

Matthew 10

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[0 : 0 0] Are Christians being persecuted in Scotland, in the United Kingdom? What do you think? What would you answer if you were posed that question? Well, I'm posing you the question. What do you think the answer to that is? Are Christians suffering persecution in Scotland today, 2014?

I imagine, I don't know if you are representative of the Christian public in Scotland, but I would imagine that if you are, there will be different answers to that question. There are some who would argue very strongly that, yes, you know, we live in a day when Christians are being persecuted, even in our own country. You sometimes come across, be it on the media or on social media, news of some street preachers. There's been some recent cases that have hit the news who are very quick to cry, "Persecution." Curiously, they seem to be folk who come from other countries, and then tell us how pagan our country is and what terrible persecution they endure as they seek to do the work of the gospel in Scotland. And every impediment that is placed in their way, as they see it, is evidence of persecution. Then there are others who would take a very different opinion and who would argue that to even talk about Christians suffering persecution in Scotland is to minimize, and almost a slap in the face of Christians in other countries who really are suffering intense persecution, whose life is in danger, who find themselves arrested, imprisoned, all of the things that we've read of there in Matthew 10. And to even compare what we might have to endure in our own country with such persecution is almost obscene, or perhaps that's rather strong a word, but inappropriate, to put it mildly.

Now, I imagine that the truth probably lies somewhere in between, though I do tend to veer more towards the second position than the first. What I think we can say with a fair measure of confidence is that we are, unless there is a change in the direction that we are heading as a society, we are heading certainly in the direction of Christians being increasingly exposed to opposition and even persecution, simply for holding the way, and certainly for expressing views that are grounded in the Bible. And there have been some examples even in recent days that illustrate the prevailing mood and how it is evolving, not in a very promising direction. I don't know if some of you have been following the debacle of the Church of Scotland's unholy alliance with the humanist society in the matter of religious observance in schools.

And the proposal that they are making jointly, so it would seem that that be changed to a time for reflection. Well, I'm not sure of the ins and outs of all of that. It's part of a consultation. Nothing has been decided as yet. But in the course of that debate or discussion, the prospect has been raised of ministers or indeed anybody else who would be involved in school assemblies or in religious observance or time for reflection or whatever name it ultimately is given, having to sign up to the schools or the local authorities' equality and diversity policy. Now, that isn't the case. I'm not saying that is what's going to happen, but that's one of the things that is being suggested now. Can you just imagine what that might involve and how that might be, depending of course on what the policy was in any given local authority, how that could be something that would close doors for Christians, doors that previously were open? Now, the question is, would that constitute, if that were to happen, would that constitute persecution? Perhaps we couldn't call it persecution, but it certainly is an example of how opposition to the gospel could result in Christians being marginalized and denied rights, some might call them privileges, that have been previously enjoyed. Well, whatever your view is as regards the current situation, it makes sense for us as Christians to be familiar with the teaching we have in the Bible regarding how we should act in the midst of or as we move towards a scenario of increasing hostility towards the faith and persecution of the faithful. And in Matthew chapter 10, in the verses that we have read, we have one block of teaching, and there are other similar blocks, and there are obviously overlaps and parallels in the other gospels, but we're going to limit ourselves to the verses we've read in Matthew chapter 10, one block of teaching that was

first delivered by Jesus to the Twelve. And in these verses that we've read, we can identify seven principles of conduct for believers facing or preparing or anticipating persecution. Last week we had seven principles of mission and I was very keen on getting seven again, so I managed to get seven from the verses that we have before us. Now, before we identify these seven principles of conduct, let's call them that, principles of conduct, it's worth noting how Jesus in His instruction is moving even within the chapter, and we haven't read from the beginning of the chapter, but if you remember how the chapter began, even as we move through the chapter, we find Jesus moving in the matter of His instruction or in the context of His instruction from teaching that was obviously designed for the immediate circumstances of the Twelve to Jesus contemplating future circumstances that would be more general, more universal, more permanent. We can notice the progression even within this chapter. There's the progression from a reference to the disciples being dragged before synagogues, so very clearly a Jewish context, very much what you would expect to those who had been sent to the lost sheep of Israel. But then, almost in the same breath, we have reference to kings and governors.

Now, you can't imagine that the Twelve would have had much contact with kings or governors, and then immediately there's reference to them being witnesses to the Gentiles, there in verse 18. And when we think about what we had seen last week about a prohibition there in verse 5, these Twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions, Do not go among the Gentiles. So, on the one hand, Jesus is indicating that they are not to go to the Gentiles, and yet within what would seem to be the same discourse, we have this reference to an opportunity that persecution would provide to bear witness to the Gentiles. And what seems to be happening is that there is this progression from instructions that were very much applicable in the here and now of the Twelve to contemplating of what would be the case later on in the future for the Twelve and indeed for those who would follow. Now, one way of understanding this is that what we have here, certainly in part of this chapter, is Matthew having compiled various teachings of Jesus on the subject and presented them as part of this single discourse or commission to the Twelve. That's maybe what is happening and would explain the disparate nature of the material, certainly as it appears to us.

[8 : 51] But let's move on to what really interests us, and that is to identify these seven principles of conduct in the midst of persecution or perhaps as we prepare for what could well be our own circumstances of increasing opposition and hostility to the gospel. I'll mention what they are and then we can think of them in turn. Be prepared, be sensible, be good, be aware, be a witness, be strong, and be smart. Okay, I think these exhortations are one way of drawing out the principles that we find in the passage that we've read, and I'll try and explain how I've got there. Now, first of all, be prepared. Now, this is a principle of conduct that emerges throughout the passage, and so we'll spend a little more time, indeed, considerably more time on this first principle of conduct than the others. So, when you find in ten minutes we're only just finishing, be prepared, maybe it won't be ten, and you're working out the maths and you're thinking we're going to be here a very long time, then, you know, don't be concerned, because the others will be significantly swifter in what I have to say. But this one requires a little bit more time because it's really drawing not on any one thing that Jesus says in these verses that we've read, but on what He says and what recurs throughout the passage as regards this matter of the importance of being prepared. And we'll explore this under two headings. First of all, the inevitability of persecution, and then secondly, the nature of persecution as these things are drawn out or presented to us in these verses. First of all, then, the inevitability of persecution.

Throughout what Jesus says, He simply takes as a given that the disciples will be persecuted. There's no suggestion that, well, you know, if this were to happen, well, this is what you would want to be doing. That's not the manner in which Jesus speaks at all. Quite the reverse. If we just quickly scan through the verses in verse 17, they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. In verse 18, you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. In verse 19, when they arrest you, when they arrest you, not if they arrest you, but when they arrest you, this is what you are to do or this is the attitude you are to have. In verse 21, brother will betray brother to death. And it goes on to speak of terrible things, not as possibilities, but as things that will happen. Verse 22, all men will hate you because of me. And we could perhaps go on. That certainly covers the ground, I think, adequately. And in just relaying this aspect of persecution as Jesus is speaking about it and presenting it, He's saying this will happen. It is inevitable.

Inevitable. Now, that's clear enough. We read the verses and they're clear enough and we say, well, that certainly seems to be what is being said. But there is, of course, a difficulty. And the difficulty, if we can call it that, is that that is not the actual experience of many Christians.

[12 : 29] I don't think it's the actual experience of most of us here this evening. Curiously, it was probably not the experience of the Twelve who, as far as we know, didn't suffer at this stage, on this missionary task that they were given, didn't suffer in the way described. Now, some of them subsequently did, but at this stage, when they're sent out, they go out and they return. We don't have any indication that they would have suffered in the manner described at this stage in their ministering. So, how are we to understand this seeming, I don't know if contradiction is the right word or what would we call it, the intriguing aspect of this, that Jesus is saying this will happen and yet often it doesn't happen. You know, some people might conclude that the absence of persecution is an indictment on our failure to go among the wolves. Jesus is sending His disciples to go among the wolves. And of course, if we fail to do that, if we are disobedient to the call and we remain among the lambs and the sheep and don't go among the wolves, well then, we can spare ourselves a lot of grief. And maybe that's the reason why we're not subject to persecution. Well, there may be some truth in that. But I think we also have to recognize that Jesus is describing in these verses what will ordinarily happen as Christians take the gospel message to an unbelieving world. It is not what always happens. Simple observation makes that very clear. And at the end of the day, what we have to do and what is incumbent on us is that we are to go where we are sent. In verse 16, Jesus says to them,

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. We go where we're sent. Now, if where we go, if where God has placed us, if where God would have us be witnesses for Him, we are spared persecution of the kind described by Jesus, then all we can do is give thanks to God for that and be grateful for the measure of peace and the measure of protection even under law that we enjoy to be spared the persecution that he describes here. But if in God's providence we are sent or if in God's providence the environment in which we are, the nation of which we form a part, changes and we find ourselves in different and more hostile circumstances, well then, there too we accept that that is where God has sent us and we can rest in the assurance that whatever opposition we face, this is known by our Lord. Jesus evidently was very clear. He had full understanding of what they would encounter. It came as no surprise to Him. It would have come as no surprise to Him. He's saying this is what will happen.

And as He knows what will happen, so we can also be sure that He is in control of all that happens. So, the inevitability of persecution, but also the nature of persecution. And as we think about this, this might shed some light on what we have just been discussing or pondering on regarding the very different experiences of Christians in different places or at different times. There's a couple of things that we could say regarding the nature of persecution. The first is that persecution, gospel persecution, persecution as understood in what Jesus is saying here and throughout the New Testament witness particularly, persecution is rooted in hostility to Jesus. Verses 24 and 25 make that very clear. What Jesus is saying to the disciples is, they oppose Me. And because they oppose Me, well, of course they'll oppose you. They've opposed the master, so they'll oppose the servant. If they oppose the head of the household, they'll certainly oppose the members of the household.

There's reference made also in the passage that we've read about the believers being attacked and persecuted on account of the name of Jesus. Persecuted is rooted in hostility to Jesus.

This is a spiritual battle and there is something about the name of Jesus, the name of Jesus of course representing who He is, that does generate in some a real hatred. And our enemies are first and foremost enemies of Jesus. And we ought to see them in that light, not so much as our personal enemies, but as the enemies of our Lord. The other thing that's clear from what Jesus says in these verses is that persecution can be varied in its intensity and in its expression. Even in these few verses there's a variety of scenarios that Jesus recognizes will be experienced by His disciples from being insulted and misrepresented. And there in verses 24 and 25 that the language is of Jesus being insulted, misrepresented, being spoken of as one who is evil. And He says, well, that will happen to you as well. People will speak ill of you. People will insult you. People will misrepresent you. They'll misunderstand you. It's happened to me and it's going to happen to you. But then it moves on to, in ever greater intensity, to the hatred of the disciples. All men will hate you because of Me. It moves on, or there's also a reference to being harassed and arrested. Be on your guard against men. They will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their in your

synagogues. There is physical violence. There is betrayal and death, and of the most painful kind, betrayal and death at the hands of your nearest and dearest, of parents, of children, of brothers. So, a whole host of different ways in which the disciples of Jesus would experience persecution. And that very variety, I think, allows us to conclude that it's not the intention of Jesus to say that all Christians everywhere will experience all of these things. We won't all individually experience all of these things. Clearly, we don't. Or even collectively, as the people of God in a given locality or in a given nation, we may not experience all of these things. But when we consider ourselves as we ought, as part of the body of Christ that is one body, then the body of Christ is today suffering all of these things that Jesus speaks of as He instructs His disciples. That most painful example of persecution, perhaps, of all that is said, brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children rebel against their parents and have them put to death. And you say, surely something like that couldn't happen. And of course, we know that that does happen. It's happening today in some Muslim countries, where naming the name of Jesus and becoming a Christian can lead to exactly what Jesus describes in this verse. And perhaps not only in Muslim countries, but perhaps in Muslim communities within our own country. I'm not for a moment saying that that would be true of every Muslim community, or of all Muslims by no means. But there is no doubt that these things do happen today to our fellow believers. Be prepared. Be prepared is the message that rings loud and clear for us in the teaching of

[20 : 35] Jesus. But moving on, and much more briefly, to some other principles of conduct. The second one I want us to suggest is be sensible. Now, you won't find the word sensible in the passage, but in verse 16, Jesus says to His disciples, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. That little phrase, be as shrewd as snakes. Now, the word that is translated here, shrewd, would ordinarily be translated, or certainly could be translated by a very ordinary word, not a very dramatic word, but the word sensible. But of course, the picture of a snake that it is attached to does lend itself more naturally to the word shrewd. And so, it's quite understandable and quite legitimate for that word to be employed, be as shrewd as snakes. But I think it is worth stressing that the word itself means be sensible. Be sensible. And the basic principle that we are being given, the instruction we are being given, is that as we would witness for the truth, as we would do the work of the gospel as disciples of Jesus, we are to be sensible. We are to be sensible in the manner in which we speak and in the methods that we use. And the reason for this, and this is important, the reason for this is to avoid persecution. Jesus isn't in any way glorifying persecution as something that's good in and of itself. He's saying, I want you to avoid persecution in as much as is possible. And one way you'll avoid it in a measure is if you're shrewd, if you're sensible. If you're not sensible, if you're cavalier, if you're foolish, then you'll bring upon yourself more suffering than is necessary. We are not to perversely seek opposition and persecution.

I made reference at the beginning to recent coverage in the media of some street preachers who appear, some of them, and I stress only some, who appear to be looking for trouble, certainly the impression that one gets, as if finding themselves in trouble with the police or finding themselves arrested, gives them some status as martyrs for the faith, and they're applauded by those who hear of their great acts of heroism. Now, I want to stress I'm not thinking of any one in particular, and I'm certainly not tarring with the same brush all those who would courageously preach the good news on the streets of our cities. I applaud them. If it's the most sensible way or the most effective way, well, that's another matter, but I have no truck with them in principle. But there are those who do seem to court opposition, who seem to revel in being opposed, and if that is the case, then certainly they are going against this principle. Jesus says to us, be shrewd as snakes. Be sensible. Don't do something stupid that will just provoke opposition and bring upon you trouble that is not necessary. Be sensible. But then another principle of conduct we have in the immediately following kind of illustration that

Jesus uses, he says, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. As sensible as snakes. Doesn't sound right, does it? I don't think of a snake as being very sensible, but certainly as shrewd as a snake.

But then also be as innocent as doves. Here the word that Jesus uses is also an interesting one. Literally it translates unmixed. Be unmixed. What does that mean? Well, I suppose if you get the picture, it carries the idea of something pure. So, something that's not being contaminated. You know, so unmixed water would be pure water, not contaminated with any other element. So, Jesus

is saying be as innocent, as pure, as honest, as transparent as doves. So, the picture is of a dove. We are to be shrewd, but not in any devious or dishonest way. We can't con people into the kingdom, nor should we attempt to deceive our way out of opposition. And this innocence that Jesus speaks of is to characterize both the mission that we do, the evangelism we engage in, and our lives. We can't, of course, separate the two. And such innocence in our conduct will give greater credibility to our message and, again, in a measure, lessen the prospect of persecution. The moment that people can identify in us hypocrisy and double standards, and, well, we say one thing, but we behave in another way, then they will, of course, be much more able to attack us. We will give them ammunition with which to attack us. And so, Jesus says, be good, be innocent, be honest, be transparent in the manner in which you work and in the lives that you live. And as you do, that will, in a measure, contribute to lessening the prospect of persecution. It doesn't remove it. That's very clear from the passage. But nonetheless, this is a principle of conduct. Be prepared, be sensible, be good. But then, fourthly, be aware. Verse 17, be on your guard against men. They will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. Be on your guard against men. This, in a way, really reinforces the call to be sensible, to be shrewd. We are to be aware of who are those who would oppose us, what the tactics are that they're likely to employ. And in the measure that we can do so with integrity, we should try and defend ourselves against those who would attack us and undermine us and oppose us. Indeed, knowing our enemies will also spare us from the ultimate folly of making common cause with them. One of the ironies, I suppose, of this recent debacle of the Church of

Scotland and the humanist society is those that really ought to be enemies, not in the sense of hating each other, but in terms of having completely diametrically opposed views and goals, making common causes as those who seemingly are on the same team. But we are to be aware of those who oppose us, even if it's not with violence. And we thank God that in great measure that is not our experience as yet in our own country. Be aware. But then we can move on to another principle of conduct, and a significant one, and that is be a witness. Notice what Jesus says to the disciples as to what they will do in the eventuality of being brought before judges and governors and kings. In verse 18, on my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. You will be brought, says Jesus, as witnesses to them. Now, what is the testimony that we are to give as witnesses? That's what witnesses do. They give a testimony. Well, in the first place, our witness is not to be some defense against our attackers, defending ourselves against whatever accusations they may make against us. That's not in the first instance our witness. No. In the first instance, our witness is to testify to the gospel. A witness that will serve either to condemn those as they reject our testimony, or please be it to God, save those who believe. And that, of course, is what we most desire on behalf of our persecutors, our enemies. Our mission is to win over the wolves, and to make friends of the enemies of God. Notice also how in God's providence the actions of the persecutors will serve to advance the gospel by providing the disciples of Jesus both a platform and an audience. Even for some before governors and kings, they couldn't have dreamed of having the opportunity of reaching such important people, and yet because of persecution they find themselves with that opportunity. And so, something that is bad in and of itself, not to be sought, not to be welcomed, something that we should avoid in as much as we are able, in God's providence can be the means of providing an opportunity to His people that otherwise they might not have had. Now, is this an easy thing to do to bear witness to kings and governors, to men with power and authority over us? By no means.

[29 : 43] And Jesus is fully aware that His disciples will tremble at the prospect of speaking before governors and kings. And for that reason, He grants them and He grants us a very practical and reassuring promise, which is what we have in verses 19 and 20. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Now, here there isn't a promise that in any forum or in any circumstance we don't need to worry about preparing or reading or knowing the gospel and being able to present it cogently without any kind of preparation. Obviously, the promise is in the context of this very specific circumstance of being brought in a violent way and in a way that couldn't have been anticipated to a circumstance where you have to speak and there would be no opportunity to prepare beforehand. In those circumstances, words will be given. The point is that we are to be a witness in the midst of. Our witness will lead to the persecution, but even in the midst of, that is still to be our main priority. But moving swiftly on, and we're nearly there, the penultimate principle of conduct that I think we can draw from these verses is that we are to be

strong. Verse 22, we read, "...all men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." Jesus urges us to stand firm to the end, where the idea isn't so much to the end of your life, but stand firm through it all, through the persecution, through any particular episode of persecution, or any particular time of persecution. Stand firm through it all. The prospect at the end will be that the persecution comes to an end, that there is a measure of temporal deliverance from persecution, or, as the passage makes very clear for some, the end will be death. A faithful death that honors our Lord and the gospel. In either case, temporal relief from persecution, or even death itself, in either case we will enjoy salvation.

And the point that Jesus is making in this call to stand firm, to endure, is that this will be no picnic. It will be difficult, and the temptation to throw in the towel will be strong, but we must stand firm. Standing firm will be the demonstration that we are saved, rather than a condition in order to be saved. So, be strong. Endure to the end. And finally, one final principle of conduct in the midst of persecution, be smart. I draw that from verse 23. Jesus continues to give advice on what they should do, and He says, when you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. This verse, in many ways, is the most difficult verse in this section. Difficult in the sense that it's not at all easy or clear to establish what Jesus means when He speaks about them not finishing going through the cities of

Israel before the Son of Man comes. What does He mean by that, before the Son of Man comes? Different suggestions are made. When we read that language, our first thoughts maybe are to the second coming, but that just doesn't fit in what He's saying. Some would suggest that what Jesus is referring to is His coming following His resurrection, when there'll be a step change in the nature of the mission, no longer to the lost sheep of Israel, but to the whole globe. And so, that will mark a new chapter. And so, before that happens, they are to focus on Galilee and the towns and villages of Israel before this change comes. Well, to be honest, I really don't know what it is that Jesus means by this reference to the coming of the Son of Man. But leaving that to one sign, I think we can focus on what is straightforward and simple, and that is Jesus urging His disciples to be smart. And why do I say that?

Well, what He says, if you're being persecuted in one place, flee to another. You know, don't just stand there and take it. If you're being opposed, if you're being persecuted, if your life is in danger, in one place, well, flee to another. Go somewhere else. Now, I'm not saying that in every circumstance that will always be the right thing to do. But the principle of being smart, of avoiding violence and opposition in the measure that you can is surely clearly outlined here by Jesus. But also notice this, and this is very important, that the disciples are to flee elsewhere in order to continue the urgent task of making known the good news. Jesus isn't saying, when you're persecuted, hide. He doesn't say, when you're persecuted, well, just be quiet and don't say anything. Lay low. He says, flee, but flee elsewhere to carry on preaching the good news of the gospel. And that in itself brings out something very important for us, that whatever the circumstances might be, however difficult it might be, whatever changes we may have to make, we should never lose sight of the fact that what we must always be seeking to do is to make known the good news concerning Jesus to a lost world, to sheep who are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. And so, here's something else for us to take on board. Be smart.

As you live in the midst of persecution, or as that may become more and more the prospect that fought us. To draw things to a close, it's important to stress, and I think what Jesus says in these verses makes this very clear, that there is nothing in what Jesus says that glamorizes persecution, quite the reverse.

[35 : 58] We have no appetite for persecution, nor should we have any appetite for persecution. We don't look for it, and we certainly won't welcome it. We are in as much as we are able to do what we can to avoid persecution. That lies behind so much of what Jesus says here. But if and when it comes, we are to be assured that it comes as no surprise to God and will be used by God to further His gracious and perfect purposes. And what we must do is to take on board and to understand and to follow the principles of conduct given us by Jesus that apply not only in some hypothetical future circumstance, but in great measure can apply to our lives today. We are to be prepared. We are to be shrewd. We are to be sensible.

We are to be good, innocent. We are to be aware. We are to be a witness. We are to be strong, and we are to be smart. Well, may God help us to be all of these things. Let us pray. Heavenly Father,

we do thank you for the Bible. We thank you for the manner in which we find instruction that helps us in the different circumstances that we can find ourselves in. We thank you for the teaching of Jesus on this matter.

We pray that we would understand it, that we would take it on board, and that we would apply it. These are all things that it is important for us to do and to be now. And we pray that you would help us in this, to examine our lives, and to have our lives molded by you through your Word that we might become ever more useful and effective in your service. In these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.