

Reactions to the revolution—Matthew 10:16-42

Theme: We will face stiff opposition in our families and communities but Jesus still calls us not only to embody his values but to proclaim them from the rooftops

When we live the values of Jesus' revolution, when we speak about them to our neighbours and work colleagues, we will get a reaction.

Some—perhaps a majority—will resent our lifestyle and message, they'll fear what it will do to their way of life and they will oppose us, sometimes violently. Jesus warns us to expect this and assures that God will enable us to face whatever comes our way. Of course, some will welcome us and respond to our message.

Questions:

1. How do we feel when you hear stories of Christians being persecuted in other countries?
2. Have we ever felt persecuted for our faith? What did it feel like? How did we react?
3. Do we feel that Jesus' words in this passage apply to us or only to those who are called to be 'missionaries'?
4. Do we find it easy to talk about our faith in Jesus? Can you give a reason for your answer?
5. Do we think our faith is a private matter or something to shout from the rooftops?
6. Do people notice things about the way we live that prompts them to ask questions about what makes us tick? How do we feel about that?
7. How do we account for people seeing what Jesus did as the work of Beelzebub (v25; see 9:34; 12:24)?
8. What do we think Jesus means in the second half of v23? Does Daniel 7:13-14 help us to understand it? [it will help you to read the notes at this point]
9. What does it mean to 'fear' God?
10. If Jesus didn't come to bring peace (v34) why did he call the peacemakers blessed (5:9)?
11. Is there anything we can do to help families where there are tensions because some are Christians and some are not?
12. How do we think those who give us a hearing will be rewarded? [see the notes on v40-42 for guidance]
13. What does this whole chapter teach us about how we should go about sharing our faith?

Your stories:

Potted summary

Having commissioned his disciples, Jesus warns them to expect opposition, telling them not to be afraid of what the world throws at us but rather, through our fear of God, to grow in trust of his care.

Any opposition is the outworking of the effect of Jesus' mission which is to bring division over where real authority lies—with human rulers or with God's anointed king. All who receive this king's messengers will be rewarded.

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What the passage is about....

The revolution creates a backlash but this is not a reason for us to keep quiet about it. Rather, Jesus reminds us that we need to trust God to help us when the pressure's on.

V16 is the key verse in the whole discourse (10:1-42), summing up Jesus' commission (he's sending them) and his followers' character: disciples' lives are marked by two qualities:

- Innocence—we are forgiven and our lives are being shaped according to the ethics of Jesus' revolution. Sheep and doves were both animals associated with gentleness and their usefulness to people; disciples should be the same. The sheep image is also one of vulnerability: Jesus sends the weak to the strong; there's something of this reflected in Paul's understanding of his ministry in 2 Cor 6:3-13; 12:7-10

- Initiative – snakes were noted for being cunning. We're called to fearless witness to Jesus and his revolution but this does not mean being reckless with our own lives. For instance, when attacked, running away is a good choice (23) if it's available to us (see Rom 12:17-21; 16:9)

Jesus' words in this discourse fit both the immediate context of the Twelve's first mission (sometime in the early 30s in Galilee and the focus of v1-15) and the later, broader mission of the church as outlined in 28:18-20 (the focus of v17-42). As in the previous study, this should not be read as a blueprint for mission but a description of how it will be for us in the world and principles that will help us to face it with faith.

1) risk (17-25)

While some will receive the disciples and listen to their message (11-13, 40-42), many will not and the opposition will come from all quarters. But Jesus tells us that this is not a reason to keep our heads down—quite the reverse.

It's being Jesus' disciples that lands us in trouble ('because of me' 18, 22) and so he tells us to be on our guard (17), that is watching what's going on and how people are responding. We shouldn't go looking for a fight. But if one comes our way we need to trust God because he'll supply the words we'll need to use when hauled into court. There are 2 things to note here:

- In v17, the word translated 'synagogues' really means 'assembly' and refers to town or village councils that had the right to administer punishment for breaches of the peace.

- The reference to Beelzebub in v25 indicates that some of the opposition that we will face is completely irrational and explainable only in terms of satanic forces being ranged against us. Jesus was accused of being in league with the devil (9:34, 12:24) as people refused to accept his works as

a sign of God's in-breaking Kingdom and thus had to see it as a satanic deception.

The key point in this section is that there are rival ways of seeing the world—so called worldviews—that are not just matters of opinion but of truth and power. Jesus' revolution is a challenge to the powers-that-be and they will fight back using all the weapons of repression at their disposal—informants, courts, beatings, executions.

But Jesus hints that it will not be long before his disciples know for sure that he's the one with all authority: v23b is a veiled reference to Daniel 7:13-14 which is not about Jesus' return to earth but his vindication by God following the cross and resurrection. Seven times Matthew refers to this passage—10:23, 16:27-28, 19:28; 24:30; 25:31; 26:64 and 28:18—and each reference concerns Jesus being the one who shares God's authority.

It is because Jesus is the king of the universe that he is able to assure his followers that God's Spirit will inspire their words when they are hauled before the courts. In this clash of worldviews, the sheep are able to stand their ground against the wolves and triumph—albeit through martyrdom (Rev 7:13-17).

2) relationship (26-33)

The previous section could leave us feeling fearful—following Jesus means an early grave! So three times Jesus says 'don't be afraid' (26, 28, 31), meaning 'don't fear your opponents'. Rather we should fear God for out of that relationship comes trust and the ability to face whatever the world throws at us.

He first stresses that we should seize the initiative and not keep our faith hidden (26-27); better for us to proclaim what we know on our terms than have to defend ourselves against our opponents cross examination. This is an echo of 5:14-16 with more of a focus on what we say rather than what we do. People might not want to listen and we might be afraid of the consequences of them hearing, but it's better to take the initiative and go into the wolf pack.

Jesus' reason for our boldness is simple: our opponents can only kill our bodies, they cannot harm our souls if we have put our trust in God (the word means not so much 'soul' as opposed to body but our true life which is hid with God). Again using an illustration from nature (see 6:26-30), Jesus reminds us that birds are two-a-penny and yet God knows all about them. How much more will he care for those who trust him.

Finally, in a bold reminder of his authority, Jesus declares that those who remain loyal to him will benefit from his loyalty on the Day of Judgement (33). This is not a matter of private faith but public declaration. We cannot be a secret

disciple for long: as we live his revolution, sooner or later we get asked to explain ourselves—how we respond has eternal consequences.

3) radical upheaval (34-42)

Jesus sets our experience of opposition in the overall context of his mission. At first sight what he says is rather strange because the Messiah was expected to usher in God's reign of peace and justice (Isa 9:6-7; 11:6-9). But Jesus' point is that people have to decide for or against him; no one can be neutral and indifferent. Hence he brings conflict to families, households and nations (a fulfilment of Micah 7:6)

The radical nature of Jesus' call means we have to decide between family and God's Kingdom. And it will feel like a sword being thrust into people's hearts, rendering families asunder. But we need to remember that one of the core values of the revolution is peace-making (5:9). True peace only comes through following Jesus and it is those who choose not to who will often be the cause of division and conflict. Our conduct, however, should do nothing to stir up such conflict. Rather our aim is to bring peace by helping people to be reconciled to God and hence one another.

Peacemakers often pay a heavy price. Jesus carried a cross—not a piece of Christian jewellery but a Roman gibbet—and we are called to do the same. Peace comes through the shedding of blood—Christ's and possibly ours as well. This is a lesson Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther-King knew only too well.

But there is encouragement at the end of this long discourse: Jesus reminds us in v40-42 that some people are receptive to our message (see 11-13). This final paragraph recalls the hospitality enjoyed by the disciples from people of good will. Such hospitality—given what Jesus has said—could be costly for those offering it. So it indicates at least a level of interest in what we have to say that goes well beyond the casual.

Who are the prophets and righteous ones that Jesus refers to here? Us. We take God's word and God's new way of righteousness (spelled out in ch 6) to anyone who'll listen. Those who receive us will be rewarded—possibly a reference to hearing what we say with understanding and faith and so start on their journey to salvation. Indeed anyone who offers us hospitality in a world of hostility will be rewarded in some, as yet, unspecified way (we'll have to wait until 25:31-46 for Jesus to flesh this out).

This is a hugely encouraging conclusion to the discourse: despite the opposition—which will be fierce at times—there will be people who will welcome us, listen to us and receive our message as God's word to them. So, let's go and tell them.