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Body

1.

Theme: Sheep Among Wolves v. 16. "Sheep among wolves" is the key theme and illustration from here to the end of the chapter. Christ said,

1.

Text

1.

16 Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

2.

Description of reality: Sheep among wolves. First Christ gives a description of reality—He sent His apostles out " as sheep in the midst of wolves. "

1.

Why does Jesus call them sheep? You know, if you put a sheep and a goat next to each other, both with short hair and neither with horns, it can be difficult to tell which is which. Our neighbors have some short stocky animals with horns that go "baaaah" and will follow you along the fence, and we wondered whether they were sheep or goats, so I looked up the differences between sheep and goats. Goats like to go exploring; they will come right up to you and might eat out of your hand. But sheep are paranoid; they get distressed when separated from their flock. Sheep are paranoid because they are easy prey. Defenseless. And that is precisely the contrast here between sheep and wolves. Sheep are easy prey, and wolves are their predators.

Wolves eat sheep.

2.

Now Christ isn't telling you to be paranoid; He's not telling you that everyone is out to get you; that would be untrue. But He is telling you to beware; to watch, to be on your guard. Don't give unbelievers an easy excuse to shut down this church or your Bible study. Christ tells you to "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.
" This means
do
follow the zoning laws, but know your first amendment rights as well. Serpents are wise in a way foxes are not—foxes may cheat, steal, and break the law, but serpents wind their way around obstacles and prefer to slither quickly out of your way and out of sight. But your wisdom in navigation and escape must never be a cloak for vice; Christ commands you to remain " innocent as doves.
" Doves are gentle, neither predators nor pests. After receiving Christ's instruction Peter later wrote "
Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, that when they speak against you as evil doers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation....For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.
" (
1 Pet. 2:12, 15
) "
Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.
"

3.

The Outset of Persecution: "Beware of men" vv. 17-18. Christ warns us at the outset of persecution to

1.

Text

1.

17 Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues,

2.

18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.

3.

Warning v. 17a. He gives the warning to "Beware of men" and then explains His meaning by giving the reason.

4.

Reason vv. 17b-18. The reason is that unbelievers will persecute Christians in the church and in society, in the ecclesiastical and civil realms.

1.

Ecclesiastical persecution: Jewish v. 17b. The courts Jesus mentions were the Jewish courts, subject to Jewish law. Punishments of these sorts were inflicted in the synagogues, the local Jewish houses of worship.

2.

Civil persecution: Roman v. 18a. The governors and kings were Jewish and Roman.

3.

Examples.

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Ecclesiastical. The scribes and Pharisees persecuted Christ and His apostles and put Christ to death on the cross. Before he was a Christian, Paul beat Christians in synagogues and stood by as Stephen was martyred (**Acts 22:19-20**), and in the service of Christ he received forty lashes minus one five times from the Jews. (

2 Cor. 11:24
) The Jews drove Paul and Silas from Thessalonica and threatened the Christians who remained. (
Acts 17:1-10
)

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Civil. Christ was tried before Pontius Pilate the governor; Paul before governors Felix (**Acts 23:33-24:27**
) and Festus (
Acts 25-26
), and King Herod Agrippa II (
Acts 25:13
). King Herod Agrippa I killed James the brother of John and arrested Peter. (
Acts 12:1-3
) Most of the apostles were martyred—by sword, hanging, crucifixion, being thrown from the pinnacle of the temple, beaten, beheaded, whipped, speared, shot with arrows, and stoned.

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Church History. This struggle has continued throughout church history. Early Christians were accused of cannibalism and atheism. Nero massacred Christians, Christians were fed to lions in the arenas. Justin Martyr, Ignatius, and Clement of Alexandria were martyred for their obedience to Jesus Christ.

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Polycarp. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, the last to be taught by the apostles, called to condemn the Christians by saying "Away with the atheists!" pointed his finger at the unbelieving crowds instead, and said "Away with the atheists!" Commanded to "Revile Christ," he testified, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has never done me wrong; how can I blaspheme Him, my King, who has saved me?" He asked not to be nailed to the stake where he was burned to death, saying "He who strengthens me to endure the flames, will also enable me to stand firm at the stake without being fastened with nails." While he prayed with a loud voice, "Lord God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I praise you that you have judged me worthy of this day and of this hour, to participate in the number of your witnesses, and in the cup of your Christ," the flames consumed him. [1] Though persecution lessened after the Edict of Milan legalized Christianity in 313, Donation of Constantine, in the West and throughout the world unbelievers still persecute Christians.

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Purpose v. 18b. Despite its terror, God has a good purpose even for persecution. Christ says you will be persecuted " for my sake, to bear witness." For a testimony. Our OPC missionary Bruce Hunt's book by that title recounts his imprisonment by the Japanese in Korea for refusing to worship the emperor. He bore witness of the grace of salvation through Christ to the guards who tormented him, unbelievers in Korea, and to us today, even writing hymns of praise borne out of his wretched suffering in prison. When you are persecuted, the world's eyes are on you. Will they see Christ in you, the hope of glory?

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Do Not Be Anxious How You Are to Speak vv. 19-20. When you are called to defend yourself, Christ tells you He will protect you, and will provide the words you need.

1.

Text

1.

19 When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour.

2.

20 For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

3.

Christ's encouragement here was true in a special way for the apostles. Christ gave them the Spirit of truth to remind them of what He taught, the keys of the kingdom—which is the

gospel—to open heaven to men or shut them out, and the Spirit was poured out upon them in abundance and power so Peter at Pentecost and Paul in the temple and on trial spoke with power for the conviction and conversion of those who heard. But Jesus Christ is with you also by His Spirit and His word. Though you may be on trial or even in prison for the sake of the gospel, the gospel is not chained! It is the power of God unto salvation! There is a place for the Alliance Defense Fund—be wise as serpents!—but you need not fear that you have no defense when you are on trial for the gospel of Jesus Christ, for the gospel is its own defense. Christ's encouragement here calls you to decide today—when you are put on trial for being a Christian, will you save your life, or will you proclaim the gospel? "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
" (
Matt. 10:39
) You may find it again in this life, if not in the life to come, but the one way to that life is by clinging to the gospel even more than to life itself. Give me my Savior, and I will not fear death.

4.

Endure to the End vv. 21-22. Once you testify you will face the consequences, and amidst them Christ gives you a command.

1.

Text

1.

21 Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death,

2.

22 and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

3.

Unbelievers' opposition to Christ can, has, and will bring these terrible things to pass. If you truly

believe the prophecies of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation, you know that holy wars will never be only a thing of the past. They are also the future. Perhaps we should call them "unholy" wars, because God promises unbelievers will make war against Christ and His church. The world's hostility to God runs even deeper and stronger than do family ties.

4.

But amidst that hostility and tumult, Christ calls you to endure to the end. Make the good confession, run the race of faith and obedience to the end, even resisting sin unto the point where your own blood must be shed!

5.

Now why would you be willing to do this? Because "the one who endures to the end will be saved. " Because salvation is worth more than sin; because your life is secure in the hands of your Savior. No one can snatch you out of His hand. " Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. " (**Rom. 8:28-29**)
"How can I blaspheme Him, who has saved me?"

6.

Flee If You Can v. 23. If God calls you ultimately to die for His glory and the truth of the gospel, count it an honor. But be wise as serpents.

1.

Text

1.

23 When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

2.

There is some confusion regarding whether Christ is speaking of His second coming at the end of history, the end of His apostles' first 3-day evangelistic training mission, Christ's resurrection appearances, or the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. I believe the answer is simple. The apostles did not finish going through all the towns of Israel, nor has the church finished going through all the towns of the world, with the gospel, before Christ's second coming. The point is that when you meet insurmountable persecution in one place there is always a more receptive place to bring the gospel elsewhere. The message is the same as in v. 14. In the long term, be willing to suffer and die for Christ, but in the short term, flee persecution if you can. It is a sick perversion of Christ's teaching that we should seek martyrdom, that we should invite persecution. May it never be! Be innocent as doves.

3.

Conclusion

1.

We see in this that the gospel must take center stage.

1.

Beware of men, because the gospel will draw persecution.

2.

But do not be anxious about what you are to say, because the gospel is your defense.

3.

Endure to the end because the gospel is true!

4.

Flee if you can because the gospel must be preached.

5.

Does the gospel take center stage in your life? When someone cuts you, do you bleed the gospel, or bitterness, rage, envy, slander, reviling for reviling? The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of your persecutors.

6.

Amidst the difficulty persecution brings I want to encourage you that Christ still rules and defends us from all His and our enemies. In our country Christ has even institutionalized His protection in the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which begins with these words, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Just yesterday the news came out that the San Diego County Chief Administrative Officer apologized for sending the cease-and-desist order to that Bible study in Bonita, CA, and withdrew it because it was wrongfully issued; a lower officer misapplied the law but in recognition of the First Amendment the chief officer righted the wrong. You remain sheep among wolves, and so must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. But despite your weakness, the preaching of the gospel brought about our First Amendment freedoms, and by the power of Jesus Christ His gospel will endure, even if those freedoms are taken away.

1B. K. Kuiper, The Church In History, p. 63.