

The world around us is a dangerous place, not merely because of the temptations, but because of persecution. When Jesus sent out the Twelve, he warned them. "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." (Matthew 10:16a) Sheep are largely defenseless against predators and wolves are used typically in the Bible to picture dangerous opponents (*cf.* Matthew 7:15; Acts 20:29; John 10:12). Jesus presents a very sobering picture of the danger into which he was sending his disciples. The situation has not changed. All who would live godly will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 2:12), a reality which every believer should consider possible.

I. The nature of persecution

1. *Persecution arises because of who we are in Christ.* Jesus forewarned His followers of persecution because of who we are in Him (Matthew 10:11; 5:10-11; John 15:18-21).
2. *Persecution arises because we belong to a different world.* Men hate Jesus and followers of Jesus for different reasons but essentially because we do not belong to this world but to God. The two worlds are in conflict and are as different as light and darkness.

As a result, our words and even our very actions reprove those who sin. Followers of Jesus are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19-21). Light reveals what they are doing as bad.

It is also possible that our words and actions may threaten those of this world. The Jewish leadership who wished to kill Jesus felt that their position of power was threatened (John 11:48). They did not want to give their authority over to Jesus. They were of a different world and not of His kingdom.

3. *Persecution because of Jesus reveals what truly is in our hearts.*

In the parable of the soils those plants which sprung up quickly were withered by the sun because the seed could not sink roots through the underlying rock. The sun, Jesus said, was trouble or persecution because of the word, which tested them (Matthew 13:21; Luke 8:13).

Peter wrote that persecution and trials come to prove our faith as genuine (1 Peter 1:7). Difficult times because of being associated with Christ show us if we truly do belong to Him and help us to grow.

II. The response to persecution

Jesus particularly warned His followers of coming persecution and gave them four commands on how to respond in Matthew 10:16-23. Although the first section of Jesus' talk in the chapter is directed at the Twelve Apostles and the immediate missions trip they were to take, the remainder of the chapter extends beyond them to all who would follow Jesus until He visibly returns to earth at the Second Coming.

1. *Be wise & innocent (v 16).* "Shrewd" (NIV) translates a term meaning wise or prudent. Being as wise or prudent as a snake probably means in this context to avoid danger as much as possible. (Consider the wise man who built his house on the rock successfully surviving the coming storm.) "Innocent" translates a word that was used to describe wine or metal that had no impurities and figuratively has the sense of being free from evil or guile. The significance is seen in other passages (e.g., Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:1ff; 1 Peter 2:20ff; 3:8-14).
 - a. Disciples of Jesus should have nothing evil in them, no evil actions or words (lying, stealing, etc.), which would allow a justifiable accusation.
 - b. Disciples of Jesus should be good citizens, such as paying taxes. Like Jesus who paid taxes (Matthew 17:24-27; cf. Romans 13). This wisely avoids trouble for wrong-doing and demonstrates the pure character which Christians should have.
 - c. Disciples of Jesus should not return evil for evil: no insult for insult, no threat for suffering.
 - d. Disciples of Jesus should not resort to evil (e.g. lying) to escape danger.
Though it is easy to condemn the radical failure in other professing believers, be on guard against the more subtle, yet equally evil failure in ourselves.
2. *Beware of men (v 17).*
 - a. There are at least two good reasons to beware of men: people can be the tools of Satan (*cf.* Ephesians 6:12; Matthew 16:23; 2 Corinthians 11:15) and people who do not know God through Jesus Christ will of themselves hate followers of Jesus (Matthew 10:22). Though we want to trust people, Jesus did not (*John* 2:24-25). Be on guard, even family members may turn against the believer (*Mt* 10:21).
 - b. In all this God has His purposes which may include being a testimony to secular or religious courts.
3. *Do not worry about what to say when arrested (v 19).* This is not a general promise to "inspire" our words, nor an excuse for not knowing the Word. This is a call to trust God when bringing testimony to government leaders. Sheep must trust the shepherd who protects and leads.
4. *Flee (v 23).* If the disciple is persecuted because of his faith, having shared the gospel and seen it rejected, then he is to flee. This is not saying to flee difficulty in sharing Christ, but persecution from having done so. This was also Paul's pattern.

Verse 23, a difficult passage, is variously interpreted. It may be saying that ministry to Israel will continue until Jesus physically returns. Resistance to the gospel and the sheep-among-wolves condition will also continue. Our responsibility remains in effect until His return: to be wise and innocent, to be on guard, not to worry what to say when arrested, and to flee when persecuted. It is important to stand firm.

Remember to be in prayer for oneself and for one another.