



“Work While It Is Still Day”
(Matthew 10:23)

Introduction: Last week, Jesus reminded us how difficult it is to live in this world. If we are obedient to Christ and live the kind of life He calls us to, we will be persecuted. We will be persecuted because the world does not like the truth, nor the conviction which seeing someone living like Christ can bring. They only like the darkness. They enjoy the things which are wrong. Therefore, Jesus told us, all men, even those who are closest to us, will forsake us, because of the Gospel. But this should not dishearten us, because for one thing it is an indicator that we are going in the right direction. We should worry if no one hates us, especially in light of what Jesus has said. We should also prepare for it, or we will never be able to endure. Half of the battle is being properly prepared for what comes into our lives. If we expect that things should always go well in our lives, we will always be confused and disappointed. But if we listen to what Jesus says here -- *i.e.*, that the Gospel can and will divide --, then we won't be so surprised when it does. Preparing for this will help us remain faithful to the end of our days. We must arm ourselves and protect ourselves, by making sure that our affections are directed towards God and Christ first of all. Then when all our lesser loves fail, we won't become disheartened. Remember that we don't have a lasting city here. We may not even be able to keep our earthly family here. But we do have a city in heaven, and we have a spiritual family which we can enjoy now, and have for the rest of eternity. These are the encouragements Jesus gives us to help us to endure.

But even though the apostles were to expect persecution as they went out to evangelize, Jesus now shows us that He did not want them to suffer anymore than was necessary. When persecution came, they could move out of its way, if by doing so, the Gospel would not be compromised. When the opposition was too great, He told them that they could go to another place where they might be able to do good to others. But He also reminded them that what He had given them to do was so great a task, that it would not be completed until the Son of Man returned. These are the things we will consider this morning.

I. First, let's consider that Jesus did not want His apostles to be persecuted any more than was necessary. Jesus said, “But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next.”

- A. Jesus told them on another occasion that if the people of that city did not receive them or their testimony, they were to leave that city and to wipe the dust off their feet as they were leaving, as a testimony against them. Here He tells them that if they suffer persecution, they are to dispense with the symbolism and run.
 1. This tells us that Jesus certainly didn't have any interest in making His disciples suffer for no reason.
 - a. Now sometimes suffering is unavoidable. When Stephen was arrested and sought to be faithful by boldly proclaiming the truth, there was nothing he could have done to avoid being killed. If he was not to deny his Lord, he needed to speak. But if he spoke, the Jews might become angry enough to kill him. But not considering his life as precious, in order to fulfill what the Lord had called him to, he spoke, and they killed him in their anger (Acts 6-7). He could not escape, and so he went to be with the Lord. In cases like this, the Lord tells us that we must simply endure to the end, looking forward to the crown of life which is only moments away.
 - b. But sometimes, escape is possible. When Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, the first thing he did when he regained his sight was to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues and to confound the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Christ. After several days, the Jews wanted to do away with him. But when he learned about their plot, he did not continue to speak publicly, but rather allowed the disciples to help him escape at night by lowering him through a hole in the city wall in a large basket. And so he escaped (Acts 9:19-25). Sometimes escape is possible and sometimes not.
 - c. There have been those in the history of the church who have so glorified martyrdom, that they would willingly walk into the lion's mouth for the sake of the Gospel. Certainly it is an honor to die for the One who died to give us life. But to throw your life away for no reason, when death can be avoided, is not heroism, but foolishness.
 - d. Jesus told them that when they are persecuted in one city, that they are to run to the next. There is no value in dying when you can escape death, without compromising the Gospel.
 2. But there is also no value to continue to speak to stiff-necked and stubborn people, when there are

others who might listen.

- a. There were many others in Israel who needed to hear the Gospel, some who might listen, who might be the Lord's elect. Why should they stay with an unprofitable people, a people who have already shown by their actions that they wanted nothing to do with what the apostles were bringing?
- b. Remember, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. There was no time to spare. The disciples needed to move on if the city they were ministering to rejected them.

B. Now I believe the lessons for us in this section are plain.

1. First, we are not to expose ourselves to danger unnecessarily for the sake of the Gospel.
 - a. The key word here is "unnecessarily." Sometimes it is necessary for us to be exposed to danger, but not always.
 - b. There will be those times, when in the Providence of the Lord, we will be put into situations which are potentially dangerous, as we seek to bring Christ to others. Years ago, Donna and I spent time with a group from our church doing street evangelism. Every week we prayed and considered where we should go. Sometimes we went to the tourist areas where there was little danger. But at other times we went to the worst parts of the city: to the boardwalk, next to the bars at dusk, and to the hangouts of pimps and prostitutes. We believed that this was what the Lord wanted us to do, and so we tried to do it faithfully. And we could have been hurt -- there were people there who might not like what we had to say. In God's grace and mercy, we didn't suffer too much, but we could have.
 - c. But the point is, if we are faithful to do what the Lord call us to, and if men should become angry with us, enough to injure us in some way, there is no virtue in standing in the path of a fist or of a bullet. If the swine want nothing to do with our pearls, we are no longer to offer those precious things to them. We are to leave. And if they threaten us, we can leave a little bit faster. We are authorized by Christ to move out of the way, if we can without compromising the Gospel. If we can escape, fine. But we must never deny Christ to do so.
 - d. One thing we need to be thankful for in our society is that we still have some protection from the law to practice and promote our faith. In Paul's day, when his fellow-countrymen came upon him to kill him, the Roman centurion preserved his life. If he hadn't been there, Paul would have died. But in the case of Stephen, there was no centurion to help him. It was God's will for him to seal his testimony with his blood.
 - e. How can we know whether or not it's God's will that we suffer? If we are faithful to what the Lord calls us to do, and suffer for it, then we can know that it is His will. How can we know if it is His will that we die for the Gospel? If we are faithful to the Lord, and death becomes unavoidable except we compromise our testimony, then it is God's will that we die.
 - f. If we can escape the danger without compromise, we may. But if we can't, then we must suffer or die.
2. The second thing we are to learn here is if our efforts to evangelize someone are bearing no fruit, we must not waste time with them, but move on to someone else.
 - a. All of us have only so much time and energy. Our opportunities to do some spiritual good to others are also limited. If this is the case, then why do we often spend so much time focussing on those that want nothing to do with the message of the Gospel, such as those unconverted loved ones in our families, especially when we have already told them everything they need to know to be saved and when there are so many others all around us that are about to perish from a lack of knowledge?
 - b. There comes a time when we need to say enough is enough. We may certainly continue to pray for the salvation of their souls, but we must also try to reach those who have lived their whole lives without God's light.
 - c. We must remember that the one who sows much, shall reap much. But the one who sows little will reap little. And if you continually sow your seed on hard ground, you will reap nothing.

II. But now Jesus gives them one last reason why they should keep moving on, especially in the face of persecution. He says, "For truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes." The fact is that there were many towns and villages for them to go to,

and the work was so great that they wouldn't accomplish it all until the Son of Man returned.

- A. We will see much more about this as we go through the book of Matthew, but let's consider for a few moments what Christ means here.
1. There are three things which Jesus could mean by this statement.
 - a. He could have been saying that He was going out to preach and teach as well, and that the apostles would not finish their preaching tour until He returned from His. If this was the case, then Jesus expected them to evangelize all of Israel by the time He saw them again, at least that they would have been to each city. Its hard to tell if this was possible or not. Israel was about 150 miles long by about 50 - 60 miles wide, and there were only 6 teams of two apostles each to cover it. Jesus later sent out another seventy men to do the same thing for which He had sent the twelve (Luke 10), which indicates that the work was extensive, and that the twelve had not completed it.
 - b. Secondly, He could have meant that they would not get through all of the cities of Israel until the time of His second coming at the end of the world. Some Dispensationalists understand this passage as referring to the evangelization of the Jews during the Tribulation period. But this is a forced interpretation in light of the context, especially since the New Testament tells us that the whole world (the Roman empire) had heard the Gospel by the time of its closing.
 - c. But thirdly, Jesus could have been speaking about His coming in judgment in 70 AD, when He came to put an end to the Old Covenant system, and to establish His kingdom forever.
 2. I believe that this third option is most likely what Jesus had in mind. Jesus was sending His apostles out to herald the good news of the kingdom to gather His elect people in, before He brought judgment upon the rest for their covenant infidelity.
 - a. Remember there were two reasons why Jesus came first to the Jews:
 - (i) God had promised them the kingdom through their fathers, and so God was fulfilling His promise by sending Christ to them first. Paul said to the Jews at Pisidian Antioch, "And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this *promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'THOU ART MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN THEE'" (Acts 13:32-33). Christ was gathering His sheep from Israel first.
 - (ii) But secondly, He was also coming to Israel first for judgment. There are many passages which teach us this truth, but I will give you just two.
 - (a) In Romans 11:7-10, Paul writes, "What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; just as it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day.' And David says, 'Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever.'" *Note that the chosen obtained what Israel was seeking for, but the rest were hardened.*
 - (b) And in Matthew 21:42-44, Jesus tells the chief priests and the elders of the Jews, "Did you never read in the Scripture, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." Jesus came to the Jews first to offer them the kingdom, but they rejected it. Therefore, He was taking it away from them and giving it to another nation which would produce its fruits.
 - b. Jesus was coming to the Jews first to gather His sheep, His elect people, from among His covenant people. The apostles would continue to do this work after Christ's work on earth had ended. But when they finished their work, Jesus was returning to judge the faithless Jews. He was coming to take the kingdom away from them and to give it to His New Covenant people. He did this in 70 AD, when He destroyed their city and their Temple. Jesus summed this up when He said to the Jewish leaders, "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell? Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues,

and persecute from city to city, that upon you may fall *the guilt of* all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. *Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation.* O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Matt. 23:33-39).

- B. Now how can we apply this to our current situation, since this was fulfilled almost 2000 years ago?
1. Though the judgment of 70 AD has come and gone, there is still a judgment ahead of us, something of which the destruction of Jerusalem was only a picture, and that is the final judgment. This judgment also won't come until the church has finished her work of gathering in the last of Christ's sheep. When the last elect Jew and the last elect Gentile have been converted, then Christ will return.
 2. But until He returns, we have a job to do: we are to gather in His elect people through the Gospel, so that they might escape the coming Judgment through Christ. This is a large task, and it will require all of us to complete it. And so while we are here, we must continue to pray, to witness, to exhort, and to give to seek to bring in the lost. And we must continue to love, to encourage and to admonish each other to be faithful to this call. May the Lord help us to be faithful to this work, with whatever He has given us, and wherever He has placed us, until He returns for us, either at our death, or when He comes again from heaven. And if in the process we should suffer persecution for Christ's sake, let us run when we can, or stand when we must, that in all things Christ may be glorified, even if it costs us our life. May the Lord give us the grace to hear His Word and obey it this morning. Amen.