

**Matthew 10**  
**Discipleship Masterclass**  
**Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool**

Bishop Nicholas Ridley, a passionate defender of biblical beliefs, was martyred in 1555 during the reign of Queen Mary – bloody Mary as later generations have come to know here.

This account of his death comes from the classic "Book of Martyrs" by the English protestant John Foxe published in 1563...

*Dr Ridley, the night before execution, ... had himself shaved, and called his supper a marriage feast; he remarked upon seeing Mrs Irish (the keeper's wife) weep, "Though my breakfast will be somewhat sharp, my supper will be more pleasant and sweet"...*

*When they came to the stake, Mr Ridley embraced Latimer fervently, and bid him: "Be of good heart, brother, for God will either assuage the fury of the flame, or else strengthen us to abide it."... Dr Smith then preached a short sermon against the martyrs, who would have answered him, but were prevented by Dr Marshal, the vice-chancellor...*

*A lighted faggot was now laid at Dr Ridley's feet, which caused Mr Latimer to say: "Be of good cheer, Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day, by God's grace, light up such a candle in England, as I trust, will never be put out."*

*When Dr Ridley saw the fire flaming up towards hi, he cried with a wonderful loud voice, "Lord, Lord, receive my spirit." Master Latimer, crying a vehemently on the other side, "O Father of heaven, receive my soul!"...*

*Well! Dead they are, an the reward of this world they have already. What reward remaineth for them in heaven, the day of the Lord's glory, when he cometh with his saints, shall declare."*

On the whole though I think it has to be said that martyrdom isn't something that our culture and society thinks of at all positively.

If you haven't come across Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy already you soon will. A kind of atheist Narnia with a touch of Lord of the Rings epic style thrown in the best selling books are currently being made into a film by Peter Jackson's (director of the Lord of the Rings movies) New Line Cinema company.

This extract, from the second book, *The Subtle Knife*, shows one of the heroes of the books, adventurer Lee Scoresby, taking on a,

Skraeling, a representative of the church – which is the great enemy of the stories.

A "dæmon" in the Dark Materials books is not something evil but a kind of soul – only outside the person and taking the form of an animal. Lee's dæmon is a hare called Hester and the Skraeling's an owl...

*"Behind you Lee," Hester said, and he whipped round, diving, as an arrow hissed over his shoulder.*

*He fired at once. The Skraeling fell, grunting, as the bullt thudded into his leg. A moment later the owl dæmon, wheeling on silent wings, swooped with a clumsy fainting movement at his side, and half-lay on the snow, struggling to fold her wings...*

*"It's too late," said the Skraeling... "I have already sent a messenger bird. The Magesterium [highest council of the church] will know of your enquiries... It confirms what we thought... You are an enemy of the church Lee Scoresby..."*

*The owl was making soft hooting noises, and raising and dropping her wings fitfully.... Even in the fog-thick dimness Lee could see that the man was going to die.*

*"Reckon my bullet must have hit an artery," he said. "Let go my sleeve and I'll make a tourniquet."*

*"No!" said the Skraeling harshly. "I am glad to die! I shall have the martyr's palm! You shall not deprive me of that!"...*

*...with a bleak little shiver the ole-dæmon disappeared. The Skraeling's soul was gone. Lee had once seen a painting in which a saint of the church was shown being attached by assassins. While they bludgeoned his dying body, the saint's dæmon was borne upwards by cherubs and offered a spray of palm, the badge of a martyr. The Skraeling's face now bore the same expression as the saint's in the picture: an ecstatic straining towards oblivion. Lee dropped him in distaste...*

*Lee had never enjoyed violence, and he hated killing... "No sense in thinking that," said Hester. "He didn't give us a choice, and we didn't shoot to kill. Damn it, Lee, he wanted to die. These people are insane."*

So which is it – heroes or madmen?

Is facing persecution as a Christian foolish zealotry or godly courage? And is it really necessary? After all isn't people persecuting you just a sign of a religion that unnecessarily offends others? Surely a religion presided over by the Prince of Peace isn't likely to provoke such violent opposition?

Well in these verses Matthew, former tax collector and then one of Jesus' 12 closest followers, records Jesus' explanation to his disciples of what they can expect, short term and long term, as a result of following and representing him to the world...

### **1 The first disciples will experience acceptance and rejection...**

At the end of Matthew 9 Jesus points out to his followers that there are many, many people who needed to hear about the kingdom that he had come to rule. *The harvest is plentiful, 9:37, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*

And, 10:5, sending out is exactly what Jesus does with his disciples. He pairs them up and sends them off to preach exactly the same message that he himself brought – he sends them off to tell people about him. Along the way, he says, they will also demonstrate in their actions the power of Jesus' kingship as people are healed and raised from the dead and the powers of evil are overcome. At the beginning this message, v5, is for the Jews only. The disciples are not yet taking the good news about Jesus to all nations – he is, first and foremost, king of the Jews and so it is to God's own historical people that the message goes first.

These messengers weren't a particularly impressive group of people. Of the list of 12 names in verses 2-4 most people, including, I suspect, many Christians could probably only name three – Peter, John and Judas. And one of them is only famous for betraying Jesus. And another one is possibly most famous for denying him. Of the rest Matthew is quite well known – and identifies himself in this list by reference to his former extremely dubious profession as a corrupt agent of the occupying Roman army. Thomas is reasonably well known – for his doubt. But what about James son of Alphaeus? Or Thaddeus? They are the one hit wonders of apostleship. In the providence of God they are vitally important as the original eyewitnesses of Jesus – the people whose testimony means the Bible is

the most reliable book in the world. But as people – well they never made a name for themselves. There was nothing special about these messengers.

They had a message to bring about Jesus, about a great and wonderful new king, not because they were clever and had worked it out. No they came with this message because Jesus, God himself, had graciously and generously given it to them. They had received grace freely.

And that, v8, was to shape the whole way they went about their mission. They were not to be preachers for hire. They weren't to take gold and silver in return for their speaking. They were to give without charge – just as they had received without cost. They weren't to rely on carrying massive rucksacks full of everything they could possibly need and spares too. For two reasons.

Firstly because Jesus wants them to know that just as it is the Lord of the harvest, God himself, who sends the workers out into the harvest field, it is also God who provides for them while they are there.

And secondly because God wants to make it clear to those who receive the good news about Jesus that they are getting something precious – and so the one who spends his time announcing the arrival of the kingdom has earned the right to be properly housed and clothed and fed by those who benefit from the message.

But not everyone will listen. Even in this first mission – a mission to God's own people, when Jesus' popularity is massive – there will be opposition and rejection. In each place the disciples will have to search for a worthy person. Not necessarily someone who does lots of good works. Not always an upstanding pillar of the local community. Not the person with the biggest house. But someone who is willing to hear about Jesus. And should someone with a nicer house become interested no matter – the disciples are to stay with the first person until they move on.

Like all good Jews they are to wish peace to the home when they enter. But if it turns out that they have been misled – that the owner of that house is not open to hearing about Jesus, well they are to leave and take their blessing with them.

When Jews who had travelled outside of Israel passed the borders back into their home nation they would give their clothes and sandals a good shake. They didn't want even

the tiniest bits of dust and dirt from the surrounding nations infecting their country. It was a powerful symbol of rejection. Well people and towns in Israel who won't listen to the message about Jesus are to be treated by the disciples as if they were pagans.

In the ancient world the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were proverbial for wickedness. In a culture where hospitality was of the utmost importance the inhabitants of those cities had tried to rape their guests instead of caring for them. And God had struck them with his judgment so that they were utterly destroyed. But although there is no doubt that at the final judgment those people will be condemned by God for their lack of hospitality and sexual perversion, theirs is not the worst fate. There is a darker corner of hell yet reserved for people who reject Jesus and his messengers.

The disciples were sent on a training mission. In some ways it was unique. As Jesus' later followers we are not given any instructions about what clothing we may and may not take as we go to the world with Jesus' message. We are not to remove the grains of earth from the treads of our trainers where homes do not accept Christ. We don't have to give a greeting of peace to every home we stay in – or indeed stay in other people's homes at all when on mission.

But lots of features of that training mission apply to every occasion when Jesus' people take his message to the world. Especially, Jesus teaches in the rest of the chapter, it is always the case that his message will bring both acceptance and, sometime violent, rejection...

## **2 Jesus' message ALWAYS brings acceptance and rejection so...**

### **a) be clever sheep**

A quick search of Google images reveals some truly terrible art based on the biblical image of Jesus as a shepherd.

But in my admittedly fairly brief survey I didn't find any pictures representing Jesus as the shepherd he sees himself as in v16 – a shepherd sending his sheep out into a field full of wolves.

The rejection that the first disciples experienced on their Israeli mission trip in v1-15 might have been fairly mild. But it wouldn't always be like that. In the future, after the cross and resurrection, they would be,

arrested, flogged and brought to trial before kings and governors.

V16 marks a transition between the specific mission instructions of v1-15 and v17-42 where Jesus explains more generally what all of his followers, including us, can expect when we go and tell people about him.

We are humanly speaking, defenceless. Like sheep amongst wolves – it is others who bear the sharp teeth of authority and power. But that does not mean we have to be stupid. In the face of a hostile world Christ's people are to be as "shrewd as snakes".

Serpents are associated not just with wickedness in the ancient world but with a certain kind of cunning or prudence. This is not to be deceitful or two faced – at the same time, and to the same people, Christians are to be as innocent as doves.

What does that look like in practice? Well Jesus himself gives us an example in v23. "*When you are persecuted in one place flee to another.*" The Christian is not like the Skraeling in *His Dark Materials*. The Christian following Jesus' advice does not seek death – we try all reasonable means to avoid it. We are to be shrewd and smart. Clever sheep amongst the wolves.

If you are in a workplace where you are being persecuted for being a Christian then you do not have to stay there if you can get another job. If you can't get another job you may just have to ride it out but there is no need to carry on being persecuted if you can escape persecution without denying the gospel. The apostle Paul, no fearer of men, was happy to be lowered in a basket over the city walls to escape unjust punishment.

Of course we also need to be as innocent as doves – our care to look out for people's motives – our determination, v17, to be on our guard against men (which means all people here not just males!) mustn't make us cynical. We aren't to be people who are looking for slights, rejection and opposition in every throwaway comment. We need to remain open and visible rather than becoming paranoid and hiding away in the long grass.

Churches in other parts of the world know much more about this than we do. Chinese churches are shrewd to meet in secret and not advertise themselves. And believers in Afghanistan are rightly open and visible in confessing their belief in Jesus – even when it is an offence punishable by death in a court of law.

Many of these believers have experienced the truth of the promise of v19 – that, hauled before a hostile court God himself has given them words to speak in defence, not of themselves, but of the gospel. This doesn't mean that God will suddenly take over their body like one of the characters in last week's *Doctor Who* so that it's not them speaking any more. As someone wisely said: "a man is never more himself than when the gift of the Spirit of the Father is given him."

And, I should add, this is not an excuse for lazy Christianity. It does not mean that people who do not prepare their sermons will know just what to say. Don Carson puts it like this in his commentary:

*"This is not a text on which lazy preachers should rely, in the hope that inspiration will come as they enter the pulpit. They are not standing before persecuting tribunals (although they deserve to be!)."*

The Bible is quite clear that we have a responsibility to know what we believe. And, the longer we go on as Christians, the better we should be able to articulate it. So you should be concerned if you can't explain the Christian message better now that you could a year, or two years or five years ago. But, in special circumstances, where Christians are placed in frightening situations – whether it's a court of law, hostile lecturer in a tutorial, or cynical coffee time companions at work – we should be comforted that God himself, by his Spirit, is with us in our witness to the Lord Jesus.

We need to be clever sheep. And though we are sent out amongst wolves the shepherd does come with us.

### **b) expect to be treated like Jesus**

His recent TV programme was called "The root of all evil" – and it was about religion, not money! His next book is going to be called "The God delusion". Professor Richard Dawkins has a real problem with religious people – and especially with Christians. I don't know how much any of you know about Dawkins, or about Phillip Pullman, author of "His Dark Materials" that we read from earlier, but one of the things that always surprises me about them, and many other well known atheists, is their real venom and spitefulness against Christianity and Christians. But actually it shouldn't surprise me. In fact people's irrational hatred shouldn't surprise any of us who have read the accounts of Jesus' life.

A student, v4, is not above his teacher. Just previously in 9:34, Matthew has recorded that the Pharisees have said of Jesus, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons." Or as Jesus puts it he, the head of the house, has been called Beelzebub. That was a Jewish term that literally meant Prince of the Baals – the gods who had been worshipped by the pagan nations around Israel in ages past. But it sounded very like the Hebrew for "Prince of Dung". So it became both a crude insult and a term that referred to Satan or the devil.

And if that is what they called Jesus his followers can't really expect anything else. In fact even if the leader of a group commands some respect by dint of fame or sheer force of personality that courtesy is unlikely to be extended to his followers.

And when you look at what they did to Jesus it is no surprise that over the centuries Christians have been crucified, flogged, burned alive, drowned, raped and a hundred other things too horrific to talk about. It is no surprise that our "tolerant" world thinks it is fair game to call Christians racist, sexist and homophobic – three of the worst insults our society can muster. It is no surprise that Chemistry Professor Peter Atkins says things like:

*"It is not possible to be intellectually honest and believe in gods. And it is not possible to believe in gods and be a true scientist"*

It is no surprise that people accept invitations to Easter events only to turn round later and cancel at the last minute. Because where Jesus is concerned the rules of common courtesy go out of the window.

As we go into the world we are fools if we do not expect to be treated like Jesus.

### **c) be afraid of God**

In fact, and this would have been much more shocking to Matthew's first readers than it probably is to us, following Jesus will even cause division amongst families.

V21: *"Brother will betray brother to death, and a Father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death."*

And later on Jesus goes on to suggest that this, in some sense, is actually his purpose:

*"I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-*

*law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household."*

Now of course Jesus isn't saying that his main mission in life is to divide families – that would be ridiculous. But his main mission is to command people that, v37, he must be the first love of their life. He demands an allegiance that belongs to God alone. And so everything else must come distinctly second.

Each person here whose family are not Christians knows what that feels like. For some of us it means real and bitter conflict with our families. I know there are people in our church whose parents are really, really angry that they have become Christians. People whose families feel that it is a betrayal of the religion and culture they have been brought up with. Or who simply feel that becoming a Christian is saying that the liberal agnostic middle-class values they were brought up with are not good enough – that becoming a Christian is almost a criticism of their parenting.

But even those of us, like myself, who have non-Christian family with whom I get on very well in almost every way, inevitably experience conflict because of Jesus.

My experience is that my parents, siblings, aunts and uncles are great fun, we enjoy hanging out together, we like the same books and films and share views on lots of things in life. But in the end they are motivated, finally, by something completely different to me. Because my life is about glorifying Jesus Christ and making him known. If believing in Jesus meant that I was thrown into prison and my family were deprived of their income then I would still preach Jesus. And my family will never understand that. I will be a million times happier if my daughter Rosie turns out to be no great achiever in her school life or career but love the Lord Jesus than I will if she turns out to be the most successful, delightful, brilliant unbeliever in the world. And my family simply do not get that.

Despite our agreement over many things my own family ultimately cherish things which are symbols of rebellion against God. Mostly they are good things that my family values – but they are not good to have as your ultimate aims and goals; which they do. God demands that I work on my relationships with my wider family and become a netter son, brother and nephew. But he demands even more than that, that I love Jesus first and yield no ground at all in making him the most

important person in the world. And that inevitably results in conflict and division.

We know, as Christians, that if our first loyalty is to God, conflict with sinful men will follow. We are aware of that. And that is the first reason not to be afraid.

You see there is a cost to being a Christian. And, rightly, whenever we do *Christianity Explored* and other things where we tell people about Jesus' demand that they follow him, we talk about that cost. But there is also a cost to not being a Christian. Look at v28, v32-33 and v39. We should be afraid of men – for as Foxe's Book of Martyrs and much of the rest of church history tells us men can do unspeakably awful things to Christians.

But we should be more afraid of God. In a divided world we will always face the wrath of Satan and those who serve him OR the wrath of God. There is no neutral territory.

The question is whose judgment would you rather face? That of a human court that, at worst, can kill the body and then never touch you again. Or the judgment of the one whose blessings and whose punishments last forever?

Of course that only makes sense viewed from the perspective of eternity. In this life it is often foolish to be a Christian. In this life you would often do better, be more prosperous, achieve ore success, fame, money and happiness by denying Christ.

But we need to look into eternity in order to...

#### **d) be clear that the Christian life is worth it**

Despite rejection and persecution the Christian life IS worthwhile. For two reasons.

One of them is only implied here but it is vital to the passage. The Christian life is worth it because some people will respond to the message of Jesus and believe. That is why there is division – because some believe in Christ and others do not. Christian discipleship; going out and telling people of Christ, living openly and distinctively different Christian lives in the world is worthwhile because some people, wonderfully, will be so taken with Jesus that they will give their lives to his kingship. Not everyone will reject him.

The other reason the Christian life is worthwhile is explicit in the passage: V39 – whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. That doesn't mean that only martyrs

will find life. Still less does it mean that like the Skraeling we should go out looking for death. Losing your life is not just being killed for being a Christian. It is a daily decision that Jesus is more important than anything else. That loyalty to him is our first priority no matter what the cost – today, maybe very little, tomorrow, maybe a hard time, Tuesday, maybe death. No matter. Losing your life is saying that whatever happens Jesus is most important.

That is the way to find life. That is the way, v40-42, to gain great reward. Bishop Ridley was no fool. He lost his life – and found it.

Now I suspect that for us it's actually harder to make those decisions about small things than it would be about big things. The key, I think, is that in all situations I need to remember what it is that Jesus wants. He wants me to acknowledge him before men. Not simply to not deny him when challenged but to actively speak of and live for him in every situation.

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