

Incentives to Faithfulness in Opposition

Intro: Did you ever find yourself trying to go in a certain direction and it seemed everyone else was going the opposite way? There is a spiritual analogy.

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. “For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.” (Matthew 7:13–14, NASB)

It is hard to go the right way when everyone else is going the wrong way. It would be easier to turn and go with the crowd than to resist and push forward.

So then, what will enable us to keep pressing toward the goal in spite of the opposition of the world? When Jesus sent His apostles out, He did not withhold from them the possibility of opposition or even persecution and death. What Jesus said to them can also incentivize us to remain faithful in spite of the world’s opposition and even its persecution. What will help us to remain faithful in times of opposition by the world around us?

We must recognize that Jesus our Master was hated before us.

Jesus wanted His disciples to have a realistic expectation of what it meant to be His disciples.

“It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household.” (Matthew 10:25–26)

In essence Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that the call to be a disciple meant becoming like Him; but becoming like Him would mean they would be treated like Him.

Already the disciples had witnessed Jesus’ enemies accusing Him of wrongdoing and even attributing His miracles to the power of Satan. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when He said, “If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul...” It was a term of derision, somewhat like calling Him the devil himself!

Later when the apostles were flogged by the religious council in Jerusalem, this teaching of Jesus caused the apostles to see their persecutions differently.

“So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.” (Acts 5:41)

The fact Jesus had put them on notice led them to do the same to their disciples:

“Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you.” (1 John 3:13)

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.” (1 Peter 4:12–13)

In a word Jesus and His apostles wanted us to see that opposition is inevitable! Let that encourage you to stand firm!

We must trust that God will protect His people.

Jesus urged his disciples not to be afraid of those who opposed them, but recognize that God would expose the cruel intentions of the enemies of God's cause, protecting them from their machinations.

"Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops." (Matthew 10:26–27)

The essence of Jesus' statement appears to be that we do not need to be afraid of what other may do, since God intervenes according to His will to expose the intentions of the enemy and protect His people.

Perhaps we see an example of this in Acts. Paul had been taken into custody by the Roman commander after the Jews had attacked him in the temple courts because of the mistaken belief that he had brought a Gentile into the temple. Though Paul was in the safe-keeping of the Romans, a group of Jewish men had vowed not to eat or drink before they assassinated Paul. They had planned lie in wait for him after persuading the commander to bring him to the council for a hearing. But in God's providence their plans were exposed to Paul's nephew who heard of their intentions and as a result warned his uncle. The young man was given the opportunity to report it to the commander and Paul was steeled away in the dark of night and the Jewish death-plot was foiled. Indeed what had been "covered" was revealed; what had been "hidden" was made known. And it saved Paul's life!

Thus Jesus sought to assure His disciples that God would help them in their testimony; thus they should not be afraid to speak out boldly for Jesus and against error. Instead of "whispering the truth where no one could hear, they were proclaim it from the rooftops so that no one could not know it! We likewise need that same conviction that God will help His people who faithfully speak His truth. Paul's words to Timothy are apropos here: "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline." (2 Timothy 1:7)

We must fear God more than we fear man.

The opposition of the majority around us can be a fearful place to be. It was for the apostles. In fact Jesus captured the idea perfectly in his statement:

"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; (Matthew 10:16) And so Jesus acknowledges that our fear is real. Certainly facing the prospects of persecution would be fearful; but Jesus urged them to recognize that there is one to be feared more—God!

“And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28)

Jesus wanted them to see that there is a fate worse than death; and that is to be separated from God eternally in hell. That is a living and eternal death!

If fear is to be a driving force in our decisions, then let it be the fear of God’s punishment that motivates us to remain faithful to what is right.

After all the Scriptures are quite clear about the destiny of cowards:

“But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.””

(Revelation 21:8)

We must be assured that God values the lives of His saints.

How could Jesus help the disciples to see that they were precious to the heavenly father and that nothing that happened to them would go unnoticed? He appealed to the common house sparrow.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. “But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. “Therefore do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:29–31)

Though we wouldn’t do that today, in Jesus day sparrows were sometimes purchased for food. The small amount of meat from them was incorporated into a pastry for a simple dish. Two of them could be purchased for a half-hour’s pay.

Yet amazingly Jesus said that something of that little value would not die without the Father’s knowledge. I marvel at how great God’s intimate knowledge of His entire creation is! How much more a beloved child of God!

God knowledge of His creation doesn’t stop with the sparrows! He knows everything about his people! “The very hairs of your head are all numbered.”

Jesus wanted the disciples and us to see that God knows everything about us; and that assures that if or when something bad happens to one of His people, He will not only be aware, but come to their aid.

We must know that however we treat Jesus in this life will determine how He treats us at the judgment.

“Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. “But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 10:32–33)

Jesus offers both an incentive to faithfulness and a word of warning. For Jesus to deny us at the judgment is to experience the greatest shame. When we are ashamed to confess Him and His word, then He will be ashamed of us at the judgment. It is why Paul urged Timothy:

“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God,” (2 Timothy 1:8)

But if we are bold enough to confess Him before others, then He will confess us before the Father. Imagine the glory of Jesus acknowledging that He knows us as His loyal followers. Wouldn't you love to have that happen?

How many of us have felt a tinge of pride in saying that we know someone important? How much more when that person knows us and is a friend! Yet nothing could possibly compare with the confession of Jesus at the judgment!

What happens on that day will be determined by what we say and do now! Don't be like some in Jesus' day we were too afraid to stand up for Jesus: “Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.” (John 12:42–43)

We must be aware that the gospel judges the hearts of men and thus inevitably divides the closest of relationships.

These words of Jesus may surprise many:

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. “For I came 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 MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD.” (Matthew 10:34–36)

Earlier we saw that opposition was inevitable. Now we see why. It is the nature of the gospel to test men's hearts. Some will believe and obey its message. Others will not believe and disobey. It sets the two groups on an inevitable spiritual collision course. Moreover that division can penetrate even the closest of earthly relationships—even those with our family. Some of you have experienced that division. It is painful; but also inevitable! And there is a not-so-subtle pressures sometimes to choose our family over the Lord.

As a result Jesus warns that allowing anything earthly to get in the way of serving Him would make us unworthy to be His disciple:

“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. “He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it.” (Matthew 10:37–39)

These are strong words! Neither family nor persecution or even the loss of life itself should keep us from following the Lord.

We must realize that those who do receive the messengers of Christ, receive Christ, and therefore receive God as well.

Another thing that would help the disciples would be the recognition of the impact of their work in teaching the gospel.

“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.” (Matthew 10:40)

When the gospel is taught, the teacher shares the status of both the Father and the Son. The disciples would be consoled to recognize that the Lord viewed those who received them as receiving Him; that those who persecuted them are persecuting Him.

Likewise when we are rejected as spokesmen for God, it is not only we that are being rejected, but also the heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus!

And when our message is received then our work becomes glorious because it leads people to worship and serve the Lord and brings great blessing to them. That is good enough reason to speak up!

Paul was quite aware of both the consequences of the rejection of God’s message as well as its reception.

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:14–16)

We must believe that the promised rewards of eternity cannot fail.

If on the one hand we are motivated to be faithful by the fear of punishment for cowardice, on the other hand we should be motivated to be faithful by the joy of heavenly reward.

“He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward. “And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward.”” (Matthew 10:41–42)

One of the key phrases in these statements is the expression “in the name of.” It is a reminder that whatever our status may be as a teacher of the truth, when we persuade others to act, they share in the blessing of the truth.

Every effort to stand for the truth will be rewarded with blessing to those who act upon our words. Let these motivate you to speak the truth!

But that is assuring in another way! Jesus assured his disciples that no effort would go unrewarded:

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Conclusion: I hope our hearts encouraged, our courage bolstered by recalling the teaching of the Lord. We can overcome the opposition of the world; and in so doing we can bring blessing to those around us!

