

“A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.²⁵ It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!

²⁶ “So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.²⁸ Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.³¹ So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

³² “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.³³ But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. (Matthew 10:24-33)

Don’t Be Afraid!

A couple of weeks ago, I did an online devotion about racism. I don’t think I said anything really controversial, but one of the local pastors asked me if I got any negative feedback over it. He expected that I’d get angry emails or posts or something. But I didn’t. One person gave it “thumbs down” but that’s it. Now, in truth, I’m glad that I didn’t get a bunch of angry comments on my devotion. The mere prospect of that happening makes me a little sick to my stomach. By the same token, I wouldn’t want to have a whole bunch of you walk out of church on Sunday angry about what I said. That feeling makes me want to stick to safe subjects that won’t get anybody upset. What is that feeling? It’s fear, isn’t it? What about you? How do you feel about being attacked or even about getting a whole bunch of “thumbs down” on your Facebook posts? In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus talks to us about standing up and saying what needs to be said. He knows people won’t like to hear it. But Jesus tells us, **don’t be afraid.**

I.

Now, Jesus was not talking here about racism or pandemics or any of the specific issues that are upsetting our society today. This text follows the one we heard last week, when Jesus sent the disciples out to preach the good news. Their message was the gospel. But to preach the gospel clearly, you do have identify sin that we need saving from. To do it really well, you have to speak to real issues, like people’s attitudes about everything that’s going on today. People rarely want to hear that part of the message, especially if it calls their attitudes sinful. Quite often, when we say what Jesus calls us to say, people are going to lash out at us. Does that scare you? Does it make you less eager to say those things publicly today? Well, **don’t be afraid. They can’t treat you any better than they treated Jesus.**

That’s what Jesus meant when he said: **“A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.”** Jesus is the teacher and master. We are the students and servants. And we cannot expect to do better than he did. There are so many ways that we could apply that to our efforts to serve the church. But Jesus is specifically talking here about persecution. So he goes on and says, **“If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!”** Beelzebub is the devil. When Jesus drove out demons who were possessing and tormenting people, his enemies said, “It’s by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.” They as much as called Jesus the devil. A person who was willing stand in front of Jesus who had just driven out a demon and say that to him is not going to be intimidated by us.

But does this really apply to us? I mean how often are we called “the devil”? More often than you might think. Maybe not is so many words, but the world is full of people who despise everything that Jesus stands for. So how do you think they’re going to treat us? I could spend a lot of time this morning citing examples for you, but I want to focus on the point Jesus was making. When his enemies attack us, that shows that we belong to Jesus. When the devil drives people to persecute us and mock us and blame us for everything that’s wrong with our society, that is one of the best indications that we stand with Jesus, because that’s exactly what they think and say about him. Jesus is telling us not to be surprised by that and not to let it break us. It’s what happens we tell the truth to a world that doesn’t want to hear it. So be ready to face persecution for Jesus.

II.

Now, that may not eliminate our fear – after all, they did finally kill Jesus. And even he asked his Father to take that cup of suffering away from him, if that were possible. So, the fact that we stand with Jesus does not mean that nothing bad will ever happen to us. That’s why Jesus continued saying these things. His point is simple: **don’t be afraid. They can’t really hurt you.**

Jesus said, **“So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.”** What does he mean by that? He’s talking about all the plots of those people who hate us because of our faith. Whatever they have in mind, God already knows about it. Eventually, it’s all going to come out, and it’s not going to make them look good. Finally, you could apply this even to the devil himself. All his plans to hurt us are all going to be exposed. When? Possibly during our lives here, but for sure on Judgment Day. That’s when God will make everything right. Until that day, Jesus tells us to shout from the rooftops the things we hear whispered. What does he mean by that? The world isn’t paying attention to what we’re doing and saying here today. I’ve been thrilled with how many people have been watching our livestreamed services, but truly, it’s a couple of hundred people in a nation of over 300,000,000. We’re hidden in plain sight. God carefully builds your faith in your home and in your church – really out of sight of most people. But then he tells you to shout your testimony so the whole world can hear it.

Some people won’t like it. But notice what Jesus says, **“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”** What is the absolute worst thing that anyone can do to me? What is the worst thing that the devil can do to me? Kill me, right? But you know what none of them can do? Send me to hell. If someone kills me today, then I will be in heaven today. As I know very well, that won’t be easy for the people I leave behind. But for me, going home to heaven means that nothing will ever hurt again. So the absolute worst that the devil or the enemies of the gospel can do to me would really be the biggest favor of my life.

Of course, the opposite is also true: if I am unwilling to do what God commands me to do, or if I put my fears ahead of what God commands, well then, I could be in real trouble, because not only can God end my life, he can send me to hell. And that is the penalty for all unfaithfulness and sin. That is the penalty for letting fear win and keeping my mouth shut when God calls me to speak. That’s why Jesus finished this reading by saying, **“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”** God most certainly does send sinners to hell.

But Jesus came to set us free from death and hell. That’s the message God gave us to proclaim. Jesus came to be the one perfect gospel witness in all of history, to be the only person who could, by his own strength, go to the cross and suffer torture and hell and death there in our place. Jesus did all that so that our sin is paid for and gone forever. So, think back on every time you should have been braver, think back on every time God called you to speak and you chickened out. Jesus died and paid for that sin. You are forgiven. You are freed from hell and promised eternal life with Jesus. Nothing in this world can take that life away from you. So there is nothing they can do that truly hurts you. Take courage, and do the work God calls you to do.

III.

It takes faith to trust that promise, doesn’t it? When God’s word says something that people don’t want to hear – especially when it’s about burning issues that get people worked up– fear can paralyze us. Even though we trust that we’ll go to heaven in the end, we don’t like the hurt we have to face here before we get there. But Jesus addresses that today, too. **Don’t be afraid. They can’t even hurt you here.**

Jesus said, **“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”** Why would you buy sparrows? Very poor people in Israel bought them to eat. They were cheap. You paid almost nothing for them because there’s not much meat on the bones of sparrow. They come in flocks. But Jesus says that not a single sparrow dies without God’s approval. God is in control of all things. He pays attention even to the most minor points: like a bird dying, or how many hairs you have on your head. Do you know? I didn’t. I had to look it up. The average human head has 100,000 hairs. Blondes, as usual, have it better than others – they average 150,000 while people with brown hair only average 110,000 and people with black only 100,000. Redheads sadly only average 90,000 hairs on their heads. Of course, I figure I used to have a lot more hairs than I do now. And we all lose them every day.

But God can tell you exactly how many hairs on your head today and how many there were yesterday and how many there will be tomorrow.

So what's the point? If God is keeping track of stuff that trivial, he's watching over your life. You are worth more than many sparrows. Don't be afraid. Nothing happens to us without God's express permission. And our Father in heaven is watching our entire lives. He knows where we're going and what we need most. And he decides what we have to face. Yes, that does sometimes mean we have to face hard things. Last summer, I faced the hardest thing I've ever gone through. And focusing on what Jesus is talking about here, sometimes people who hate the gospel will hurt us. They might even kill us to shut us up. They might tell lies about us and get us fired from our jobs. They might make our lives miserable. But God's promise still stands: you are worth more than many sparrows. No hurt comes into your life without God's express permission.

So why would God ever give it? To bring us home to heaven. God uses hurt and persecution to purify our faith, to teach us to cling to him no matter what, to teach us how little this life matters and how much we need him. God uses every bad and painful experience we go through to draw us back to him for help. And he comes to us in the message of Jesus' love and he builds our faith. He gets us through today and tomorrow and every day after that until we go home. And along the way, he also persecution to underline our confession – to impress people who see us clinging to Jesus in spite of all that hurt. It makes them stop and ask why.

So, that means that even in this life, they can't do us any real harm. They can make life hurt. They can make us feel sad and miserable. But that's only temporary. Jesus will cure it all when he comes again. Truly, it's only an illusion because Jesus is in control and he's doing all things for our good right now. How can you know that's true? This is the Jesus who took on flesh and lived here in your place. This is the Jesus who died and paid for all of your sins and washed them all away. This is the Jesus who rose, who conquered death and the devil and all evil of this world, so that he can bring us home to him. This Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father and rules all things for our good.

So, don't be afraid. There are so many times in our lives when we have to say things people don't want to hear. On the divisive issues of our day, giving Jesus' perspective is almost certainly going to offend someone. But it's the only way to be faithful to God. Whatever consequences we suffer for our testimony show that we belong to Jesus. Suffering with Jesus is only temporary. We will live and reign with him in heaven. And even here, Jesus only lets those things touch us which he will turn to our good. Trust in Jesus and speak the words God calls us to speak. Amen.