

# Opposition is the Expectation

Alright, if you've got a bible, head with me over to **Matthew 10**—we'll get there in just a bit. If you're here for the first time this morning, we are in a **teaching series** where we are just walking through the book of Matthew, one chunk at a time, and seeing what we can learn from the life and ministry of Jesus. **Last week**, if you missed it, was all about Jesus' *plan* for making his movement known to the world. And his plan, we found out, is his *people*—his disciples, going out and being his representatives in the world. So we talked for quite a bit about what that means and what it looks like adapted for our context today.

And today's passage in many ways, picks up **where all that left off**. Jesus is still sending his disciples out to make him known, he's still preparing them for that whole mission. But beginning in v. 16 he starts talking about one thing they should *expect* as they go *about* all of that: they should *expect* **opposition**. As disciples go out into the world to announce the good news of the kingdom, they should *expect* to be *opposed* in doing that. In fact, Jesus *starts off* this passage with **this sentence in v. 16**:

*[16] "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves..."*

In case you're not dialed into how the **animal kingdom** works, sheep in the midst of wolves generally does not go great for the sheep. But you guys are smart, so you probably picked up on that. But *that's* the word picture Jesus gives his disciples to help them prepare for their mission: "...*sheep in the midst of wolves*. Godspeed to you all." Can you imagine a *less* encouraging metaphor? That's what Jesus wants his disciples to expect as they go about making him known.

And as intimidating as it is, I think we would be well-served today to **recapture this mentality** Jesus relays to his disciples. If we are following Jesus faithfully—if we are seeking to make him known to our world today—we *also* should *expect*, at least from time to time, opposition of our own. Maybe not in the same ways or with the same intensity as Jesus' first century disciples, but opposition just the same. We may very well be *resisted*, *marginalized*, *ostracized*, and and at times even *persecuted* because we follow Jesus. And like Jesus' disciples, we should *expect* for that to happen.

Now, as I say that, I do **cringe a little** at the **potential misunderstandings** of what I'm saying. Because there is a way to "expect opposition and persecution" that is lightyears away from what Jesus means in this passage. **When I was in high school, we did something called See You At the Pole**—anybody know what that is? Okay. So if you're unfamiliar, **SYATP** was an event one day a year where all the Christians at a particular public school would meet around the flagpole in the morning in front of the school and

pray together. It was a way, I think, of communicating to people that we were Christians (Now if you're thinking "why were we praying around the American flag, or why were we praying in public just to be seen doing it when Jesus says not to do that specific type of thing...you're thinking too hard about it). For better or worse, that's what we did.

And one particular year, our **school administrators** asked if we could start the event twenty minutes earlier. The reason was that pretty much every student who was at the event the previous year ended up being twenty minutes late to their first class. So a very reasonable request from the school—they didn't ask us not to *do* the event; they just asked us to start it twenty minutes *earlier* so students could be on time to class. And I was an office assistant that year, so I got to see an email that a parent sent in in *response* to that request. It said, and I quote:

**You all know** that if we start the event earlier, less students will be there. (And then in all caps at the end of the email...) **THIS IS PERSECUTION!!!!** (Four exclamation points. *Four.*)

Okay first off, *no*. Second, *also no*. But I think that **email is somewhat representative** of the posture many American Christians have towards persecution, right? They expect it, but they expect it in a way that they almost go out *looking* for it, and trying to see it around every corner—and sometimes even *inventing* or *imagining* it where it doesn't exist. Just so we're clear, that is *not* the posture Jesus is advising when he tells *his* disciples to *expect* opposition. That's not what he means.

In fact, in many ways, **that is the opposite** of the response he wants his disciples to have. He doesn't tell them to expect opposition so that they throw up our hands and throw a tantrum every time it happens. He tells them to expect it simply so that it doesn't catch them *off-guard* when it happens. So it doesn't *surprise* them. So it doesn't *blindsides* them. I think Peter, who would've been there for this pre-game speech from Jesus, puts it well in his letter later on. He says this in **1 Peter 4:12**:

**Beloved, do not be surprised** (do not be *what? Surprised. Don't be shocked or offended or caught off guard*) **at the fiery trial** (his metaphor for persecution) **when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.**

That's it. **That's the goal.** Not that we would panic and cry out and complain when we encounter opposition, but that we would see it and go "oh yeah—Jesus said this would happen. No surprises there. Let's not get distracted and get off-mission or off-message—let's carry on." **His goal is that we wouldn't *freak out*, but that we would**

instead **press on, when we encounter persecution and opposition**. Does that make sense to everybody?

Okay. So in order to help us have that *better* type of response, Jesus is going to offer us **three types of things** in this passage: **expectations, promises, and instructions**. This is a longer passage, but I would argue most everything in it fits in one of those three categories. So today, rather than walk through the passage line-by-line like we normally do, we're going to walk through it using those three headers. And I've got three sets of three points—so if you're a notetaker, this is your dream come true. The rest of us are going to get through it together. First up, let's talk about...

## Expectations

I think we get at least *three* of them. *First*, we are told to **expect opposition from our own people (v. 17-18)**. In those verses, Jesus says they should be *beware*, because people will *deliver them over to courts and flog them in their synagogues*. The only people that had synagogues were *Jewish* people, and the disciples were Jewish. So notice that while they may very well be opposed by the occupying Roman government, or pagan dictators and rulers, that's not what Jesus *leads* with. He *leads off* by saying they will be opposed by *their own* people. Proclaiming God-fearing people who are supposed to be the same team as them.

I'll tell you that in **our almost five years of existence** as a church, we have certainly encountered resistance and opposition from the outside world—people in our city that don't follow Jesus. But do you know who is usually the most *antagonistic* towards us? Religious people. Other *churches* that don't like how we go about things. Proclaiming Christians that come around our church and immediately start pointing out all the things that we're not doing the right way or good enough for them. The people who think we're not conservative enough or liberal enough, or traditional enough or modern enough—those are the people that situate themselves most *aggressively* against us. Jesus said that would happen: you may get resistance from the people you think are on the same team as you.

Next, Jesus says we should **expect opposition from our own families (v. 21, 34-37)**. Jesus says that brother will deliver brother over to death. Parents against children. Children against parents. He says “a person's enemies will be those of their own *household*.” Jesus prepares his disciples for opposition that very well may come from their own flesh and blood, their own immediate *family*.

Because at the end of the day, **deciding to follow Jesus is a decision to shift your allegiance**.<sup>1</sup> And one of the strongest allegiances people had back then (and many still have *today*) is to their *families*. So Jesus knows that when his people start to shift their *allegiance* away from their families and *toward* the kingdom of God, they are going to encounter *resistance* for doing so. And Jesus says it very well could get ugly. Family members may deliver over other family members to be *killed* as a result.

Now for many of *us today*, it may not be quite that intense—it might not be life and death. But opposition **still happens**. I've heard about many parents who find out their son or daughter is a part of a church where they are walking in openness and honesty with others—and the parents will quickly chide their kids to not “air their dirty laundry in public.” I've heard about times where a spouse wants to open up and get gospel help for their marriage, and their husband or wife quickly responds by saying that they really should “keep that stuff private.” The reality is that following Jesus—truly aligning your life with the kingdom of God—is often going to create some friction with other members of your family that *don't* live that way. Jesus said we can *expect* that to be the case when we follow him.

And third, Jesus says his disciples can **expect opposition from anyone** (v. 22). Jesus finally says “...you will be *hated by all* for my name's sake.” Hated by *how many*? *All*. Ultimately, opposition really can come from anyone and anywhere. Here's the reality: **the gospel by its very nature is disruptive and divisive. It makes exclusive claims to a world that does not like exclusive claims. It makes claims of ultimate authority to a world that prefers no authority at all outside of themselves. It makes claims of absolute truth to a world that prefers to define its own truth.** And because of that, you can expect resistance most anywhere the true gospel is proclaimed. There's really no way around it.

So we should **expect opposition from our own people, opposition from our own family,** and we should expect **opposition from anyone** and everyone. Does everyone feel sufficiently cheery and encouraged so far? Yeah. So let's move to the *next* section, which are the **promises** we find in this passage.

## Promises

First, Jesus promises us that **all will be revealed** (v. 26-27). He says “nothing is covered that will not be revealed,” and “nothing is hidden that will not be known.” **Have you ever been watching a movie or TV show,** maybe like a True Crime something or other, and one of the characters says something like “I know the truth will *come out*.” They always

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<sup>1</sup> See specifically v. 37.

sound so confident saying it. But can we be honest? Does the truth always come out in our world, this side of eternity? *Nope*. How many corrupt leaders and politicians are sitting on a mountain of truth about them and have been for *decades*? In our world as it stands, the truth does not always come out.

**But in the kingdom of God**, Jesus says, the truth *will always* come out. If you did the right thing and people treated you poorly anyway, that truth will come out. If you did what was *just* and were opposed anyway, *that* truth will come out. In the kingdom of Jesus, we don't have to wonder if justice will be done and truth will prevail. It *will*. // And here's why that matters practically: that means when we are mistreated or marginalized or opposed, we don't have to be the one who settles the score. We don't have to lash out in return or get even—we trust that God will ultimately do all of that. Which means we can press on with our mission of making Jesus known.

Second, Jesus promises that **the Father attentively cares for us (v. 29-31)**. In those verses, Jesus grabs one of his favorite illustrations for talking about God's care and attention for his people. He says that we are of *more value* to God than many sparrows. Sparrows in Jesus' day were about the cheapest, most common animal you could find. They were sold at the market for basically nothing. And *yet*, Jesus says, not a single one of those sparrows falls to the ground apart from the Father's care and attention. So if that's true, and if we aren't common at all—God has every hair on our head numbered—how much *more* care and attention does the Father show to *us*? That's the promise.

Now, **his point isn't** to say that the Father attentively cares for us...and therefore nothing bad will ever happen to us. That wouldn't even make sense in the context of a passage where Jesus is telling his disciples they very well may be *killed*. I mean even in the sparrow metaphor itself, the sparrows are "falling to the ground"—in other words, *dying*. So it's quite the dark metaphor. But the point Jesus is *making* is that **opposition and persecution should never be interpreted as signs that God has forgotten about you**. If God is aware of and attentive to every single sparrow that passes, how much more is he aware of and attentive to *you* when *you* face persecution or even death?

And the third promise is that **Jesus is also with us (v. 40-42)**. In the final verses of our passage, Jesus begins talking about how anyone who receives his disciples, ultimately receives Jesus *himself*. How anyone who gives one of his disciples just a cup of cold water—the bare minimum of hospitality—will be rewarded for doing so. What Jesus is doing is that he is hitching our wagon, to *his*. We saw this some in last week's passage: if people accept his disciples, they accept him. If they *reject* his disciples, they *reject* him. Jesus is saying that his *presence* and his *authority* reside with his people.

We see this even clearer **in the book of Acts** when Saul is persecuting God's people, Jesus shows up to him and says "Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?"<sup>2</sup> Now that's weird—Saul never interacted with Jesus, much less persecuted him. But he persecuted God's *people*, and to Jesus that's the same thing. Jesus fully associates our acceptance with *his*, such that he associates people's persecution of *us* with their persecution of *him*. So aren't walking in *our* power or *our* authority, but rather in *his*.

**So Jesus promises** that **all will be revealed**, that **God attentively cares for us**, and that **Jesus** and his authority are **with us**. So now let's get *practical*: what *instructions* does Jesus give his disciples for navigating opposition?

## Instructions

First, Jesus tells his disciples to **be discerning** and also **innocent (v. 16)**. Jesus says his disciples should be "*wise as serpents* and innocent as *doves*." Did that read a bit weird to anybody else? So *serpents* were often iconic of being wise and even *shrewd* or *cunning*, while *doves* were more symbolic for things like innocence and purity. So Jesus here is trying to get his disciples to understand that in their response to opposition, they can be both *innocent* and *intelligent*.

Sometimes, certain **people can be so focused** on being *innocent* and *morally pure* that they end up being kind of *naive*—have you ever met someone like that (don't point if they're beside you)? Right. And then *other* people can be so focused on being strategic and shrewd that they end up being somewhat shady and manipulative—have you ever met somebody like *that* (again, don't point)? Okay, here Jesus is saying that we don't have to pit those two things against one another like some sort of false dichotomy. You don't have to be ignorant and naive in order to be *innocent*, and you don't have to be shady and manipulative in order to be *wise*. There is a way to be *both simultaneously* and avoid the errors of either. And followers of Jesus should shoot for that.

Now Jesus actually gives us **one example of how to do this** *in the passage*. Jesus says "if they persecute you in one town, flee to the next." So he's telling his disciples that if they are singled out and persecuted, they don't have to just stay there and *risk* death—they can be smart and go on to the next town. But he *also* says "anyone who denies me before men, I will deny before the Father." Jesus is essentially saying, "feel free to be wise and strategic (by going to the next town), but do not lie and manipulate (by claiming not to follow me when you do)." **Feel free to avoid persecution by being**

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<sup>2</sup> See Acts 9:3-5.

*smart, but do not avoid persecution by being dishonest.* Wise as serpents, *innocent* as doves. Does that make sense?

Next, Jesus instructs his disciples to **not be anxious about what to say** (v. 19-20). Jesus says that when his disciples are handed over to be persecuted, they will often be given chances to “bear witness” to Jesus before various people.

I mentioned this briefly last week, but sometimes Christians can get really fixated on “tips and tricks” to help them share the gospel with people. So there’s this method and there’s this napkin drawing and there’s this acronym where there are five steps and when you put them together they spell out the word “S.H.A.R.E.” or whatever. And I know those methods have been really helpful to a lot of people so I want to tread carefully here. But I will tell you that for the most part, non-Christians can tell when you’ve already set the agenda for the conversation. They can tell when you’re on “H” and you know you need to get them to “E” by the end of the night. And so at the bare minimum, maybe I’d just say to at least be as dependent on the Spirit giving you the words to say to people about Jesus as you are to your tips and tricks and methods and acronyms. That fair?

Because **Jesus simply says** “don’t be anxious about what you are to say.” Don’t pre-formulate arguments and accusations and defenses and methods. *Trust* that when you need to say something, the Spirit will give you what to say. Trust that we have a living, active, speaking, attentive God who can be trusted to speak to us when the moment arises. Don’t be *anxious* about what you are to say.

And finally, Jesus says that we should **fear God, not people** (v. 26-28). Jesus says “don’t fear those who can kill the *body*.” Which probably sounds like a bit of a strange instruction to us. And probably to Jesus’ disciples too—I have to think at least *some* of his disciples are going, “well that’s *precisely* the thing we are fearful of—people *killing* us.” Right? They were nervous that they were going to get handed over, persecuted, and killed. But Jesus is saying instead of fearing the people that can do that, fear *God* who has far more control over your ultimate destiny than they do. Yes, the worst they can do is kill you. But Jesus is saying “*you* as my disciples have the gift of knowing that there is actually something beyond *death*.”

And all this starts to make **even more sense after Jesus’ resurrection**. At the resurrection, for followers of Jesus, death was actually robbed of its *power*. We see this laid out in plenty of places in the Scriptures, but one of my favorites is in Paul’s letter to the **Philippians**, where Paul says “to live is Christ, and to die is (*what?*) *gain*.” What a thing to say. What Paul is saying is that if he gets to go on *living*, that means he gets to make Jesus known to more people and show off who Jesus is. But if he *dies*, that means

he gets to be *with* Jesus. Paul is saying that **death no longer looms over followers of Jesus**—it no longer has to control or paralyze us—**because the worst the world can do to us is actually the best possible outcome for us**. Do you see how that works?

I realize that's **not how many of us think** about life and death, but what this passage is showing us is that we now have the *ability* to think that way. We no longer have to fear even the worst, because the worst, for us, is *gain*. That's why we don't need to fear those who might oppose, persecute, or even kill us. Because death has lost its power over us in Jesus. This is why Jesus says in this passage that "whoever *loses* his life for my sake, will *find* it."

And **if that's true** for us should we ever face *death*, **how true is it** for when we encounter *lesser* forms of opposition for the sake of the kingdom? How true is it when we face ridicule, or resistance, or marginalization. If *death* no longer controls and paralyzes us, neither do any of those things. You and I can face any and all of that with the boldness of the Holy Spirit in our souls and the message of Jesus on our lips. Precisely because of the cross and resurrection.

So as we finish up today, I just want to give us **two questions** to consider. First...

### **If I don't experience any opposition for following Jesus, why not?**

Jesus says in this passage that his disciples should *expect* to be treated negatively because they follow him. **The very nature of living a counter-cultural life is that you can expect the culture around you to be confused, put off, and bothered by how you live**. So if you would call yourself a follower of Jesus, and no one ever *reacts* to your life in that sort of way, it is probably worth asking why that is. Why do they never seem to respond to you in that way?

It **could be** that no one opposes your way of life because you don't **spend enough time around non-Christians** for there to *be* any opposition. If you live the majority of your life inside the confines of Christian family and Christian friends, and inside the almighty Christian bubble, you probably don't encounter a ton of opposition. Because you're spending the majority of your time around people who do life the exact same way you do. It's possible that you have somewhat *insulated* yourself from any type of outside opposition. So maybe the biggest takeaway for you from this teaching is that you need to figure out how to share life more consistently with those who don't follow Jesus.

*Or*—and this one may be a lot harder to hear—it might be that no one opposes your way of life as a follower of Jesus because **nothing about your life is different enough for**



**people to oppose.** If your life looks nearly identical to your non-Christian friend's life, what would they be objecting *to*? *If you think about and go about your job and career the same way they do, if you go about your sexuality and sexual expression the same way they do, if you approach money and possessions the same way they do, if you consume alcohol in the same quantities that they do...they're probably not going to object much to your life, because there's nothing to object to.* So maybe the practical step for you is to re-examine how you approach any number of those things in your life, such that there starts to *be* a distinction between you and a person who doesn't follow Jesus.

But the question itself is worth asking and reflecting on: **if I don't really experience opposition for following Jesus, why don't I?** Second question...

### **If and when you experience opposition, how can you respond like Jesus?**

For those of us that *do* encounter opposition, we should constantly be asking "how can I respond to that opposition like Jesus did?" So it's **not by throwing a tantrum** about it. It's not by crying out and complaining. And it's certainly not by *inventing* persecution when it doesn't actually exist. So what *is* the right response?

I think of a few more words from **1 Peter 2:23:**

*When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*

One of the **easiest, most instinctive things** for us to do as human beings is to treat others exactly how they treat you—isn't it? They exclude you, so you exclude them. They talk about you behind your back, so you talk about them behind theirs. They make you feel small so you make them feel even smaller. That's the most natural way to respond. Retaliation is the way of the world.

But **as God's people, grounded in God's promises**, what if we entrusted ourselves and our outcome to the "one who judges justly"? What if we felt liberated to not retaliate because it's not up to *us* to settle the score. What if we carried on with our mission, carried on with our message, because we don't expect better treatment than our rabbi, and because he showed us what it looked like to trust God with what happens to us? He didn't retaliate, he didn't debate and argue people into submission, he didn't cry out and complain whenever he was persecuted. He took it in stride and saw each of those situations as opportunities to display the counter-cultural kingdom of God, and fix his trust on the one who's truly in charge.

So **my prayer** is that we would all be filled with the promises and presence of Jesus, in such a way that we put him on display to our world, even as we face opposition. Let's pray together.