

WHOEVER ACKNOWLEDGES JESUS

Matthew 10:16-42

Key Verse: 10:32

“Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.”

Matthew was a tax collector, who knew how to organize. He applied this skill in writing his gospel and summarized Jesus’ teachings in five major discourses, of which chapter 10 is the second. It is Jesus’ instructions for his disciples. In verses 1-15, Jesus called his twelve disciples and sent them on an evangelistic journey to the lost sheep of Israel. In verses 16-42, Jesus prepared them to confront the persecution that would surely come.

Thus far, Jesus’ ministry had been successful and very popular. People were amazed at what Jesus was doing: healing the sick, cleansing lepers, casting out demons, and even raising the dead. His disciples might have thought that this kind of success would continue indefinitely. But Jesus did not lead them to think that life would be easy. Rather, he foretold that persecution would come—even through their family members. At that time, it would be tempting for them to shrink back and even disown Jesus. But Jesus taught them to stand firm in their faith and acknowledge Jesus before people. Then they could grow as spiritual giants and world changers.

When we look at today’s passage, we feel that it is too challenging; nor does it seem relevant for us. In America, we have a Christian heritage and freedom of religion. Instructions on persecution seem more relevant in Muslim countries, or North Korea. Yet, in America too, there is persecution of Christians. The mainstream media often disparages Christian faith. Whenever anyone genuinely follows Jesus, they may experience strong opposition, especially from family members. There is also a possibility that more widespread persecution will come in America. We should be prepared to acknowledge Jesus. Then the time of persecution becomes a time to grow spiritually, become a witness to Jesus, and change the course of our family history, campus history and world history as well. In today’s passage let’s learn how to stand firm in faith during persecution and acknowledge Jesus.

First, be wise and innocent (16-25). Jesus prefaces this part by saying in verse 16a, **“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.”** Jesus was

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compelled to send his disciples into the world, out of his great compassion for lost people. But the world is full of evil people who are like wolves. In character, wolves are strong, fast, and aggressive. They know how to exploit weaknesses in their prey and show no mercy. In the same way, wicked people try to find and exploit the weaknesses of others. This is why many people hide their weaknesses. In contrast, the disciples, like sheep, were naïve and vulnerable. It seems that they would be devoured by people of the world. They would also face the devil's intimidation. It was dangerous. Nevertheless, Jesus did not overprotect them. He sent them into a hostile world to win a spiritual victory.

For this purpose, Jesus wanted them to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves (16b). Snakes understand their environment and know how to use it to their advantage. When they sense their opportunity, they strike immediately and decisively. We don't like people who are sneaky and opportunistic like snakes. So, we say, "You snake!" as an insult. But Jesus' point is that we should be wise in dealing with issues and people of the world. Doves are known to be faithful to their partners to the end. They are the symbol of purity, innocence, faithfulness, and peace. But doves are not so smart. We should not imitate doves in being naïve, but in being pure and innocent. If Jesus' disciples are only pure, gentle and innocent they will soon become the prey of wolves. On the other hand, if they are only clever like snakes, they will lose integrity as servants of God. We need to learn the good side of both the snake and the dove. Daniel is a good example. He was purely devoted to God and lived with integrity. At the same time, he was full of wisdom and spiritual insight in dealing with the evil people and difficult issues of his time. God's manifold wisdom and sovereign power have been manifest through him, even down to the present time. God used him as a world changer. Let's pray that God may help us to be wise and innocent. Then we will not be influenced by the world, but can be a good influence on others and evangelize effectively.

In verses 17-20, Jesus warned his disciples that opposition would arise from both religious and political leaders, and he taught them how to deal with it. **First of all, they should be on guard.** They should be spiritually alert, like soldiers in battle. They would be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues (17). They would be brought before governors and kings as though they were criminals (18). Before this painful opposition, they

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might be tempted to shrink back and lose their identity. But this was the opportunity for them to stand as witnesses of Jesus. The time of persecution is the time to witness to Jesus powerfully. How can we do that? Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would be with his disciples and speak through them (19-20). When we depend on him, the Holy Spirit gives us courage, wisdom, and power. We see this in the book of Acts. The early apostles boldly proclaimed the gospel to the Jewish religious leaders by the power of the Holy Spirit. They were flogged and put in prison. Yet they rejoiced to be counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name of Jesus (Ac 5:41). Paul and Silas preached the gospel boldly in Philippi. They were imprisoned and flogged. Yet they sang hymns of praise and thanks, and the Holy Spirit worked mightily to evangelize the jailer and his family (Ac 16:16-34). In this way, the gospel advanced during times of persecution.

In verses 21-23 Jesus warns that the scope of persecution will include family members and the whole society. Persecution by family members is particularly painful and difficult to bear. Brothers betray brothers to death; fathers betray their children, and children rebel against their parents and have them put to death. At that time, it is tempting to compromise or to deny the faith. But Jesus said, **“the one who stands firm to the end will be saved”** (22). Among us, Joann Ismael was strongly persecuted by her family members. But she stood firm and overcame by faith. She grew spiritually and her family members now have a new respect for her. Jesus also tells us that when we are persecuted in one place, we are to flee to another (23). Fleeing is not an act of cowardice. It is God’s wisdom for spreading the gospel. They would not finish preaching in Israel before Jesus rejoined them.

Our teacher and master Jesus was persecuted and called **“the prince of demons.”** So his students will be persecuted and slandered (24-25). Persecution should not surprise us. It has deep meaning. It is the evidence that we do not belong to the world, but to Jesus (Jn 16:19). Moreover, through persecution, our faith can be refined and we can take root deeply and grow. Also, we can be witnesses to Jesus. So, when persecution comes, we can be thankful and rejoice (5:12). In the history of Chicago UBF, there was a season of persecution from the mid 1980’s to the mid 1990’s. At that time, our Sunday worship service was full of the Spirit and power and was ever increasing. Many people deepened in their faith. It was a time of growth in breadth and depth. We can thank God in a time of persecution.

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Second, don't be afraid of people; fear God (26-33). In verses 26-31, Jesus told his disciples not to be afraid of people, but to fear God in the time of persecution. When persecution comes from parents, it may involve a threat to cut off the relationship, including financial support. Persecution in the workplace may cost a person their job. If it is through peers, it may result in being bullied, shamed and alienated. During persecution, we are tempted to fall into fear. When fear is planted in our hearts, it is tempting to compromise. What is fear? Where does it come from? During the Great Depression, people were fearful about their future security. At that time, President Franklin Roosevelt said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." He meant that the real enemy was not the situation, but the fear in people's hearts. It is Satan who works to plant fear in our hearts.

In verses 26, 28, and 31, Jesus urges, "**...do not be afraid of them....**" Then Jesus explained why. **First of all, because truth wins in the end (26-27).** Verse 26b says, "**...for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.**" Usually persecutors resort to deception and suppress the truth. They try to control everything secretly. Sometimes it seems that the power of darkness smothers the truth. But this does not last long. The truth will be disclosed and made known. Evil will be exposed. When we have confidence that truth wins, we can overcome fear and proclaim the gospel publicly (27).

Secondly, God alone determines the final destiny of us all (28). Even though persecutors may seem to have great power, it is limited. They can kill the body, but they cannot kill the soul. No one wants to suffer and die. Human beings have a strong desire to live in this world. Persecution is challenging to anyone. How can we overcome it? We should fear God. God has power to destroy both soul and body in hell. Death is not the end of our lives. After that, there is judgment. Hebrews 9:27 says, "**Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment....**" Since there is an eternal destiny after death, that is more important than life on earth. That is why persecutors do not have real power compared to God. Their threat is limited to our mortal bodies. But God has almighty power. He can give eternal life or eternal condemnation. He can save us or punish us. This God is the One to be feared. When we fear God, we can be free from fear of people. Then we can stand firm in our faith and witness to Jesus.

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There is an amazing document of early Christian history: it is the prison diary of a young woman. Her name was Perpetua, and she was a nursing mother who lived in Carthage.¹ In A.D. 202 she was arrested for being a Christian and threatened with death. Her father pleaded with her to recant for the sake of her newborn son. But she decided to face wild animals in the arena rather than deny Christ. She was trampled on and in great pain, but still alive. A soldier was sent to kill her. He was so afraid, he could not do it. So, she guided his sword to her throat and helped him to finish her martyrdom. How could she do this? She feared God more than her persecutors by the power of the Holy Spirit. Throughout history, countless Christians became martyrs. When we hear such stories, we are afraid. We think, “Oh no! I cannot be a martyr.” But we don’t need to worry about this in advance. Each person’s destiny is in God’s hand. What we should do is trust God. Then the Holy Spirit enables us to do all things. Once, D.L. Moody was asked, “Have you grace to be a martyr?” “No,” he replied, “I have not. But if God wanted me to be one, he would give me a martyr's grace.”

Another reason to fear God, not people, is that God loves us and values our lives (29-31). Sparrows are very small creatures, and pennies the smallest coins. Yet God loves and cares for sparrows as he does all his creation. God is most concerned about people. He knows each of us so well that he can tell the number of hairs on our heads. Do you know how many hairs you have? The number changes every day. God knows everything. This great God values our lives more than many sparrows. God loves us so much that he gave his one and only Son Jesus for us. Here, we can understand what “fear of God” means. It does not mean to be scared of God. It is to realize that God’s power, love and goodness are so much greater than anything else. As we realize we are the objects of God’s love, awesome respect and deep love arise within us. As we love God from our hearts, we are free from fear of people. Apostle John said, **“There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear”** (1Jn 4:18a).

When we fear God instead of people, we can be courageous and wise. We can overcome adversity and change the course of history. What then does Jesus want us to do? Let’s read verse 32. **“Whoever acknowledges me**

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/primary/perpetua.html>

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before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.” Jesus wants us to acknowledge him before people. Here the word “acknowledge” means to openly express our allegiance to him; it is to confess publicly what we truly believe. Romans 10:9 says, **“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.”** This public confession of faith is essential in our salvation. We must acknowledge Jesus at any cost. If we are in favorable circumstances, it is not so difficult. But at the threat of losing everything—including our lives—we can have a second thought. At this moment, we should remember Jesus’ warning: **“But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven”** (33). Oh my! If we are disowned by Jesus, we have no relationship with the Father and suffer eternal consequences. But if we acknowledge him, he promised to acknowledge us. When Jesus acknowledges us, we are most secure, and everything will be okay.

Third, love Jesus more than anything or anyone (34-42). People expect the Messiah to bring peace on earth. He does—that is true. Jesus is called the “Prince of Peace.” But many people don’t understand what true peace is. They think peace is a problem-free life with strong family ties. When one member of the family believes in Jesus as Lord, and loves Jesus most, the other family members feel betrayed. They think that the Christian stirred up conflict and broke their family unity. This leads to persecution. This is a necessary process to bring real peace. Jesus said in verses 34-36, **“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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.’”** This seems to be very harsh. When it happens, there is a temptation for believers to love their family members more than Jesus. But Jesus said, **“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. 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”** (37-39). We love our parents. We love our children. We love ourselves. How can we love Jesus more than these? It is very challenging. Yet when we remember that Jesus loved us most, even at the cost of his life, we can love him most. When we love Jesus most, we can

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genuinely love our family members and ourselves. This is not self-seeking love or conditional love, but God's selfless, unconditional love. This can be a foundation of true peace. Dr. Nabeel Quereshi² grew up in a very devoted Muslim home; his grandparents were Muslim missionaries. But he accepted Jesus as his Lord by the help of a Christian he met in college. When he read Matthew 10:32-39, he realized that he must acknowledge Jesus before his family members. This caused a family division. It was very painful to acknowledge Jesus, but he could do so when he loved Jesus more than anything or anyone. Since then, God has been using him as a very influential gospel preacher.

In verses 40-42, Jesus tells his disciples that they will not only receive persecution, but will also be welcomed by some. Those who welcome them will be rewarded by God. Even an act of giving a cup of cold water to Jesus' disciples will be remembered and rewarded by God.

Today Jesus has taught us how to live in times of persecution. We should not fear people, but fear God only. Furthermore, we should acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Then God will surely acknowledge us and bless us. This is the way of victory, joy and peace. Let's pray that we may acknowledge Jesus in our homes, campuses, workplaces and beyond.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bjv2t7PC7E>