Westlake Church Lausanne

Followers who Fear Not
Matthew 10:24-39

When Good is Called Evil

Now if you lived in first century Palestine, and you attached yourself to a rabbi, your greatest ambition in life would be to become like your rabbi. It's why Jesus says in v25, 'It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.' You'd want nothing more than to become like the man you're following. And that's not so alien to today, is it? Maybe you've worked for a boss in the past and you've thought – when I grow up, I want to be like them. I want to be as wise as them, or as insightful as them, or lead like them. And it's not just at work, is it. Recently, I was talking to someone older than me, and whose life and character stand out, and I said, I want to be like you when I'm your age.

Now, if that's true of our role models, what about Jesus? His first followers clearly saw something remarkable in him, didn't they? In his gospel, John writes, 'we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). A grace and truth they wanted to imitate. And whether or not you're a Christian, isn't that true to some degree for you? You look at Jesus and there is something deeply compelling about him - about his compassion, or his character, that we don't see in ourselves, but we wish we did. But also about his integrity, his courage, his willingness to confront power and injustice and hypocrisy and evil, and we like what we see, and we think, 'I want to be more like Jesus'.

And of course the good news of the gospel is that God wants that for you as well – that he doesn't leave you where you are, but as Paul puts it, God transforms you, by his Spirit, from one degree of glory to another, into the likeness of Jesus.

But there's a catch, and Jesus spells it out here. Verse 25, "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household." Now remember the context here. Jesus is sending these disciples out into the world, on their first mission trip, to proclaim in word and deed, in grace and truth, that the kingdom of God has drawn near. But if you do that, Jesus says, if you want to imitate me in doing that; if you want to be a person of integrity and swim against the cultural flow; if you want to work for justice and against the principalities and powers that mangle people's lives; if you want to speak up for Jesus on campus or among your friends and colleagues – you will get maligned. People will think and say bad things about you.

Sure, you want to be like me, Jesus says, but that means you will also be treated like me. And the religious leaders – the cultural elite of his day - called Jesus *Beelzebul*. And Beelzebul means 'Lord of the high abode', but in Jewish thinking it became synonymous with the prince of demons. So if you called someone Beelzebul, you were calling them *satan*.

Now can you see the irony of that? Jesus, the Son of God, comes as a man, as the most complete, perfect example of humanity, and people call him satan. The

ultimate good is labelled the ultimate evil. And yet, as ironic as that seems, it's exactly what happens today? In our western cultures, Christianity used to be considered the moral position, the right position, the good position. But now, if you hold to a traditional view of sexual ethics, or of personhood, or of what leads to fulfilment, you're labelled immoral. And what is good is spoken of as evil.

Think of another irony: the early Christians were labelled and persecuted as atheists by the Roman authorities. Now why was that? Why would a movement of people who worshipped God, and sought the welfare of their communities, be labelled *atheists*? Because they refused to worship *the* gods. Because they would only worship *one* God. Because they refused to bow the knee to the gods of the culture – gods of power and trade and sex. And Jesus is saying, when you do that, when you identify yourself with me, you will be labelled and spoken against. Good will be called evil.

And you know that's true, don't you. I mean think of this politically – and this is a gross generalisation, but you'll get the picture. If you want to imitate Jesus' compassion and grace in the world you will face attack from the right. But, if you want to imitate Jesus' speaking of the truth and calling people to repentance, you will face attack from the left. And if you combine those two and seek to truly become like the master you'll get attacked from right and left!

And the result of all that is…? Fear! We want people to think and speak well of us; we want to be liked not maligned, and so we worry, we're afraid of the consequences if we do speak up. So, we hesitate to speak about faith at work, or about Jesus on campus; and we don't really want certain topics to come up with colleagues over lunch - because we're afraid of what others might think or say. We all feel that, don't we?

And so in a time when good is called evil, fear becomes a potent weapon of darkness to keep the light from shining. So, what does Jesus say?

Fear Not

Verse 26, "So have no fear of them." And Jesus gives these first followers, and you and me, three things, three truths that you can plant your feet on to stop your knees shaking.

And the first one is the judgment to come. Verse 26, "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." Now, have you ever had an argument with someone, and you insisted that you were right, and they insisted that they were right, and you end up turning to Google as the arbiter? And it turns out they're right… don't you just hate that! Especially when it's one of your teenage daughters. But if you're right, and they're wrong, you feel so good – in your sinful pride! - because you've been proved right. And Jesus says, if you speak up for what's good, it may be labelled

evil now, but there will be a day when it will become clear that you were right, when good is shown to be good, and evil to be evil. When what is covered will be revealed.

But unlike you and Google, that's not going to be a cause for gloating, is it? Jesus is not saying, 'listen you can face fear now because one day you will feel so good about yourself, that you were right and they were wrong!' No, Jesus is talking of the judgment to come is an encouragement to keep on speaking, and not stay quiet, so that others might hear: v27, "What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops"; that what Jesus told these disciples in private, they are now to tell to as many people as possible. So don't let fear keep you quiet, Jesus is saying, rather let love for your fellow men, and the prospect of the revealing of all things, the judgement to come, open your mouth. Let your love for them conquer your fear of them.

But the second reason Jesus gives is that all they can do is kill you! Verse 28, "and do not fear those who will kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Now, does that work for you – fear not, they can only kill you! I mean imagine someone saying to you, 'don't worry, it's nothing, I'm only going to kill you!'. 'You're only going to kill me? That's not nothing, that's everything!' Except it's not, is it? I mean, you know that you are more than your body, you know that instinctively, that you're more than this physical life. And that tells you that there is something to be feared more than physical death – it's eternal death, it's what Jesus calls here eternal destruction, hell.

And yet interestingly, Jesus doesn't say you should fear hell more than death, he says you should fear God, more than them. You should fear God more than fear itself.

Proverbs says, 'the fear of man lays a snare' (29:25) – that if you are constantly worrying about what other people say about you, or think about you, or could do to you, you'll never change the world, you'll never see others' lives transformed, because you'll always opt for the status quo, you'll never risk change, you'll never risk others' disapproval. And if we live like that, there will inevitably be this decline into darkness, in which good is called evil, because no one will have the courage to say no; because we'll all be moral cowards. But fear God more than others, know that he is greater, and more beautiful, than what others can say or do to you, then it releases wonderful life-changing courage and power.

But the third reason Jesus gives that you don't need to fear is because your heavenly Father loves you. Verse 29-31, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

Now a sparrow was poor man's food. Sparrow was not prime Swiss steak. It wasn't even French supermarket chicken. You could buy, not one, but two sparrows for a penny, the smallest Roman copper coin. So there wasn't a coin small enough to value the life of a sparrow. That's how disposable, how cheap the life of a sparrow was. And Jesus says, not one of those little birds falls to the ground outside of God's will. He's got even their lives covered.

And the God who is sovereign over their lives; the God who is sovereign over heaven and hell, is your Father, Jesus says, and you are worth far more to him than sparrows.
But notice, Jesus doesn't say, and whilst your Father let's the sparrows die, he won't let you die, does he? He doesn't say, that sparrows fall to the ground but your heavenly father will never let you fall. No, he's saying that your life, and your death, and everything in between, are just as much in the hands of this sovereign God as sparrows are. And sparrows die. And so too do Christians – but when it happens God will be controlling it.

Now, do you hear that and think? Is that supposed to encourage me Jesus? That if I stand for what's right, and speak out about you, and seek to proclaim the good news that Jesus is King, in word and deed, in grace and truth, they might kill me, but it's ok, because you're controlling the timing?

And this isn't just theoretical, is it? It might be for us, but multiple thousands of Christians across the world live under just these conditions, don't they? Could today be the day ISIS, or the religious police, or the mob, knock on our door?

But even if it's not death for you and me, is God controlling the day my colleagues roll their eyes at me, or talk behind my back, or my friends laugh at me, supposed to give me courage? How does that work?

Verse 30 again, "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered." Now as the father of 4 daughters, I know a thing or two about hair. Long blond hair. Long blood hair that blocks sinks, and showers, and vacuum cleaners. And they can spend hours brushing and plaiting one another's hair. And I don't know about you, but I can't remember the last time I had to brush my hair. And when they're done, they undo it and start all over again. Now, there was a time when they would come to me for their plaits and their pigtails. I'd sit behind them, and brush it, and plait it, and it would look… average. Which is why when I offer to do it now, they just say, 'no dad'.

But do you see the picture that Jesus is creating here? Your Father knows your hair, he's counted them. A sparrow can drop out of the sky and no one would know. A hair of your head could fall out, and you'd never even notice, but God would. He sees it. Because this God, the Lord of life and death, knows you and

loves you intimately, like a father lovingly brushing his daughter's hair. So don't fear *them,* Jesus says, don't fear those who speak ill of you, look to *him* who loves you.

And having given three reasons for courage, Jesus follows it up with a promise and a warning. Verse 32-33: "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."

Now, imagine that you've been invited to a party, but you don't really know anyone who's going to be there, so you're a bit nervous. But as you enter the room, you see in the distance a face you know. Imagine your relief as this person sees you, waves, comes over and gets you and begins to introduce you to all his friends: 'Everyone, this is John, he's an old friend of mine.' That's what it means to be acknowledged. But imagine how crushing it would be if that person saw you come in, and instead of greeting you warmly, turned his back on you – refusing to acknowledge you.

And when it comes to Jesus – you want him as your friend, don't you, the friend who will acknowledge you before his Father, not turn his back on you?

So when it comes to the cost of choosing whether to acknowledge Jesus, and speak out for truth or integrity, or to act with compassion for the broken and the needy, the question Jesus puts is, who do you want to acknowledge you as a friend? The world or Jesus? Do you want the world to say, 'hey this is Martin everyone, he's one of us, he feared us rather than God, he thought his comfort, or his reputation, was what counted, he thought it was better to keep his mouth shut so we all thought well of him, than to speak up for what's right - welcome him everyone!' And you watch as Jesus turns away. Or, do you want Jesus to welcome you and acknowledge you: 'Father, this is my good and faithful servant, he was prepared to be maligned for my name. He didn't count his life, or his reputation the ultimate thing. He considered what I said about him of more value than what the world said about him. Father – he's one of the family.'

But how do you know any of this is true? How do you know God really does care for you – and not just cares for you, but loves you intimately? Because if you're going to stick your neck out for him at a time when good is labelled evil, you need to know this is for real, don't you?

A Greater Love

Now, if I were to ask you, did Jesus come to bring peace on earth, you'd probably say yes. After all, Isaiah the prophet foretold that the messiah, would be the Prince of Peace. And at Jesus' birth the angel sang out, 'Peace on earth'! And yet listen to Jesus in v34, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

So, does Jesus bring peace? And the answer is Yes! The incredible, soul satisfying, thirst-quenching peace of your relationship with God restored. The peace of hearts and lives restored and transformed. And yet, he also brings a sword. But not the sword of military might or political power; not the sword of religious coercion, or cultural pressure; but the sword of decision.

You see, whilst Jesus is this deeply compelling figure that we want to be like, he is also divisive. And that division cuts to the level of social and family ties; it cuts to the level of your loyalties and allegiances.

Verse 35-36, "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."

When I became a Christian, my family weren't too happy about it. When you're English and middle class and your son starts reading the Bible and going to church it's a bit weird, isn't it. But what I experienced was nothing in comparison to the guy who got baptised the same night as me. Raj was in his twenties, and his family were Indian and Hindu. And when it came for us to talk about why we were getting baptised, Raj spoke about how, having recently become a Christian, his father had disowned him – 'my son is dead', he said. It's that kind of division Jesus is talking about here.

But can you see what Jesus is doing? He's calling into question the things that we love most. At a time when good is called evil and there's a price to be paid if you swim against the flow and speak up for Jesus, and for beauty, and for truth, what will you love most? Your comfort? Your safety? The good opinion of others? Your family?

And Jesus says, it's got to be me. Verse 38, "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Do you know how shocking that is? I mean in the Greco-Roman culture, to be crucified was to die the most shameful of deaths. And Jesus is saying, you've got to embrace shame for me. And that means dying to our pride. It means dying to ourselves, to our own self-wills, to our reputations, to our ambitions. Because the man who picked up his cross was a man heading to his execution, he was a dead man walking. You've got to do that for me, Jesus says. You've got to love me more than your family, more than your reputation, more than your comfort, more than your life.

And if you do, he says, you'll find life: v39, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." That in making Jesus your ultimate loyalty, where you get your identity from, you'll find true fulfilment.

But how can he ask that of you? How can he ask you to die, to lose yourself for him, to let go of your pride and your fear? And what could make you love him more than all your other loves? Only a greater love could do it, couldn't it? Only if your heart was overpowered by his love for you. Only if he, the king, were to die for you.

And Jesus can ask you to take up your cross and follow him, because he took up his cross for you. And he came and he experienced the sword of division in his own family, and his own family thought he was crazy. And he experienced the sword of political and military and religious power directed against him. But worse – he experienced the sword of God's wrath at the cross, paying the ultimate price for you and me. He experienced the public shame of crucifixion, so that our shame might be covered, and our sins forgiven. And he was humiliated, so that our pride might be humbled and paid for; so that you and I might experience the endless love and welcome of our heavenly Father.

You see, none of Christ's calls upon our lives make any sense unless he would love us with a far greater love than we can love him, unless he, the Son of God, would die for us. And he did. And then he rose again. That's the proof we need that makes the cost worth it. That's the proof that tells you, your heavenly Father loves you intimately. Understand that, and he'll be your highest allegiance, and you'll take up your cross, whatever it is for you, and follow him. And as you do, Jesus promises you, you'll find life.