermon)

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Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel / Persecution / Matthew 10:16–33

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## 2. Talk 1

### 2.1 Introduction

Last Sunday morning as we started this series on the teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel we saw how Jesus sends his disciples out to be part of the work he is doing. He gave them authority, he gave them specific instructions, he gave them particular responsibility. We thought about the privilege of living as a disciple of Jesus and being involved in his work - and asked questions about whether we are living up to his call on our lives today.

In our passage this evening we are presented with some of the stark implications of following Jesus in this way - as he speaks about persecution, beatings, betrayal and being hated. Following Jesus is intended to disrupt - to disrupt the situations we are in and to disrupt our own lives.

I think it's fascinating that Jesus doesn't present this as a "if you do this these are the consequences" but "this is what is going to happen to you as you do what I say". There is no question that these disciples are going to listen to the warning of Jesus and say this isn't what I signed up for and I'm going home. That wasn't what discipleship meant - they were committed to him and doing what he said, here he is simply seeking to prepare them for what they are going to face. And he makes this clear as he refers to them as students and slaves (translated servants in our Bibles)

### 2.2 Servants and students

**Matthew 10:24–25 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)**

'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!

The point he is making is that those who have chosen to follow someone shouldn't expect to be treated more gently or respectfully than the person they are following - they are seen as associated with him and so are treated in a similar way.

I was once sent out to placate a very angry customer. He had a major issue that we - as a company - hadn't handled very well. I hadn't been involved up to this point so hadn't done anything to upset him but, as a representative of the company, I was the only person he could blame.

When we have a problem with a product we have purchased and want to complain we often end up speaking with someone in a call centre. They had no involvement in selling us the product, they had no responsibility for designing it but so often - as the only representative of the company we can engage with - they are seen as fair game for all the things we want to say and the way we want to say them.

And - to a degree - its unfair but these are the roles I - and these call centre staff - have taken on and responsibility comes with it. We are associated with the company / individual we are following and are treated in that way.

And Jesus refers specifically to him being referred to as "Beelzebul" - a name sometimes used to describe Satan, the "chief demon".

**Matthew 9:34 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)**

But the Pharisees said, 'It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.'

Jesus was driving out demons from people who were possessed, and is accused of doing so using demonic power. Jesus has sent his disciples to drive out demons and is warning that the same thing will happen to them or that they will even be persecuted more. There might be some grudging regard for their leader but his followers can more easily be picked off and targeted.

### 2.3 Before and after the cross

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples before going to the cross - and so they would have been able to associate them with how he was being treated at the time.

Matthew, however, wrote his Gospel after the death and resurrection of Jesus and so his readers - such as us - read it after the cross as well.

And so the warnings of Jesus take on deeper significance as we recognise the many things he suffered which hadn't happened when he said these words.

- He was arrested and handed over to the authorities
- He was beaten by soldiers
- He was brought before governors and kings and testified about God's greatness and who he was
- He was betrayed
- He was rejected by many
- He was disowned - the particular example of Peter

And as we think about some of the experiences that Jesus went through we see parallels between what he is saying here will happen to his followers.

So there's a sense that when we read these words we are drawn to recognise all that Jesus endured and suffered - and, hence, something of the reality of living as his fully-committed followers.

And we see so much in the example of Jesus as he endured suffering and humiliation and death as to how we - as his people - are called to live and behave through persecution.

- He was prepared to submit himself totally to God's plan for his life
- He prevented his followers fighting to protect him
- He didn't rage against his accusers but mainly stood silently as they spoke lies about him
- He did not call on the armies of angels that he knew were available to him

Peter - one of those followers who was sent out by Jesus, someone who actually disowned Jesus at his time of greatest need - sums it up like this:

**1 Peter 2:23 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)**

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

A great example of not fearing those who had some authority over whether he would live or die - but only being concerned about being obedient and faithful to God.

So as we think about Jesus sending out his followers to experience hostility, aggression and even death we are encouraged to think about all that he was prepared to suffer for us. And to realise that he has gone through immeasurably more pain and suffering than we can ever understand or enter into and that he willingly did so for us and to restore all of creation to God.

And with those thoughts in mind let's come and share communion together

### **3. Talk 2**

#### **3.1 The cost of following Jesus**

And so we come back to this passage to think about the cost of following Jesus - after we have reminded ourselves of the price that he paid for us.

The cost that Jesus spoke about was the reality for many of his early followers:

- In Acts 4, Peter & John are arrested and put into prison for speaking about the resurrection of Jesus. They are brought before the religious rulers and questioned - and Peter responds in the power of the Spirit to testify about Jesus (Acts 4:8). I wonder if these words of Jesus were in his mind as he so powerfully carried them out.
  - After being released they knew this wasn't going to be their last run in with authority. They recognised the reality of the threat and prayed to God that he would enable them to speak boldly (Acts 4:29)
- In Acts 5 the apostles are arrested but were freed by an angel sent by God. They were brought back in front of the religious leaders, questioned and beaten and ordered not to speak any more about Jesus. And they left

rejoicing in the privilege of suffering for Jesus (Acts 5:41) - and continued to speak good news about him.

- In Acts 6 Stephen is arrested and then, at the end of chapter 7, after speaking powerfully and boldly, is killed for his allegiance to Jesus and his refusal to compromise that belief
- In Acts 12, James was killed by Herod
- Later the apostle Paul speaks about the many things he suffered - imprisonments, beatings, accusations - for speaking about Jesus
- Church history tells us that all of the first 12 followers of Jesus - apart from John - were killed for their faith while John was persecuted and imprisoned.
- And we see many accounts of similar things happening during church history - and it still continues today in many parts of the world.

About a year ago I was in Georgia meeting with some Christians from Azerbaijan and met many people who were suffering real persecution for their faith. As many of you know that was a trip organised by a friend of mine called Elnur - also from Azerbaijan - who can no longer go back safely to his own country. Two examples:

- One pastor was wrongly imprisoned for a year after five police officers accused him and his wife of beating them up. Apparently his wife had held them and he had hit them. And in prison he was placed in cells with Muslim men to try and persuade him to renounce his faith
- One man who - with his wife had just recently started a church with 15 young people in a hotel room - heard while we were in Georgia that they had become the targets of militants, they had lost the room and the hotel owner had been punished. They didn't know what they were going to do next

But their faith continued to be strong and they were rejoicing in the opportunity to live for and follow Jesus - to be identified with his suffering, to follow in his footsteps.

### 3.2 Engaging with persecution

One of the questions I was asked in Georgia was whether Christians were persecuted in my country. What could I say after hearing some of the things they repeatedly and willingly endured?

I think it's fair to say that for most believers in this country we do not suffer persecution in the way Jesus is talking about in this passage. We may get mocked, we may get laughed at, we may - sometimes - find that our careers have been impacted. But it is a different level to what is being spoken about here.

We - as a nation - cherish freedom of speech and the rights of individuals to believe and worship as they see fit so it is not surprising that anything over a low level of ridicule is not seen as acceptable.

Different governments put priorities in different places but the general position stays roughly the same.

Having said that there are at least two potential exceptions to this:

- A growing sense among some Christians that we are becoming more and more marginalised and that those who follow other faiths and beliefs are treated more sympathetically and sensitively than we are
- Some people - and there have been some notable headline cases - are sued, taken to court, lose their jobs or their businesses suffer because of decisions and actions they taken based on their faith convictions

And there is often outcry over these cases and those involved are supported, represented and helped.

But - and I don't want to seem insensitive here - but why are we surprised when we are opposed for following Jesus? Jesus' non-compromising call to his followers was to go and speak about him and to expect to suffer as a consequence.

And what does it say to those of us who don't experience any persecution at all? Are we relieved or are we concerned that we aren't living up to what Jesus is calling his followers to do?

### 3.3 What are we saying?

And an associated question is around the message we are taking to the world around us.

Jesus - when he sent out his followers - told them to proclaim the wonderful ways that the kingdom of heaven had come near, and he told them to heal and bless those who were in need.

God's rule was starting to appear on earth in the person, and through the work, of His Son and his followers were to go and spread that word and blessing. It was a message of joy, a message of hope, a message of restoration, the blessing of healing and release.

And it was such a message and ministry that was going to result in them being persecuted as it went against the prevailing understanding of the day and as it focused prime importance on the person and work of Jesus. This was a message that was not seen as acceptable then and - to many - is not seen as acceptable today.

It is seen as:

- exclusive - because those who don't accept Jesus are portrayed as outside of God's blessing
- intolerant - in that it doesn't accept that other views are just as valid
- arrogant - as people claim to know the truth, which suggests that others don't
- challenging - as it calls on people to change how they live in response to Jesus

And it was for these, and similar, reasons that people rejected that message - and its messengers then - and continue to do so today. But, at its heart, it is good news as it speaks about all that Jesus has done in order to make it possible for people like us to have a restored relationship with God. It is a message worth proclaiming, a message worth suffering for, even a message worth dying for.

But - so often - the church is seen as not proclaiming this message of hope and good news, not speaking about the deep love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus - but more speaking about what we are against. And while it is right that there

is a need for people to change, the first need is for them to hear and respond to the good news about Jesus. But by our words and actions - for far too long and in so many ways - the church has shown people it doesn't care and so is more and more often ignored and sidelined.

The call of Jesus - for those who are committed to following him - is to go and speak words of good news and hope and a possible future, to embrace those who are in need and to seek to draw them back to God.

It is a call - and a message - that will provoke hostility and criticism but it is the message we are called to take into the world.

If we are going to be persecuted - and, while we shouldn't seek it, we need to be prepared for that to happen - let's be persecuted for the right reasons, for sharing the good news of Jesus with a broken and suffering world.

Jesus speaks about acknowledging him or disowning him - and the consequences of doing so

**Matthew 10:32-33** NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

'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.

How do we disown Jesus by our words, our silence or our actions?

How can we acknowledge him before others this week?