

A Gospel Marked by Opposition

Matthew 10:24-33

Bombarded by a formal condemnation both of church and state, Dr. Luther found himself a formative target. He was proclaiming that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But the church of his time wouldn't have it. They demanded that he cease and desist, intimidating him with threats of both bodily harm and interrogation. But how could he stop preaching the Gospel, Luther thought. He may well have had the Gospel lesson in mind when he envisioned the Lord on Judgment Day asking him, "Why were you more afraid of them than Me?"

I. A Gospel Marked by Heavy Opposition

Jesus is about sending. He sends out the disciples into a world hostile to a specific message. The message is that the kingdom of heaven is near. Along with various miracles and wonders worked, these sent disciples will face some heavy opposition. Rejected sometimes by whole households, even whole towns, they nevertheless are expected to preach on just as Luther once did. The opposition intensifies when even their own family members and close friends in conjunction with heads of church and state vehemently oppose them. "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves," the Lord warns them (Matthew 10:16). You would expect just the opposite. They have Jesus on their side, His blessing should count for something after all.

A disciple is not about his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household! The Pharisees and scribes who should have known better and recognized Jesus for who He was turn out to be His sharpest critics. They call the Lord Jesus "Beelzebub," the lord of flies. And if these church officials (who think they can do no wrong in the eyes of God's chosen people), call the Lord's Christ such, what ought the gnats who follow Him expect to receive but a terrible swatting. Intimidation and forceful persecution will be the order of the day for these sent out ones.

Intimidation is no excuse for silence or shrinking from the appointed task. Jesus' sending is accompanied with Jesus' command: "Do not fear them." Why? Because Jesus is the Lord both of disciples and of enemies. There is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. The formative enemies by all rights appear to fully have the upper hand in the matter. What chance does a single Jewish teacher and His rag-tag band of twelve stand against an entire world opposed to them? But the faithful few know the outcome in advance. They recognize and acclaim the Victor whom they believe will return again in glory to judge the nations and condemn the rejecting hoard. Therefore, the disciples of Jesus are not intimidated. Nor should we be swayed in the battle between good and evil. We know that evil will have the upper hand and appear to prevail in the present time. But how foolish to side with those majority who will lose in the end and suffer humiliation and defeat when all is said and done!

Still, those faithful few sent out with a very specific message will be subject to all manner of temptation. Regardless, they are not to remain silent. They have no right to edit or redact

changes in the message given them to preach. The kingdom of heaven is near. They must not deviate from that which they have received. Do not fear! Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear the One who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell. The disciples are sure to suffer heavily at the hand of sinners. That they can be sure to expect. But evildoers can only stifle to body. God the Father wields a much deadlier sword. He has power to consign both body and soul to the prison of hell for eternity. Fear Him!

Luther envisioned a nightmare of Judgment Day, an angry God wielding His slaying sword with divine eyes of flame piercing him and saying, "Why were you more afraid of them than Me?" That remains the question of the hour for us in today's church. As it was then, so it is now. Pastors are called to proclaim what they are given to say: God's impending Law in all its severity, along with God's soothing Gospel in all its sweetness. As a Christian believer, it is a given that you will face heavy opposition and tactics of intimidation in this world. Suffering is the way of discipleship. Bearing the cross is a mark of membership. So, will you do what is right, or take the easy way out? When that beloved family member or close friend chooses the path of sin and death, will you speak lovingly the truth and risk a hostile outcome, or simply be silent to maintain false family peace? Whether it be the business office, the school locker room, the lunch counter, or the grocery aisle, be certain there will be various attempts to turn you from what is good and right, pure and holy toward that which is opposed to God, wrong and inherently unholy in His sight.

As individual believing Christians are sure to face bombardment and intimidation on a personal level, so it follows that corporately congregations of believers together are likewise under fire. You've seen the popular so-called Christian books and heard the all too familiar refrain: The church must necessarily change with the times, we are told. Change must come about in order to bring the masses into the pews, and so the modern-day church must sound more loving and less condemning of sin. This change will reap benefits blessed by God for us. Consider that bodies in the pew translates to great offerings. Offerings mean paid bills, and paid bills means that a congregation continues to do its work of evangelism. After all, this is not your grandmother or grandfather's America. Times have changed. You must change too. Change must come (so we are told), though often couched terms and slick language are the convincing means to that end. We're not ditching the Gospel. We still have a Savior in Jesus, but the Law is choking our growth. Instead of denouncing immorality as sin and condemning evil as we should, it would be better for us to fund more study. Instead of discipling manifest and impenitent sinners, we really ought more lovingly bear with them and tolerate their sin as minor infraction rather than risk offending them. Instead of preaching a binding Law that forcefully condemns all, wouldn't it be better if the pastor gave advice. Helpful tools for Christian living sounds much more appealing.

So goes the modern-day pressure to change, conforming to the needs of people where they are at. And this is nothing new for us. A wise pastor took notice of opposition to the truth of God's Word some 150 years ago. To the students who gathered about him at his evening fireside chats, he warned of watering down the Law and softening the impact of the true Gospel. These lectures were recorded and published in the years that followed. Thus Dr. CFW Walther

concludes: “Now there is no doubt that these men wish to convert people by using false terms. They believe that they can convert men by concealing things from them or by presenting matters in a manner that is pleasing to men as they are by nature. They are like sorry physicians who do not like to prescribe a bitter medicine to delicate patients, or if they do prescribe it, they add so much sugar to it that the patient does not taste the bitter medicine, with the result that the effect is spoiled. Accordingly, preachers who do not clearly and plainly proclaim the Gospel, which is offensive to the world, are not faithful in the discharge of their ministry and inflict great injury on men’s souls. Instead of advancing Christians in the knowledge of the pure doctrine, they allow them to grope in the dark, nurse false imaginations in them, and speed them on in their false and dangerous path (The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, page 276).

The predisposition to change the Word of God to jive with the times comes from a lack of faith to trust that God does what He says. It flows for a distrust that God is fully capable of providing us with all that we need to support this body and life. The question Luther poses, “Why do you fear them more than Me?” gets the heart of our faith. After all, from the Word of God we have come to know and believe the end of the story. Christ alone sits on the judgment seat. He alone has control over both body and soul. His larger and far greater sword of eternal life and death slices through every space of time here and eternity to come. Why then, would we yield to intimidation and fear anyone else more than Him?

Up until this point, the Law of God is being preached for your hearing and mine. It is most certainly an unrelenting, unforgiving Law which demands we fear God and obey His commandments. This is the Law Jesus preaches in today’s Gospel for you and for me. But we also know that this is only half the story. As sinners, we have this on-going issue of loving sin to the point that it overcomes genuine fear of God and the threat of His punishment. Whenever you and I fail in our clear witness to the truth of God’s all-powerful Word, we fear something else besides His wrath. That “something else” becomes our god. Thankfully, we have the Law to apply in such lawless times to show us our sin for our good. Seeing our sin in that mirror, we come to realize our desperate need for a Savior. Unable to save ourselves and unable to escape God’s wrath when it comes, we look for a word of Gospel.

II. A Gospel Fulfilled in Christ

Just imagine what it would be like if the only message the disciples handed down to us was one of fear. “Obey God because He wields a big club.” The Christian faith acknowledges God’s exacting power to punish, yet this faith does not trust the Lord because of threat to punish. We trust in God because no one loves us more than He does. What do I mean by this? How does the text read? A disciple is not about his teacher, nor servant about his master. It is enough for the disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant that he be like master.

The Teacher is sending out His disciples. He is not acting as some high and mighty King who makes demands that His subjects suffer so that He doesn’t have to suffer. When this Master sends His servants out, He doesn’t demand their death so that He can live. Jesus tells us we will

suffer just as He did. As servants we are not above the Master. If the Master so suffers, the servant who owes Him allegiance will suffer also. But the Master is greater—and so His suffering proves to be greater too. Far greater.

For those kingdom-at-hand disciples (and for you and me) this Master suffers. At the hands of Israel's most-trusted celebrities who should have recognized Him, the Savior is arrested. He stands falsely accused, but is guilt-free. But you and I are rightly accused and guilty. He accepts their sentence of death in silence, allowing Himself to be unjustly beaten and scourged. Being therefore hoisted up on a cross to hang there, those religious people-pleasers below hurl their insults with mock and ridicule. Yet we know that this is merely a small slice of the greater suffering He endures. That greater suffering doesn't come from supposed righteous men, but from the Father which art in heaven—Jesus' own Father. Remember He is the One who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. The Son stands innocent and deserves none of this wrath. He is without sin. The punishment belongs to us, not Him. Nevertheless, there at the cross the Master takes the place of His servants. He is suffering the hell your sins deserve. The Father in wrath wields the sword to slay His Son on the altar of your cross and mine. The Son dies, but you live. The Son is condemned to death, but you have your sentence commuted.

Herein is the Gospel for you: Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. Did you not know that your Father in heaven keeps careful track of myriads of sparrows bought at a penny a pair? He knows when one tumbles and falls to the ground. Ponder the great cost He made to purchase your redemption. A single penny? No, you have been redeemed (as Luther says it) not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. For what purpose? Simply this: that you may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom (which the disciples preach to you is at hand), and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness.

The Law presses close and hems us in. "Obey God out of fear. If you do not obey Him in everything but instead deny Him, then know that Jesus will also deny you before His Father in heaven." The Gospel says, "Jesus has redeemed you with His holy precious blood." Therefore, rejoice that He has set you free to confess Him—not out of fear but out of thankfulness. He as Master will confess you (His little sparrow) before His Father in heaven.

You will be tempted to cave in and avoid the impending intimidation of the arch-enemy's minions. You'll want to avoid making a stand beneath the cross and settle for something much easier to stomach. Resist the easy road. Luther once envisioned an angry God spewing Law from His fiery lips as He sat on the Judgment seat. "Why did you fear them more than Me? Has anyone else on earth died to take your sins away? Has anyone shed their holy, precious blood and endured the bitter suffering of death that you may be his own forever? I have, and I forgive you, and I give you everlasting life." Thanks be to God. Amen.