

“Engaging a Culture of Power with Wisdom”

Matthew 10:16-20

Scott Hatton

Lake Norman Baptist Church – Cornelius NC

September 25, 2022

Good morning to you and to those watching online and thank you for this honor to speak with you and look at God’s Word together.

And thank you, Anson, for the privilege. Lake Norman Baptist, I have known Anson for over 15 years – and you have a good one here. You will be blessed by his ministry and Dina and his family – I trust for many years to come.

We are continuing this morning in Matthew 10 in your current sermon series about engaging in culture the way Jesus instructs his disciples.

Now I listened to Anson’s message last week and he gave an apology for moving here to North Carolina from Illinois and ruining your North Carolinian way of life. And so, I take that as a fair warning to me, because the truth is that I’m far more Midwestern than he will ever be. Except for a couple of years in Florida (with him), I’ve lived all my years between Illinois and Montana (east to west), and Minnesota to Kansas (north to south). But the difference, of course, is that I’m leaving tomorrow. He’s sticking around.

All that to say, I don’t know North Carolina culture very well, but are you the type of people who like to hear the bad news first or the good news first? Bad news or good news? Which is first?

I would say in Minnesota, we usually like to hear the bad news first – get it out of the way, and then let’s hear the good news. And that’s how I’m going to talk about today’s text in Matthew – because there is both bad news and good news in Jesus’ instruction to his disciples... and of course the good news of the Gospel is the greatest news of all.

Now, let’s remember our context – Jesus has gathered his Twelve apostles and he is sending them out. V. 16 is something of a hinge verse that summarizes what Jesus has already said, and then transitions to what is going to happen to them as they go out.

So, the numbers to remember this morning are 3-3-1. That’s our road map for this morning: There are going to be 3 bits of bad news – three warnings that Jesus gives. But then there is the Good News – Jesus provides his disciples with 3 encouragements and comforts far beyond anything they could possibly imagine.

And then Jesus himself gives us the main application point that we want to take home today – which is simply this: **in the face of hostility, in the face of confusion, and even conflict with institutions of great power – engage culture with Christian wisdom.** A wisdom that is both given and developed as we mature.

So, let’s start with the Bad News **first** – the first bit of instruction that is hard to swallow – and that is **Jesus actually sends his followers into hostile places.** And he does so intentionally.

“*Look*”, he says, “*I’m sending you out like sheep among wolves.*” Now, we’re familiar with that imagery of the wolves and sheep – it’s very biblical. Paul talks about how church elders are to protect

the flock of God's people from the wolves – those who would ravage that come from within and without the congregation. Sheep and wolves are not common to us on a daily basis, but we're familiar with the biblical imagery. But usually, we think of it in a defensive way – protect the sheep from the wolves. But Jesus sends his disciples on the offensive.

Look for a moment at the verb – “I'm sending” is an active verb. It's *not* just guard yourself against wolves, it's “I'm sending you into the wolves” It's what it means to be an apostle – that's the verb – to send out, to go, to be a “sent one”. As Anson said last week, Jesus followers are an embodiment of the gospel and representatives of the Kingdom of God. And Jesus is intentionally sending his disciples out into a hostile world: into a world that will hate them and seek to destroy them the way wolves devour sheep.

Not, “watch your back” – it's “*I'm sending you face forward into a hostile world.*” This is a precursor of the Great Commission that Matthew records at the end of his Gospel – *Go into all the world, making disciples*. And Jesus says here that the world isn't going to like you for it. But still Jesus declares, I'm *sending* you that way for the sake of the Gospel.

I've been in local church ministry for 25 years, and that is one of the most noticeable changes that I've seen – and perhaps you've seen it also – that Cultural Christianity is fading away. There is something called the “Rise of the Nones”. The “Nones” are those who claim no faith or religious identification. And while that might be jarring, it isn't always a bad thing. How good is it if there are a lot of people *pretending* to be Christians but who do not have any relationship with Jesus Christ or any awareness of the Gospel, but just act a certain respectable way – that's not necessarily a good thing. The lines between who is a Christian and who is not a Christian is going to become clearer and clearer.

Followers of Jesus are going to be a minority, and the world around them will be hostile toward them. But Jesus himself said, “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.*” (John 15:18), and John repeats in his epistle, “*Don't be surprised if the world hates you.*”

And yet, we still are surprised. We're surprised that the world hates the followers of Jesus, but not only does Jesus know it, but he tells his disciples, “I know. I'm still *sending* you into that world. That's **where I want you to go.**”

Now here's the **second** bit of bad news – **that hostility for the Gospel will come from powerful institutions – both near and far**. Looks at what Jesus says, “*People will hand you over to sanhedrins and flog you in their synagogues. You will even be brought before governors and kings because of Me.*”

There are four institutions mentioned here – and they go from smallest to largest. And they go from the Jewish world to the Gentile world. Anson talked last week a bit last week how Jesus was first sending his disciples to the people of Israel first, but these instructions are now looking forward to a time beyond the original Twelve to a time when Jesus disciples who go out to all the nations.

Sanhedrins, or “councils” would be the most local of institutions in a Jewish community. (The Great Sanhedrin was the main council that met in Jerusalem). And of course, synagogues were local gatherings within the community as well. These are local groups – and Jesus says they will be against you. And, just as importantly, they are local *Jewish* institutions. For the original Twelve, these are *their* people. *Their* neighbors. *Their* family.

We might think of local organizations in our communities – the school board, the zoning commission, the city council – the one that your friends on are on. Maybe the ones you’re on. The ones staffed by “your” people – and Jesus warns that opposition will come even from these local places on account of Him. [The zoning commission might be against building new churches in town because they don’t generate tax revenue. The school board is going to introduce curriculum that is blatant in affirming multiple genders to kindergarteners. The city council won’t allow for building expansion or parking lots.](#) Local institutions can exercise a great deal of power that affect the lives of Christians and even churches.

But it’s not just the local institutions, but also the ones far away. “Governors and kings” are now to the highest levels of institutional government – and they are not Jewish. The governors and kings were Gentile institutions – Roman officials at the highest levels. These, too, would be hostile to Jesus’ disciples.

So, now we’re at the level of courts, judges, congress, governors and presidents. These, too, Jesus warns will be hostile to his disciples and their message of the Kingdom. And we see this played out in the New Testament – in the book of Acts these men appear before the highest officials, and then we see the same with Paul who appeals all the way to Caesar.

We have powerful institutions around us – government, media, Hollywood, academia, etc. – and they aren’t in the business of glorifying Jesus Christ. It doesn’t matter who’s in the governor’s office in Raleigh or the White House in Washington – our calling as followers of Jesus Christ is to bear witness to Him; to glorify him; to make much of him; to be representatives of His Kingdom.

And no, they probably won’t like it, but Jesus said as much a long time ago.

Finally, Jesus gives a **third** bit of bad news – **this hostility will be not just institutional, but also personal**. Twice in this text, Jesus says, *“people will hand you over”* (17) and *“when they hand you over”* (19). This is the same word used in v. 4 – it is used to describe Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus to his death. “Hand over” is betrayal – personal betrayal – the kind that comes from someone you know and trust. This isn’t just going to be theoretical decisions and laws made in Washington or Raleigh – friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, people you thought you knew and you thought were “with you” and they weren’t. Betrayal hurts a lot.

And maybe even now you can think of times and moments – last year or this week – when you experienced this kind of resistance and hostility. And it might hurt; it might make you long for another time and age; it might feel paralyzing and confusing. And it is hard to face that kind of betrayal and hostility. We live in a fallen world.

That’s the Bad News, and at this point you’re wondering why this guest speaker is bringing you down during Sunday morning worship. If I am, it’s only to show you how good the good news is.

The Gospel is Good News. And because of the Gospel, we do not just *endure* cultural hostility, but we can actually thrive in faith and obedience to Christ in such a culture.

Here are three encouragements for believers this morning.

First, we have the purpose of Christ. And I want to make the same point I made with the first of the bad news – remember that it is *Christ* who sends his followers into a hostile culture. If we believe that Christ is sovereign, and that he is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, nothing is beyond

his powerful hand. Indeed, even appearing before governors and kings has a divine purpose – to bear witness to them and to the nations – the Gentiles. Even in hostility and resistance, God is accomplishing his purposes.

The best example of this is the apostle Paul in Philippians. In Philippians, Paul is in jail because of his Gospel ministry, but he declares that what has happened to him has really served to advance the Gospel because he is able to proclaim Christ to the imperial guard. For Paul, being wrongly jailed means fruitful ministry. Because he knows that he is fulfilling the purpose of Christ and making Christ known with his words and his life.

As believers – if you are a believer – trust and rest in the sovereignty of God. Even in the face of hostility, even if you are treated unjustly, even if you are mistreated. Remember that you serve the Risen King. You don't have to win every cultural battle; you don't have to triumph over earthly powers – Jesus does that for us and Jesus reigns even now. And we do not have to know the *wheres* and *whens* and *whys*... Jesus does. He's the one on the throne and His will *will* be done.

And Jesus just not only accomplishes his purposes, but he gives us His **provision**. Here's the second bit of good news – **Christ gives us everything we need** and because that's the case he can say "Don't worry." Christian, don't worry. Worry might be natural, but it's still a sin, and one that many of us need to overcome. "*Don't worry about how or what you should speak. For you will be given what to say at that hour.*"

Just like Jesus told his disciples to trust that he would provide food and drink for them, now he promises them the words to speak. And one way to look at that is that Jesus will do the *miraculous* – in moments of stress or confrontation or need, God will provide the answers or the words or even the language that we do not have naturally. [I recently heard the story of a pastor in a crisis situation who suddenly was able to understand and speak French.](#) That is entirely possible.

Remember, that this was a world with professional orators who spoke for a living. We see one in Acts 24 where an orator named Tertullus brings a case against Paul. Jesus' disciples are mostly Galilean fishermen, not professional orators. How can they manage in such a world on such a stage before kings and governors? Jesus assures them that he will provide – just in the same way they would be provided food to eat and a place to stay.

That provision might be miraculous, but that's probably not the situation we are going to find ourselves in. By giving words, I think that God's provision here is not so much *miracle*, but rather *memory*. Jesus promises the provision of words when they were most needed – but oftentimes that provision comes from the storehouses he has already prepared within us.

A lot of these warnings are played out in Acts, and in Acts 4 we have an example of this: Peter and John are arrested and they declare, "*We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard*". They spoke with power because they had the Holy Spirit and they simply recalled what Jesus had done. Because earlier in the same chapter there is a wonderful description of them: "*They were uneducated, common men... and they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*" Spending time with Jesus, in the word, in worship, in meditation, in obedience – it changes us for the better. It is how God provides for us by filling the storehouses of our thoughts and words and priorities.

And then **third and greatest comfort of all – it is the presence of God**; the presence of the Holy Spirit. *“You are not speaking, but the Spirit of your Father is speaking through you.”*

If you are in Jesus Christ this morning, you have the Holy Spirit dwelling within you; you have the presence of God with you always. You have a union with Christ and fellowship with him, because you are joined with him. The power of the one within you is greater than any power out there.

This is one of the greatest promises that we can rest in – *I am with you always*, Jesus declared, *even to the ends of the earth*. Jesus’ authority and power are supreme wherever we go; The Holy Spirit dwells within us wherever we are sent; the Father loves us wherever we are.

And so, all of these work together, don’t they? We cannot easily separate the purpose, the provision, or the presence of God – they are all woven together for our good.

Three bits warnings of bad news... three encouragements of good news... this lays the groundwork for Jesus’ own application; his own instruction to his disciples about engaging a hostile culture: *“Therefore, be as shrewd as serpents and as harmless as doves.”* This is a call for mature Christian wisdom in the face of hostility and conflict.

Knowing that we have the purpose, the provision, and the presence of God – pursue godly, mature wisdom in the face of hostility.

“Shrewd” is oftentimes translated “wise”. And “shrewd” is fine as long as we disassociate it with notions of dishonestly, or conniving, or scheming. That’s not what Jesus means here. ‘phronimos’ is being practically wise, sensible, and prudent. The origins would have been in Genesis 3 – the serpent was craftier than all the other animals – but the comparison between snakes and doves was a common figure of speech at that time. Jesus is not suggesting that his disciples imitate Satan.

The wisdom that Jesus commends here is not simply knowledge, but acumen: understanding the time, understanding the need, understanding the situation, understanding people – to be circumspect (old word). And to do so with the utmost integrity.

“Harmless” as doves – also sometimes, “innocent”. That doesn’t mean naïve or oblivious. Literally, it means *unmixed* or *pure*. To be wise with complete purity of motive and quality of character.

Now, we know that wisdom comes from God – *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. James said, *“wisdom from above is pure...peaceable...gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”* That kind of wisdom is a gift from God. Jesus Christ is the personification of Wisdom.

But we can also cultivate such wisdom and maturity and integrity with our daily habits. I was especially helped recently by Brett McCracken’s book called *The Wisdom Pyramid*.

Some of us are old enough to remember the Four Food Groups? Meat, Fruits and Vegetables, Grain, Dairy. Eat from all four. Well, they’ve revised now to the food pyramid – the base is grains, then vegetables and fruits, then dairy, then meat, and at the very top – sugars. Eat a lot of whole grains; eat just a little sugar and salt.

McCracken takes the same idea about developing wisdom in our lives, so that we can be the kind of mature disciples who can stand firm and fast in the face of hostility. And so he makes this Wisdom Pyramid as the places we need to go to feed our souls. And the base is the Word of God.

Christian wisdom is always going to be grounded in God's revelation of himself – that is most important, is it not? To discover who God is, what God has done for us, and how we are to respond to him.

Second level up – worship and fellowship with other believers. It's this – come to church and spend time with other believers and learn from them, and serve them in return.

Next up – Go outside. Spend time in nature, in creation. Turn off the screens and take a walk and see that God is glorious and powerful and huge. [I took myself camping last week on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River and savored the darkness](#) (I kinda forget my lantern – iphone.)

Next level up – read good books. Books. Not tweets. Not hot takes on the internet. Books – books that took time to write and have stood the test of time.

Above that – find ways to enjoy beauty and creativity. Play the guitar; do something you enjoy like a craft or hobby; draw a picture. Do something to slow you down and appreciate God's creative world.

And finally – last and least – social media and the internet. Small doses only. Because the internet – this great invention of the last 25 years – has the unfortunate effect of doing the opposite of v. 16 – *it makes us guilty as snakes and stupid as pigeons*. It is fascinating to discover the research that is coming out about how the internet and social media is making us angrier and sadder at the same time; it makes us lonelier, even as we are “connected” to the entire world. It is making more hostile, more bitter, and more depressed. It is NOT making us wiser, or happier.

The world around us – the culture we swim in – it does not need more angry, embittered, cynical followers of Jesus Christ. It does not need more power brokers who are in on the latest schemes, or cunning influencers with the latest hot takes. The Church doesn't need more people to convince us that we can make the world love us if we just act more like them. Jesus said just the opposite.

What we need are women, and men, and teenagers, and kids, who know the Purpose, the Provision, and the Presence of God. To be wise disciples who are growing in Christian maturity; to be women of integrity and men of character; who know Jesus Christ – what he has done for us and what he has called us to.

He sends us to hard places – maybe overseas, maybe to the classroom, maybe across the street, to bear witness to what he has done. To declare that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And no, the world will not love us for it. It tends to hate that which it cannot understand. Jesus gave us lots of warnings – lots of bad news, even. Lots of hostility.

But then Jesus gives even better news – his purpose, his provision and his presence. And Jesus guaranteed all of this at the cross and the empty tomb.

[Let me leave you with this. I saw a little video clip of Pastor Tim Keller last week or so. A young man asked a question about being anxious for the future, and nervous about society – very real issues for all of us. And Keller had a longer answer for him, but the gist of it was this – If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, everything is going to be all right.](#)

[If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, everything is going to be all right.](#)

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38-39

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father^[g] ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. ¹⁶ I pray that He may grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power in the inner man through His Spirit, ¹⁷ and that the Messiah may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God’s love, ¹⁹ and to know the Messiah’s love that surpasses knowledge, so you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us— ²¹ to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:14-21.