

## Dealing with Opposition Matthew 10:14-33

Can anyone doubt that Americans are increasingly divided? Where it comes to Federal politics, only 78,000 votes in key states decided the Presidential election in 2016, and a change of only 43,000 votes would have reversed the outcome of the 2020 race. Exactly half the seats in the US Senate is controlled by each of the two contending political parties, and the Democrats have only 10 more members than Republicans do in the House.

And this is because Americans' underlying worldviews are increasingly divergent, with some of us placing our faith in government to solve our problems while others relying more on God, on free markets or on their own resources. Some insist that human beings can control everything about themselves and their environment, while others acknowledge natural and biological limits on reality.

But these divisions don't just exist on the Federal level, pitting people in red states against blue states, or even those living in densely populated cities and suburbs against those of us in small towns or rural areas. No, such fundamental differences of opinion can be found these days even among the closest of friends. Congregations have recently experienced splits not just over what kind of music to play and when to require masks but also over what political stances they should take. And how many of us have suffered through those awkward conversations around the family dinner table when disagreements about race or the environment or human sexuality cause tempers to flare?

But the most explosive topic of all tends to be religion. After all, an increasing number of Americans have come to believe that what they call "spirituality" is simply a matter of personal taste or preference. Because they know they have a political right to believe whatever they want, they can't understand how Christ could possibly make exclusive claims on all of our lives. Many simply refuse to believe that Jesus is the only Savior or that He alone is the rightful ruler over everyone and everything, the only One Who gets to decide what is good and bad, what is right and wrong.

Yes, it's easy for us modern American Christians to pine for the "good ol' days," the days when Christian morals and ethics were respected or at least acknowledged across this country. But a glance at today's passage reveals that our current cultural conflict is actually just a return to the historical norm. After all, when Jesus sent His disciples out on their first mission trip some 2000 years ago, he warned them that they would encounter the same kind of hostility that modern American Christians increasingly experience.

And He made it clear that such opposition would come at them from every direction. Sure, they might have expected blowback from the councils and synagogues that Jesus discusses in verse 17 – after all, Jesus hadn't exactly been the best of buddies with the chief priests and the Pharisees up to that point. They might even have expected to get in trouble with the governors and kings mentioned in verse 18, for those with political power have always been jealous, suspicious of any person or belief system that competes with them for the love and loyalty of the people. Andrew Brunson certainly wasn't the first person to have a government throw him in jail because he was preaching the love of Jesus, and he won't be the last.

But in verse 21, Jesus points out that the family conflict that has become all too common in recent days should also not come as a surprise to His followers. He warned His disciples that the question of loyalty to Him would cause brothers to betray each other, and that even parents and children who disagree about the claims of Christ would deliver each other to death. From Muslim parents killing children who convert to Christianity to teens rejecting parents who refuse to celebrate their so-called gender identities, Jesus Christ has always driven wedges into the closest of human relationships.

And this only makes sense when we remember how the Christian faith turns what the world calls common sense upside down. As Jesus makes clear in His Sermon on the Mount, the world believes in using force to get its way, while Christians are taught to love our enemies. The world lives in order to satisfy its lusts while Christians are taught to give self-sacrificially, even to those who try to take advantage of us. The world is, in sum, focused on gratifying the self, while Christians are supposed to live for the glory of God and the good of others.

So, we should not be amazed that the self-centered, power-hungry world would hate and fear Christians who are so strange to them. After all, as Jesus points out in verse 24, disciples should not expect better treatment than their masters receive. So just as the world crucified Jesus, the more we Christians try to show and share His truth and love, the more we should expect our opponents to push back against us.

Okay, so if it's true that there's no way for Christians to avoid conflict with the unbelieving world, if it's true that opposition to Christ is not a bug but a feature of the Christian life, how are we supposed to deal with all this division and disagreement? Well, as is so often the case in Jesus' teaching, He gives us some examples from the natural world. He says we can learn important lessons from four different kinds of animals, lessons that will help us make our way through the hate and fear that will come our way whenever we confront unbelievers with the claims of Christ.

And when we look at the first of these examples, sheep in the midst of wolves, we are obviously reminded of what we have already learned – that it is normal for Christians to face opposition from the unbelieving world. But while we might be tempted to marshal our resources to fight back against our enemies and to work for their downfall, the sheep reminds us of how pointless, and perhaps even ridiculous that would be. After all, how much good would it do for a flock of sheep to plot and scheme against the pack of wolves encircling them? No, because they are absolutely helpless in the face of such fearsome predators, their only hope is in their shepherd, the One Who, as David says, will wield his rod and staff to drive them off.

Just so, in verse 19 Jesus tells His disciples to trust Him, even when they are arrested and accused because of their faith in Him. For He promises, "it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak." And how will we know what to say in the face of an increasingly hostile world? Jesus says that it is the Spirit of our Father Who will speak in us. In other words, even though we may be called at times to stand up before our persecutors, it is actually the voice of the Shepherd that will overcome the ignorance and hatred, the violence and abuse that are ranged against us.

The lesson we thus learn from the sheep is our total dependence on Jesus, for He alone can and will overcome whatever opposition the unbelieving world may bring our way. But that doesn't mean we should court danger, wandering up to every pack of wolves and inviting them to devour us. Instead, we need to learn a second lesson from a second animal – the serpent.

Now, we are no strangers to snakes here in Southwest Mississippi. As the weather warms up, we become increasingly wary of wandering off beaten paths, into the brush or the tall grass, the places where they like to hide. Well, in the face of opposition all around us, Jesus says we must be wise as serpents, knowing when to slip away from conflict. In other words, we must know how to pick our battles – sometimes standing our ground and sometimes cutting our losses.

After all, in verse 23, Jesus told His disciples that when they experienced persecution in one of the cities they would visit on their first mission trip, they should just move on to the next town. Of course, in verse 14 He also told them they should shake the dust off of their feet in the process, bearing witness against those who refused the claims of Christ. Just so, the sad truth is that everyone to whom we witness isn't going to respond to the good news with faith. Everyone isn't going to learn to trust Jesus, no matter how clearly we show His love and how warmly we extend His welcome. And so sometimes, like the serpent, we need to slip away. We need to move on, trusting our Shepherd not just to protect us with His rod and staff, but also to bring justice to those who reject His authority by rejecting His messengers.

But we shouldn't use this sort of serpentine craftiness as an excuse to hide our faith or mute our straightforward proclamation of the gospel. And to make this clear, Jesus points to our third example – the dove. For while snakes do their best to conceal themselves both from predators and from their prey, doves walk around out in the open in the daytime, feeding on seeds and grains on the ground. They are easily spotted even by beginning birdwatchers, being much larger than other ground-feeding songbirds, and taking wing with an unmistakable and rather loud sound. In fact, their city cousins the pigeons often gather in great numbers even in the most public of places, accustomed as they have become to the presence of people. But neither doves nor pigeons ever give anyone cause to be afraid.

Just so, Jesus says we should be as guileless as doves, straightforward and plainspoken in our words and our actions. Our lives should be an open book, so that everyone can see as well as hear the truth and love of Jesus Christ in us. As verse 27 says, we are to speak the truth of Christ in the light. We are to proclaim the claims of King Jesus upon the housetops. But we must do so in a spirit of innocence and purity, offering no offense on our own part – for the gospel itself is offensive enough to the pride of worldly unbelievers.

And that is in no small measure because of what Jesus tells us in verse 26 – when He comes again all the secret, self-centered, evil deeds of the world will be brought out into the light. When He comes again, as verse 15 says, those who reject Him will suffer the same sort of judgment that the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah received. No, there's just no getting around the sad and sobering truth that we find in verse 33 – Jesus will deny those who have denied Him. He will not protect either their souls or their bodies from Hell.

So, we should not be surprised that the unbelieving world doesn't want to hear any of that. We shouldn't be surprised that they despise our guileless honesty, or that they try to take advantage of our relative weakness. But instead of letting us fall into fear in the face of the persecution that is inevitable for all those who trust in Him, Jesus points to one last example, one last animal from which we can learn an important lesson – the sparrow.

Now, I suppose none of us give very much thought to sparrows – they're too small to pose a threat to anyone, much less to attract the interest of human hunters. In fact, in verse 29 Jesus reminds His

disciples that they could buy two sparrows for the smallest coin in use at the time. Just so, the proud, violent, self-centered world may have just as little respect for Christians, for our example of selfless love or for our teachings about the need for repentance and faith. But Jesus reminds us that just as God knows when every sparrow falls to the ground, God knows the number of hairs on all our heads. And no matter how little the world may think of us, God thinks we have great value – that we are worth more than many sparrows.

Yes, that's the good news. No matter how helpless we may appear in the eyes of the world, Jesus promises that those who endure to the end will be saved. No matter how little the world may be interested in our straightforward, honest confession of faith in Christ, Jesus promises to confess us, to claim us before the Father in Heaven. So, no matter what persecution may come our way for claiming the name of Christ, we have no reason to fear. For the Father who loves us sees everything that we are going through. The Spirit of the Father is with us even in the midst of our greatest conflicts. And the Son of Man is coming again to make all things right.