

Daring Discipleship: Courage, Compassion, and the Cross

Reflections on Matthew 10:24-39 by Michael Barrett

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Introduction

As we were listening to this morning's scripture, how many of us honestly wondered if we have reached the point of "No more Mr. Nice Guy" with Jesus? (Satanic Beelzebul, several 'afraids,' soul destruction, sparrows falling, swords flashing, and sons fighting sirens)? Here we encounter some of the severest statements ever uttered by our Lord. Given his love for us, how hard it must have been for Jesus to voice these concerns.

This reading is so far, a cry from where and when Jesus and the disciples first began – then it was a simple summons – "Come follow me," Jesus says earlier in Matthew 4, "and I will send you out to fish for people." Mark the word 'send.'

So, the disciples up and follow Jesus, their focus is on learning – schooling at His feet and by His side, helping cure diseases, miraculously feeding thousands, calming nature, fending off the Pharisees, and amassing a treasury of stories, sagas and sermons.

Today, however, all that changes. We move beyond just following Jesus and are faced with actually being sent out. Sent out there into a hostile world on our own, without the physical presence of our master. Now, we are challenged, dared if you will, to be disciples. It is we who are asked now to engage in the serious and dangerous missionary work of bringing God's reign. Jesus forewarns us that the liberation, rescue, and redemption of humankind will require courage, compassion, and the cross.

Jesus is sends us on a mission, but is profoundly worried about our fate. He recognizes that we are sent as 'sheep among wolves.' In His overwhelming concern He directs our attention to warnings about two of the harshest aspects of discipleship. First, he calls us to remain courageous, to be daring. Second, He reveals the incredible cost of bearing the cross of discipleship. In doing both, Jesus requires compassion ever on our part.

About the Call to Courage

A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the students to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.

To clarify, Jesus is ever, our teacher, master, and Lord. One of our goals is forever, to be learning as much as we can about and from Him by observing and absorbing His wisdom and ways. Jesus is perfect. We are not perfect. We do not have to be perfect. It is enough, all that is expected, is that we strive to imitate Jesus and try to be like Him as much as we are able.

However, we must realize: *If the head of the house has ben called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!*

Jesus' fate is for us, likely, a shared fate. Disciples shouldn't be surprised by rough treatment. Disciples needn't expect a life hallmarked by honor and glory, filled with abundance and accolades. Jesus was not exempt from sacrifice and suffering, ridicule and rejection; and nor will be His disciples. What they did, my friends, to our master, they may also do to us.

Yet Jesus orders us: *So do not be afraid of them.*

Jesus uses the Bible's most repeated mandate, 'do not be afraid,' multiple times in this single reading.

FEAR is understood, for the most part, to mean one of two things:

- 1) Usually, fear means emotional and painful anxiety in the presence of danger and fear almost always impels the loss of courage. This type of fear may take the form of dread (intense reluctance to face something or someone), trepidation (timidity, trembling, or hesitation), fright (being shocked or startled), alarm (intense awareness of impending danger), panic (unreasonable and hysterical activity), or terror (fear in the extreme).
- 2) Sometimes, fear means a feeling of profound wonder, reverence, and submissive awe.

The Bible uses the term 'fear' in both these ways. When you encounter the term 'fear' in the Bible, stop and consider how the writer intends the meaning of the word as he uses it. Compare verses. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. Examples to follow.

Jesus gives us three reasons not to fear THEM:

1) There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.

Okay, probably not the first answer for which many of us were hoping. Really, which of us wants to have all our own peccadillos on parade?

Yes all will be known. But God is after evil not us. Evil likes to hide in darkness – the darkness of ignorance, apathy, bigotry, secrecy, stealth, pride, and injustice. God's intention is to bring all of that to light. God will not permit evil to hide – the truth will be known – justice will prevail – acts of integrity, faith, loyalty, and quiet good deeds will all be made visible. God will never, ever abandon us. In the end, righteousness will be vindicated.

This part of the good news is that message which we disciples need to proclaim boldly and preach bravely to the oppressed and suffering among God's other children. But, we need to always proclaim and preach with compassionate love and the quiet mercy of our

deeds – never with arrogant provocation nor with coerced conversion. LSIS – *if some refuse, we are to shake the dust from our sandals and move on.*

2) *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.*

As disciples, we trust that there is a realm of human experience that is only touched and controlled by God. The power of God's opponents is limited. God is eternal. His enemies are not. God controls the present and the future. Yes, the bodies of disciples may be beset, battered and broken by men. Demons will try to torture our souls. But, know that Jesus has already dealt Satan and his minions their fatal blow. Satan's ability to damage is limited and temporary – that is why he lashes out so monstrously. God alone has ultimate power over us.

Yet Jesus then tells us: *Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the soul and body in hell.*

Who is the One? God? Satan? Oneself? Honest and wise scholars differ and have argued over the past 2000 years as to what Jesus meant by this verse.

Many think Jesus is talking about God – yet this does not seem to match the loving Abba/Father that Jesus labored so long to teach us of from Sermon on the Mount to parable. Some think that Jesus is referring to Satan – yet nowhere does Jesus equate His Father's power with that of Satan nor pass ultimate control over to any entity other than His Father.

Perhaps there is a third alternative. Maybe Jesus is warning us to be anxious about the danger we ourselves may do to our bodies, minds and souls by our own collateral acts of outright hate and selfishness in the here and now? Are we making our own lives hell?

Maybe Jesus is saying:

Stop trying to make God into someone He doesn't and will not be;

Stop trying to make Satan into someone he's like to be, but God will never permit;

Instead start trying to make ourselves into someone we should be. How is 'being afraid' used in this context? Anxiety or awe or self-reflection? LSIS. You decide.

3) *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 on your head are numbered. So don't be afraid: you are worth more than many sparrows.*

God's overwhelming love treasures each of us as valuable and worthy. God cares for each and every one of His creations. God is concerned and conscious of every single sparrow and every single human out of all the millions who have lived. He knows each and all individually.

But, how about that 'falling to the ground' and 'the will of the Father'?

Does Jesus mean that every thing that happens to any of God's creatures, anything that happens, including to each of us, is somehow programmed by God's divine will? Is God responsible for each and every experience we occur? Where we live? Who we love? The schools we attend? The jobs we have? The past times we choose?

Or is it instead, that while God may will us the wondrous and wonderful – lives filled with compassion, justice, mercy, happiness, peace, creativity, meaningful contribution, and above all love; that He chooses not to control and manipulate us as if we are puppets on strings?

About the sparrows falling, Luke phrases the same differently and writes 'no sparrow is forgotten before God.' None of us is forgotten before God. LSIS God knows the number of hairs on our heads. Walt Leser said to me once, 'so what'? But, in other words, God knows the smallest details of our lives. God knows what we are going through – the joys and the sorrows, the trials and the triumphs – all of it.

And then further: *Whoever acknowledges me before men; I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.*

Jesus pledges to advocate for His disciples. Jesus is loyal to the people who are loyal to Him. He is doing so now, even as we speak. God is on our side. God responds to our prayers. God is our Creative Father, our Saving Brother, and our Motherly Sustainer. Put that in the context of what 'fear' means to you. LSIS.

The Cost of Discipleship

Jesus is utterly, completely honest about the personal cost of discipleship. The bearing of His cross is not a lost art in the world in which we live. Look around my friends.

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Peace, my friends will not just happen. Just saying we are at peace, does not make it so. Jesus lived under 'Pax Romana,' 'Roman Peace,' a period in history filled with the most egregious villainy, brutality, corruption, and despotism the world had yet witnessed. It is not peace when injustice and oppression are tolerated. Making peace is a lone and hard and dangerous struggle. Jesus does not promise us an easy, false peace.

Conflict was never his goal. That sword He mentions – *those who live by the sword* – LSIS. Jesus knows that evil will always respond violently to the gospel of love His disciples proclaim. As disciples, we don't live by the sword, but we will use truth and faith, hope and love to cut through suffering.

Standing against tyranny and injustice will cost a disciple heavily – socially, economically, and politically.

For I have come to turn x against y; anyone who loves x more than me, is not worthy of me.

It is code. Discipleship will cost its candidate the order of usual priorities. Note, Jesus asks not abandonment, but a reordering. *You shall have no other gods before me* comes to our Christian Testament in no uncertain terms.

Of all their priorities, people in 1st Century Judea, family was the very jugular of their anatomy. Family was simply the basis of life – survival, sustenance, support, safety, and self-identity all resided solely in one's family.

Jesus is not anti-family, but he is telling us that all priorities, even that of family loyalty is subordinate to honoring Jesus, growing in Jesus, serving Jesus, and striving to do His will. Love your family deeply, but love God more.

Discipleship may cost us the safe comfort of seeing our family as a framework of people related by blood lineage or tribal heritage, the price of discipleship may require us to see family as an extended, unrelated group of people living out a broader identity by doing God's will.

And anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

This is the earliest reference to the cross in all the gospels. The cross signifies the ultimate cost of discipleship. The cross strips away everything of meaning from human secular life.

The people of 1st Century Judea knew the horror of the cross – not as a burden or an inconvenience, but as fear's ultimate terror.

Perhaps, no one more so than young Nazareth boy named Jesus. When Jesus was 11 years old, Judas the Galilean led an anti-Roman revolt in the nearby village of Sapphoris (less than four miles from Jesus' home). The Roman army crucified over 2000 men along the road into Sapphoris. Terror. Jesus saw it. Jesus heard it. Jesus had the courage to stand against it.

The cost of the cross is registered in utter shame, excruciating pain, complete social rejection, ultimate violence, deepest humiliation, and isolated, lonely death, Crucifixion is designed to conclusively trivialize and minimalize the worth of its victim. Rome freely crucified all those perceived as a threat to the order of their empire – traitors, criminals, insurrectionists, revolutionaries, and all advocates of change. But, Rome never crucified their own citizens.

For a disciple, to take up the cross is to identify with those who threaten the evil empires of this world. Discipleship means to refuse to comply, refuse to be intimidated, and

refuse to accept injustice and misery. Being a disciple means standing up and challenging evil's power, whatever the cost, in the name of Jesus.

Being a disciple may cost us this life.

But trust, my brothers and sisters, my family, my fellow disciples, that

If we continue to learn all we can about Jesus;

If we strive to live and love as Jesus does;

If we understand that we will be ridiculed and persecuted, but none-the-less

let go of the fear of what others may think of us or do to us;

If we humbly accept God's judgment that we are of great value;

If we proclaim the good news of Jesus in both word and deed;

If we take divisiveness and tension from others in stride;

If we shoulder our cross and follow Jesus;

If we love God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – above all else;

Then, know that together, we will truly find the life each of us is meant to live. We will find that life as the courageous and compassionate disciples Jesus calls us to be and now sends us forth as, in God's holy name, to proclaim His good news.

My sisters and brothers, let us go forth, daring to shoulder our cross, with courage, compassion, and confidence; never forgetting as Saint Francis said, "if the Lord can work through me, He can work through anyone." The Lord, my friends can work through all of us.

Amen.