

## ***Matthew 10:16-33: Expectations***

### ***Message:***

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Connecting to Part I, Last Week:***

So remember with me that this is the second part of a three part message we started last week. Last week we saw as Jesus prepared to send the Twelve apostles, his closest disciples, out to do the work that he's been doing. He lends them the Holy Spirit, and demands that as they go they take up postures of deep trust in God's providence and mutual hospitality with those they meet. They are to offer only peace to people, and avoid arguments or a desire for the last word; they can't scratch their itch to prove themselves in the right...even though they are. And if they come to a village or town where they can't find a single like-minded person who will offer them the most basic hospitality of a foot washing--however unlikely that might be--then they are to shake the dust off their dirty feet. And that lack of hospitality will bring down on the city a chosen condemnation even greater than the one Sodom and Gomorrah chose for themselves.

### ***Connecting to Part III, Next Week***

And what we'll see as we look at the remainder of Chapter 10 next week are the costs and the rewards that will come to the Twelve, and those who follow

after them.

***Claim: Audience:***

But to say “and those who follow after them” is to make a claim about what we’re reading today.

Because, depending on who we think Jesus is talking to, how we understand today’s passage might change.

Let me just reveal my cards. I think that when it comes to this passage, Jesus is talking to his disciples...but Matthew is talking to his first congregation. That is, I think Matthew, who God chose to write this inspired bit of Scripture, wants his young, early little church to realize that Jesus’ words to his disciples matter for them, too.

Jesus is talking to the Twelve, but he’s talking to them as the first of many to come, and Matthew needs his church to understand that what Jesus is saying to the Twelve is relevant for them. The Twelve can understand what Jesus is saying, but they can imagine how what he’s saying might be relevant for the Church to come, and the early Church and us today can see our situation in the world in what Jesus says here.

So. It’s for the Twelve, but Matthew wants his congregation to hear it for them, too. And we, way, down the line, can see ourselves here, too.

***Hinting At The End:***

And this makes sense, because the last word Jesus gave right before the passage we're reading today was one that pointed the Twelve to think about things far down the line. He said, "Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town." To talk about the day of Judgment is to talk about an expectation every Israelite held no matter what religious group they were a part of. They all expected God to arrive and sort out the good and evil that had filled up history, give reward and punishment for what people have done, and especially, because they were Israelites, what people had done to them, God's People. In fact, much of the difference, the internal arguing and fight, was around when that would happen, what shape that would take, what the punishments and rewards would look like.

For for Jesus to drop "day of judgment" language is to prick his listeners ears, orient the Twelve toward the future, toward what's coming, not just today or tomorrow, but sometime down the line. It's to set them up to think ahead.

***What He Says:***

Here's what he says, and I'm going to interrupt what I read here and talk about it as I go.

***"I am sending you out like sheep among***

***wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.***

First of all, sheep, wolves, doves, snakes, these are animals that exist, right? Not just in books, but in the lives of the Twelve, in the lives of our average Israelite. If Jesus were talking to us, he'd probably use different metaphors, it'd be all "cell phones and cars and air conditioning" or something. Our broad, shared experience with animals is generally limited to dogs and cats.

But remember that just a few sentences before this, we read last week as Jesus sent the Twelve out explicitly to the "lost sheep of Israel," and now, he's saying that those "sheep" out there are actually "wolves in sheep clothing," that the real "sheep" are the Twelve themselves. He's messing with their expectations. But he continues, explaining:

***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.***

And, in a society where the religious and civil institutions are tightly tied together, the Twelve will suffer at the hands of both. Local authorities, larger, state authorities, religious institutions: they will all be

against what the Twelve are doing, because they are all part of the same fabric, there's no separation of church and state as there is in our society. They are perceived by people as lying about God, even though they are telling the truth, and they are punished for it.

But the end result of these accusations of civil disruption and the wrongful punishments they're given, will be that the Twelve become "witnesses" to the Israelites and the non-Israelites, too. "Witness" is a translation; the word, in greek, is "martyr." But because that has become sort of technical, a reference to those who have been actually killed for following Christ, its translated this way.

The concept is simple enough, though: When people see and hear about what's happening to these followers of Jesus, they'll hear about Jesus, too. Those who hear may not be persuaded, of course.

***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.***

This is just in time accounting, except that the accounting is actually giving an account of what you're doing, not, you know, tracking real-time data, or something. Jesus promises that the Twelve will be

given what they need in terms of testimony, and they'll be given it by the very Spirit of God.

And it's interesting to me that Jesus says here don't worry about what sort of testimony you'll give, because what I would be worrying about is not what I'm going to say, but the fact that I'm going to be beaten and arrested, you know? The fact that I'll be put into a position where I have to say anything, anyway.

And we want Jesus to say that the words the Spirit of our Father will give the Twelve will be the words they need to be acquitted. But he doesn't say this.

***Then & Now, Near & Far:***

And before we keep reading, let's notice that what Jesus says the Twelve will experience is something that by-and-large the early church--Matthew's own people--experienced. It's something that Christians all over the world, although particularly in African and Middle Eastern places, experience today. This is especially true in places where there are religions or ways of being religious that are written into law.

If you combine this truth with the simple fact that Jesus is talking about the future, it's easy to think that Jesus was only talking to us, today, and not "really" talking to the Twelve at all. People do it. But it's wrong.

I want us to make a distinction between the near

future and the far future, here, because I think Jesus does. I think what we've read up to this point is about the near future, what the Twelve will personally experience.

But I do think, as Jesus goes on, he's talking to more than the Twelve, but those who will follow after them. I'll plead my case on this soon, and in fact, as we move forward in Matthew we'll see Jesus make a similar jump in a different scene. But, for now, this is what we read:

### ***Farther Future:***

***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.***

So. As far as we know, historically, this didn't happen to the Twelve. They didn't experience this before Jesus' death and resurrection.

Now, many of them lived a long time; some of them almost certainly experienced these sorts of things

after Jesus' death and resurrection; Matthew himself, writing this Gospel to his congregation, likely went through some of this, and very likely his little congregation did, too.

That said, though, the historical record doesn't give any evidence that this situation existed before Jesus' death and resurrection. Which means we can do one of two things, right? We can say, well, then the historical record, as large as it is, is wrong, or we can say, well, then Jesus is wrong. Or, a third way: That we're wrong, and when we read this and assume Jesus is talking about the short-term future, he's simply not. I land there.

And this would make some sense of Jesus' statement "Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

### ***"Before the Son of Man arrives"***

How we understand this idea of "the Son of Man coming" or "arriving" determines a lot when it comes to how we make sense of this passage. And most naturally, it's a reference to Jesus' return. He knows that he'll be going away; he knows that he'll be returning. Just because his Twelve don't understand this doesn't mean he doesn't; and Matthew's congregation of course does--they are on the other side of it, right, just like us?

Later, in Matthew 25, when Jesus is certainly talking about what we'd call "the end of the world as we know it," Jesus says the same things about the "Son of Man" arriving.

Most naturally, Jesus is referencing his arrival--one on the other side of his death and resurrection.

### ***"The Towns of Israel"***

So, then, the question becomes, what does Jesus mean when he says "Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

First of all, "going through" isn't in the greek. It's added in. But it's safe. To say "You will not complete the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes," if we're following what Jesus has said, seems to mean "going through them witnessing to him."

There are some different ways to understand what Jesus might be saying here. A couple of them focus on the timing of Jesus' return, a couple on the task of "going through witnessing" the Israelite cities. Frankly, I think the focus is on the task, not the timing.

Here's what I mean.

### ***The Towns of Israel: Timing: Mistaken Messiah***

Some people, emphasizing the timing in this passage,

will say that Jesus himself under-estimated how long he'd be away after his resurrection. I'm not threatened by that perspective; he himself says only the Father "knows the day and hour" at which he'll return. So. People will say he might have thought the Twelve, and those who follow after them, would still be going through Israelite towns when he arrives. I'm not in this camp, but I see the draw of it.

### ***The Towns of Israel: Timing:***

Some people, emphasizing the timing in this passage, read this is a recipe to force Jesus' return. They believe--and there's a lot of variation here, but it comes down to something like this--that you can write up a list of every Israelite town, find some parallel between the towns 2,000 years ago and the towns today, and organize an evangelistic tour, and as you get closer to the end of the list, you'll know Jesus is coming back. This isn't as in favor as it once was, for a thousand reasons, but mostly because it's totally wrong.

### ***The Towns of Israel: An Impossible Task***

Some people, emphasizing the task in this passage, read this as Jesus saying, simply, that the task he's setting the Twelve to is an impossible task to complete. He's saying "You definitely won't finish witnessing to all the Israelite cities before I return." It'd be like a parent saying "You definitely won't finish cleaning your room before I get back from the store."

Jesus is saying that there will always be towns in Israel, or extending this, as is more typically thought, there will always be Jewish people in the world who will need to know what the Church has to share about Jesus. Jesus is just laying out a fact, here, but not really demanding that we do anything about it.

### ***The Towns of Israel: Mandating a Jewish Mission***

But going a step further, some people, emphasizing the task in this passage, read this as Jesus saying, in effect, “Until I return, you will not complete your witness to the towns of Israel.” “Before” can be legitimately translated “until,” and in fact, usually is. In this case, then Jesus is simply mandating that the Church always be concerned with these people who are descended from Abraham. In saying “you won’t complete the task,” Jesus is saying “don’t stop trying to complete the task.” Jesus wants the Twelve--and those who follow them, we the Church--to make sure that we never give up on making sure the Jewish people also know about God.

I think, out of the options we have, that this last understanding is where I land. That Jesus says “you will not complete the cities of Israel” as a command, following the other commands he’s given his Twelve. And the Church, as an extension of the Twelve, is meant to continue bearing witness whatever the extension of the “cities of Israel” is, probably the Jewish people.

So Jesus is talking to the Twelve here about the far future, and about the difficulties they and those who follow after him will face, and yet, they have to continue in the tasks he's set before them until he returns.

***Basic Questions:***

And a basic question that I think is worth asking is, "Why follow Jesus if this is what you get?" A task that can't be finished, which you're obligated to take up?

Somewhere in the answer to this is the phrase, "counting the cost." This is the eyes-wide-open bit of following Jesus. The Church is meant to take up Jesus' work and role in the world until he returns, and it's so, so costly. To be hated by everyone, to be put to death, to have your family rise against you. These experiences will be true of the Twelve, for those who soon follow after them, and has been true of the Church over history, and is true of the Church today-- not where we are, not to the extent Jesus says here, but in places far away.

And yet, the Church hasn't stopped. Even when it's inconvenient to keep going. John, in his Gospel, shares a scene in which Jesus asks his Twelve, after he's been abandoned by many, "You don't want to go, too, do you?" And Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of

God.”

The rub of it is if we've come to believe that all Jesus reveals about God is true, then despite the costs that come of living for him, it's our only option.

And Jesus goes on to say this:

**Reassurance:**

***24 “The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 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! 26 “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. 27 What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. 28 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. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.[b] 30 And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.***

We could mine this passage for a thousand things but I

want to make a very simple point about it. Earlier Jesus had promised the Twelve, and it's a promise that the Church has leaned into over history, that the Spirit of our Father would give them the words they need when they are on trial simply for following Christ. It's a promise that God would be with them. And here, Jesus gives the Twelve the same promise. They aren't abandoned. Whatever terrible experiences they face for following Christ, because they live in places that stand against Christ, God will be with them.

Does this matter? How much do we value God with us, and not being abandoned?

***Allegiance:***

But Jesus continues. He says, "Whoever swears allegiance to me in front of others, I'll swear allegiance to them before my Father in Heaven; but the one who'd denies me before others I'll deny before my Father."

We could read this as a stick to the carrot we just heard. Here, an ominous warning; before a gentle reminder that God will never abandon us, no matter what fearful thing we face.

It could be that what he's doing is not so grim, though; it could be that Jesus is simply laying out that his denial and allegiance follow from ours.

He's talking to Christians, here, the Twelve, who have followed him, who are already on board with what he's doing. He's laid out for them--and for us, way down their line--what they can expect when it comes to doing as he asks. And he's made it very clear that to take up his way of life is to take up his way of life--to experience not only the presence of God, the intimacy of the Church, the power of the Spirit--resurrection--but abandonment, persecution, and now and then murder.

So he could simply be laying out a truth that if we decide to abandon Jesus, deny him, give allegiance to someone or something else, then Jesus will give us what we want. This is what some people argue, and I find it compelling.

We'll continue to see next week as Jesus lays out the costs and rewards of doing as he asks. But he's set expectations for his disciples now, and it serves us to consider just what our expectations for the Christian life are, too.

### ***Expectations:***

The problem with today's passage is that it has presented real problems for the Church. It has been used by Christians to build great walls between themselves. Because of course, in times of persecution, there have been those who have, out of fear, denied their allegiance to Christ. Brought before

councils, synagogues, rulers--whether soon after or long after Jesus' death and resurrection--they have capitulated to fear, and traded away their allegiance to Christ by denying their christian faith. At the same time, others have held to the Lord, and been punished for it. And when time moves on, and those who weren't killed are freed, they often don't find much room for empathy or forgiveness to those who didn't keep the faith they way they did. Those whose family members were killed for the Lord find it hard to accept the repentance of those who denied him. And the Church takes on unforgiveness, division, and resentment instead of leaning into the presence of God that Jesus promised it.

I think when the Church is at our best, we remember that Peter denied Christ not once or twice but three times, and Jesus welcomed him back in, and that, in the finally analysis the Bible bears a larger witness to grace and forgiveness than it does to abandonment. Even today's passage deals far, far more with the promise that God will be with us than it does with any sense that we would, in turning away from Jesus out of fear, be separated from him forever. The haunting note we all have to hear is that none of us knows when our death will come, and it is good to be sure our allegiance is to Christ whenever that should happen.

***Conclusion:***

And I could just do some rhetorical thing, invite us to

imagine what we would do if we were really threatened with death for following Jesus, but I think the more practical thing to do, right now, is simply to remind us that when we came to believe Jesus really was the image of the invisible God, and that what he shared with his first followers, these Twelve, was true, we weren't told this stuff. We weren't told that to take up his way of life in the world could cost us our whole world--our relationships, our comforts, our lives. We were often told something like "giving our lives to Jesus will keep us from hell" or "Jesus will make us happy" or something, positive, you know.

And this is good, in that Jesus is Good News, and has Good News for us. God's making good on his promises, God's going to redeem us and the world, and all the things we hear so often--nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus and God will work out all things for our good, God is for us not against us, and Jesus is with us always.

But to be invited into the redemption work of God is to be called to a risky task, too, and to be a part of the Church--even the part that has it easy most of the time--is to be connected, in some way, to those who are being asked to stand firm in the face of persecution and the threat of murder.

The Good News of Jesus comes to us, almost always, by way of our great needs, whatever they are, as we

realize that God will meet them. And it's a grace. But maturity in Christ means that we realize God has great need of us, and we, in turn, have to be willing to help meet whatever need God may ask us to meet in Christ's name.

To say that might mean our inconvenience or trouble for us is an understatement, and passages like today's remind us that we ought consider how to use these periods of blessing we find ourselves in for growth in trust, greater faithfulness, and service to God, instead of just relaxing into them.

Let's thank God that the Twelve took Jesus seriously, despite the cost to their comfort and lives; without them, where would we be? Let's not forget God's presence, our easy access to the creator of the universe, something that we simply have come to expect, but was crazy to imagine until Jesus helped make it so. If it ever does come up, let's offer grace to those who, out of a fear we can sympathize with, deny their allegiance to Jesus, knowing that we ourselves, a thousand times a day, make selfish rather than Christian choices.

Let's encourage each other to a mature faith that takes seriously the charge to meet the needs God gives us the chance to meet in the world, instead of seeing only God as one who meets our needs.

***Finally:***

Finally, today's passage puts our own complaints into context.

You know, we can, when we gather, be dismayed at almost anything: the lighting, the temperature, the music, the message. We can, when we don't get to see each other enough, be dismayed at how little we're seeing each other; when we see each other too much, get dismayed about how full our schedules are. The ability to feel cranky about something, put out by the capital-C Church and our own dearly-loved congregation is as deep as our hearts.

There's a thousand things, you know, to rub us the wrong way when it comes to following Christ, and yet, we just don't have it that bad. In fact, we have it pretty good most of the time.

And so Jesus' words today ought to, whatever else they do, drive us to be thankful, and make us more ready to meet what needs God invites us to meet in the world with gratitude and trust.