

3. Stories of Jesus
Sharing the Cross
Matthew 10:24-39

When Jesus sent his disciples out two by two to extend his ministry of healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons and reclaiming sinners, he gave them the authority to do these things in his name. And he gave them the authority to proclaim his message of God's grace and forgiveness.

However, Jesus warned his disciples that if they accept the power and authority, they had better be prepared to accept the persecution as well. Jesus knew from his own experience that his message of grace and forgiveness would not be well received by some. There were those who believed fervently that they were doing God's will when they shunned sinners. To offer grace and forgiveness to sinners was heresy. And for Christ to say that he had the authority to forgive sinners was an even greater heresy. Only the priests of God who serve in the temple have the authority to forgive sinners. Jesus knew that when his disciples offered forgiveness in the name of Christ, there would be many who would be outraged. They would feel it was their duty to punish the disciples, because the disciples themselves were doing something terribly sinful.

This would include people who were once the disciples' friends and neighbors. It would even include their own families. They would be shunned and rejected by people they loved.

Jesus knew the disciples would be tempted to keep quiet and not share the good news of salvation by faith. They could avoid the controversy and continue to enjoy their families and their friends. The problem with that is that they would lose their souls.

Our souls are like the flames on a candle. Every Sunday we put out the candles on the altar without even touching the flames. You just hold the bell of the candlelighter over the flame and the lack of oxygen puts it out. The same is true of our souls. When we hide our deepest thoughts and beliefs, when we refuse to say that we really think, our souls begin to suffocate. Eventually they will die.

The disciples had been transformed by Jesus' message of God's love and grace. They were different people because of what they had heard Jesus say and seen Jesus do. If you could look into their heart of hearts, you would see Jesus. However, a sad thing happens to your soul when you hide the beliefs which are the foundation of your life. Slowly but surely those beliefs grow weaker until they finally die. And your soul dies with them. You lose your integrity and self-respect. When a Christian decides to avoid persecution by refusing to talk about Christ, it's just a matter of time before he dies inside.

Jesus told his disciples that losing their souls was far worse than anything their critics could do to them. If you have a choice between living a pleasant, comfortable life and being dead inside and dying with your soul alive and well, Jesus tells us you are far better off to choose the latter. They may kill the body, but they cannot take eternal life from you. But you can choose to give up eternal life voluntarily for the sake of safety and comfort.

Now, we would never say that we are keeping quiet in order to avoid persecution. What we say is that we are keeping quiet in order to avoid conflict and maintain peace. But Jesus said that he didn't come to bring peace to the world. Don't think you are doing the work of Christ if you are being silent in order to keep the peace. Christ wants us to struggle over these issues until we finally come to see what is right and true. The nation will be divided. The church will be divided. Families will be divided. That's all right. It's the only way to get at the truth.

I confess to you that I always struggle with preaching on this text. Where do we fit into this? How many of us have ever been persecuted for offering forgiveness and grace to another person in the name of Jesus Christ?

I have a small cross that I wear on my lapel sometimes. You know that I have never had anyone say anything unkind to me because of that cross. I did have one man, a total stranger, walk up to me and look around to see if anyone was listening to us, and he gives me this look like, "Pretend we're not talking to each other." And he whispers to me, "I like your cross." And he quickly disappeared into the crowd, as if he were escaping from some secret police.

We live in a society in which the vast majority of people are Christians. When we share the gospel, most of the people we talk to are already believers. Even if we were to share the good news of God's love in Christ Jesus with a person of another religion or a non-religious person, they probably would be very polite in telling us "Thanks, but no thanks." They are the ones who are afraid of being persecuted.

If we suffer persecution for our faith in Christ, more than likely it will be persecution by other Christians who have a different understanding of some doctrine or social issue than we do.

There have been many in Christendom through the ages who have been persecuted for telling the truth and for standing up for what is right. Who is it that persecuted them?—other Christians.

Martin Luther was persecuted for saying that we all have the authority to offer forgiveness in the name of Christ. Who persecuted him?—Christians.

Galileo, a committed Christian, was persecuted for saying that sun does not circle the earth, the earth circles the sun. Who persecuted him?—Christians.

John Wesley had to be rescued from mobs and was constantly maligned. Who persecuted him?—Christians.

During the Civil War thousands died because they felt call by Christ to fight to free the slaves. Who killed them?—Christians.

In the early 1900's many Christian women were persecuted and even sent to jail for claiming the right to vote. Who led the fight against them?—Christians.

In the 1960's Martin Luther King, a Christian minister, heard Christ call him to offer up his life fighting against the evils of segregation. Who persecuted him and his followers and eventually took his life?—Christians.

It sounds like I am saying that Christians are evil people. That's not what I am saying at all. These people who were persecuted were Christians as well. What I am saying is that even in a Christian society people are persecuted for speaking and acting in the name of Christ.

Every one of you knows that if you were to say what you believe as a Christian about certain issues to certain people in certain places, you would be persecuted. And many of your persecutors would be Christians.

If you take a stand, you will be persecuted.

Knowing this, we have to make a choice. We can speak up and be persecuted. Or we can be silent and lose our souls. Jesus tells us to speak up.

But we must speak up in love. It doesn't take much imagination to see what would happen if we Christians simply stood up and proclaimed loudly what we believe. For each issue you would have two sets of Christians shouting at each other and persecuting the devil out of each other. Even worse, when other Christians take stands that we disagree with, we may be so angry with them that we persecute them.

If we are not to lose our souls, we must be willing to say what we believe and accept the consequences of speaking out.

A hundred years from now Christians will look back at the beliefs of some of today's Christians and be astounded that Christians could actually hold such unchristian beliefs, just as we are astounded that Christians once could actually believe in slavery. The Church will grow in its understanding of what is right and what is wrong. And it will be because some had the courage to proclaim from the rooftops in broad daylight what Christ whispered to them alone in the darkness. They will be those who truly have faith in God, who trust God to save them--not to save them from persecution, but to save them in the midst of persecution. They trust that God will save their souls

Don't be afraid of conflict. Be afraid of losing your soul to avoid conflict. Say what you believe and trust God to take care of your soul.

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