

FEARLESS CONFESSION AND THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

When Jesus sent out the Twelve in pairs to preach in Galilee, He told them, "You see, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves." So they had some **reason to be afraid**. Some of what Jesus told them gave them further reasons to be realistic.

One is the sober fact that, when the Gospel is proclaimed, although it is a message of Good News, offering reconciliation with God or peace, it divides people into two classes, believers and unbelievers. That is why Jesus told them, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." This has nothing to do with religious bigotry and so-called wars of religion. The enemies of those who confess Jesus Christ are closer to them than that, in their own homes and among their own relatives. "For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A person's enemies will be those in his own home."

Another reason to be afraid comes from being associated with Jesus. Jesus suffered contempt, rejection, and persecution. He told His disciples, as He sent them out to tell the Good News: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and for a slave to be like his master. If people have been calling the master of the house 'Beelzebul', how much more the members of his household!" Jesus' opponents attributed His casting out demons to power that He had received from Satan. In Hebrew, "Baal" means "master of" and "Zebul" means "dwelling." Sometimes Jewish people deliberately corrupted a name of which they disapproved. So the idol god of the Philistine city Ekron was called, not Baal-Zebul" but "Baal-Zebub". They worshipped Baal meant "Baal-Zebul" as a title of honour. To Jewish people Baal-Zebub" meant "Lord of the flies" or "Lord of the dung-heap." Both names came to be used as alternates for Satan. If Jesus had been defamed as being in league with Satan, His disciples could expect no better. Earlier in His instructions, Jesus had warned, "But be on your guard against men, for they will hand you over to councils and will flog you in their synagogues." They could expect persecution from men, like their Lord and Master.

In addition, Jesus attached a saying about the cost of discipleship that He made on a number of occasions. "Anyone who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and anyone who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. The person who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. The one who has found his life will lose it, but the one who has lost his life for My sake will find it." Being worthy of Jesus means nothing less than justification on the Day of Judgment. Though it comes through faith, denial of Jesus can disqualify a person there. This does not mean that to be a true Christian everyone has to prove it by turning against His Christian relatives. In his defence before Felix, Paul asserted, "I worship the God of our fathers." The issue is the truth. Love of Christ includes love of His Word. Love for Christ and His Word is a higher love even than love of family members. The cost of discipleship may involve losing one's life literally. However, "losing one's life" involves every Christian. It may not mean losing it literally, but it always includes the sincere recognition that one's achievement in this life can earn no credit with God. Paul expressed it in Galatians 2: "For I through the Law have died to the Law that I may begin to live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. And it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. The life that I now live in my body I live by faith in the Son of God, who has loved me and given Himself for me." That is the way in which a person loses his life for Christ's sake and finds it.

On the other hand, Jesus gives His disciples **reasons not to be afraid** when they tell the message, "The kingdom of heaven is near." He said, "Therefore do not be afraid of them. For there is nothing covered that will not be uncovered, and nothing hidden that will not be known." In other words, their courage was built on the confidence that judgment day would reveal that they had been in the right. That is where every hidden thing will be made known. God's Word must be spoken, and judgment day will vindicate both God's Word, and those who have proclaimed it faithfully.

In addition, Jesus dispels their fear by reminding them that loss of physical life is not real evil. Real evil comes only through loss of faith and in its terminus, eternal damnation. God is the One who can send people to hell, body and soul, so God is the One who must be feared. Some people have the notion that, because God is a God of love, it is quite inappropriate, even sub-Christian, to talk about fear of God. They forget the first commandment, where God asks His people to fear, love, and trust Him. The Song of Mary, the Magnificat, includes the words: "He is merciful to those who fear Him throughout all generations." Indeed, the Song of Zechariah, the Benedictus, points out that, because God's promise in the Messiah means rescue from our real enemies, believers can "serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all their days." **Fear** of God, and **no fear** before our real enemies, sin, death, and the devil, including no fear before enemies of the truth, are both appropriate.

In addition, Jesus assured His disciples that they were in the Father's loving care. No one regards sparrows as valuable at all. Yet no sparrow falls to the ground without the heavenly Father. The argument is from the lesser to the greater: The Father's watchful eye will be on Jesus' disciples also as they go out in Jesus' name. No one would ever take the trouble to count the hairs on his head. However, the heavenly Father knows the count. Jesus told them, "As for you, even the hairs on your head have all been numbered. Therefore stop being afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows."

However, there is a weightier reason not to be afraid of physical harm that may result from fearless confession. Confession of Christ is made as before the judgment seat of Christ. He and the angels of God will take up the confession of His disciples at the judgment. There Christ will confess them. "I shall confess before My Father in heaven whoever confesses Me before others." One of the most characteristic forms of Jesus' teaching was the contrasting parallel statement. Here the obverse is also true, as a reason not to fear when making fearless confession. Denial can bring the ultimate tragedy: "I shall

also deny before My Father in heaven whoever denies Me before others.”

The end of this list of instructions contains further reasons not to be afraid when confessing boldly. It is the principle that governments still apply. They expect that their ambassador will be received in another country with the same respect as would be given if their Prime Minister were there in person. Elsewhere Jesus affirmed that whatever people did to one of His brothers here, even the least important of them, they have done for Him. Here the same truth applies to those who hear what Jesus’ disciples say: “He who receives you receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who has sent Me.” If there are aspects that involve both judgment day and the Heavenly Father Himself when the disciples confess Jesus, they have no reason to fear physical harm in this life.

There is an additional reason that some find hard to understand. It is what we call “the reward of grace”, which is really an oxymoron. All believers will receive salvation equally as the bliss of eternal life. When we say: “receive”, we do not mean: “earn.” Eternal life is not earned in any way, but received by God’s grace alone. However, there will be differences in glory. Daniel wrote: “Those who lead many to righteousness, will shine like the stars for ever and ever.” Paul explained this difference in glory by the illustration that there are different degrees of brightness in the sun, moon, and stars (1 Corinthians 15:41). Here Jesus expresses the same truth by affirming that even the smallest action done in His name will not lack God’s recognition of it in eternity, far greater than any could expect or dream of. “He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive **a prophet’s reward**. And he who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive **a righteous man’s reward**. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, will certainly not lose **his reward**.” In other words, if the heavenly Father’s watchful eye misses nothing, even such an apparently insignificant thing as a cup of cold water, given by someone as a disciple of Jesus, here is another reason not to fear.