



THE FIRST SUNDAY IN END TIME – REFORMATION SUNDAY

Witnessing: Shrewd as Snakes; Innocent as Doves

Matthew 10:16-23 (NIV)

¹⁶ “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. ¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹ “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²² You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. ²³ 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.

About 2 months ago, I told you that Christianity’s pain because, as Jesus said, if you want to be his disciple, his follower, you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him. Today, that message is reinforced as Jesus is prepping his 12 disciples to go and proclaim his message to people, telling them: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.” (verse 16a) They’ll be hated by everyone because of Jesus. Friends, family will betray them. They’ll be persecuted. They’ll be arrested. They’ll be flogged. They’ll stand trial. They will be put to death.

And this still happens today. Christians are still killed for declaring Jesus as the one who kept God’s law perfectly for us, died on the cross to pay for our sins, and rose from the dead to guarantee that God has accepted Jesus’ payment on our behalf. On average, every day 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked. 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned. 5 Christians a day are abducted. 13 Christians are killed because of their faith. Yep, Christianity’s still a pain.

But what about here? Are we persecuted? We may not be arrested, abducted, or killed for our faith, but do you still feel it? Do you feel the social ostracization, that you’re not part of the crowd, that you notice that your kids don’t get invited to birthday parties, that you’re asked to work Sundays while others are not? Do you feel the persecution of simply being dismissed, not given the time of day because you’re one of those “Christians,” that they assume to know what you think, that you’re closed minded, that they aren’t going to talk to you because you don’t agree or fit the narrative of their life. Or do you experience that dismissal that when you do share your faith, the other person responds in a patronizing way saying that you are just confused about how the atonement works, that truths from the Bible are lacking, misinterpreted, or that they say that yours and their beliefs are basically the same, which shows you that they haven’t really listened to you or taken your words seriously?

If you are thinking right now that you don’t experience any of this, then how much of your faith have you shared with others? Have you remained silent, that people have no idea that you go to church or what church you go to or what you believe? Or have you been quick to agree with someone else and not tried to really understand what’s different about their faith and yours? Have you been the sharer of Jesus that he has called you to be?

Jesus sends us out like sheep among wolves, just like he sent the 12. The people of this world are naturally hostile to Jesus, to God. In fact, even we were at one time. But something changed for us. Through other people who proclaimed Jesus and what he did for us, our hearts were changed. We came to know that God loves us so much that he gave his one and only Son to live and die for us in our place. We came to know that our status changed from an enemy of God to one who is loved, one covered in Jesus’ perfection, adopted into his family. This makes us want to share our God with others so that the Holy Spirit can change their hearts too.

Jesus is sending us out like the 12 to stand in front of people and share him with them. “On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.” (verse 18) I can’t recall a time that I’ve stood before a governor or king, but I have found myself in front of a lot of different people at different times. No doubt you have to: the person sitting next to you on the airplane or at the game, classmates, parents standing outside with you to pick up their kids from school; coworkers; people who play rec league with you; the people on your hiking trail or up skiing with you on the mountain; the people you park your rv or set your tent up next to. And don’t forget the family - the parents, the children, the relatives – that God has placed around you. God has brought us before them to tell them what he has done for them.

But what do we say? Jesus told his disciples, “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 19-20) Is that promise for us or just

for the 12? Because I know a lot of times when I've been in front of people and not had the words that I thought I needed. My mind has gone blank. They said something and I had no idea how to respond, and I kind of didn't respond. There have been questions asked, and I didn't have the answer. It doesn't seem like God has held up this promise in my life.

But God does uphold this promise. It wasn't just for a limited time for the 12. He has recorded and preserved his Word for us to read and meditate on. He wants us to be in his Word so that these words come to mind when we're with others. I can't tell you how many times when Bible passages or paraphrases of them, little snippets, parts of creeds come to mind and then on to my lips when getting into these religious discussions. Catechism students, that's why I have you memorize so many Bible passages, so that these words do come to mind, and you can share them.

While God does and has given us words to speak, Jesus also tells us to "be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." (verse 16b) What does that mean? We can't escape the danger that exists for us in sharing our God, but we can have practical wisdom when doing so, like a snake. If we encounter in our conversations with others that they believe something that the Bible clearly teaches against, we should tactfully bring it up. But we don't do so recklessly, throwing caution to the wind, insulting them for what they believe, calling them stupid. We show our innocence as doves, approaching the person with curiosity over our criticism. We ask them questions. Try to be an expert in them. Show that we care about them by asking what they believe, trying to understand who they are, their past, their upbringing, how they understand words.

At the same time, we uphold God's Word. Being as innocent as doves, we don't compromise God's Word and just agree with everything that they say. We can ask curious questions meant for them to wrestle with their beliefs, trying to show them who God is and what he's done for them. We do that by saying something like, "Hey, I know this thing that the Bible teaches. I'm wrestling to understand how that works with what you believe. Can you help me understand?" Or, "I'm curious. I've read this in the Bible. How do you understand that?" Other times, when we don't know what to say, we are being as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves when we remain silent, when we ask for time to give an answer, when we ask for time to research and get back to the person.

That's kind of like Daniel. In our first Bible reading, we don't hear a defense from him when he was charged with defying the king's decree to pray only to him. Daniel doesn't speak a word to justify himself. He accepts the punishment as outlined by King Darius, even though King Darius himself doesn't want to carry it out. Even after Daniel is miraculously saved from the lions, Daniel praises King Darius and gives glory to God for saving him, which led to Darius declaring to his whole kingdom that all people are fear and revere Daniel's God.

Today, as we celebrate the historical movement of the Reformation, we can see also how God gave Martin Luther the words to say and how to say them. On April 15, 1521, Luther stood at a diet, a meeting of rulers, in a city called Worms, and was asked 2 questions. He was shown his publications and asked, "Are all of these your writings?" Then, "Will you recant (or take back) everything that you have written?" Luther's response: Give me time for an answer. They gave him a day. He came back explaining that he had written many things that were teachings upheld by the Roman Catholic Church. He couldn't take those back.

When asked for a summary answer on whether or not he would take back his controversial teachings that, according to the Bible, God declared people right with him through faith in everything Jesus did perfectly for us and that all our sins were paid for by his death, Luther is recorded as saying: "I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the council, because it is clear that they have fallen into error and even into inconsistency with themselves. If, then, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons, if I am not satisfied by the very text I have cited, and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God's Word, I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be either safe or honest for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." God gave him silence first, and then the words to speak the next day.

As we witness to our God and what he has done for us and all people, being as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves, we rest in the comfort that God is the one who sends us out, who gives us the opportunities to witness, who stands beside us and protects us as we do so, who gives us the very words to speak – even if it is silence. On top of that, when we are persecuted, God tells us to move on, that there will be another place we can go to for safety and another place to share him with others, that we won't finish this work until he returns on the Last Day. God help us to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves while we witness to him and all that he has done for us and all people. Amen.