

Prayer

You are gracious, Lord Jesus, far more gracious than we deserve:
You have given up everything for those who did not love you;
You have loved and forgiven people despite their sins against you;
You have opened up the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers;
You have been our great example as well as our salvation;
You are our Lord Jesus Christ, and we thank You for all you've done.
AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Community Spirit

Pray today for your church and the part it plays in your local community. Across the world, churches are involved in all kinds of local ministries. Give thanks for what has been done.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for joys of good sport
- Pray about the morality of sport whilst the Olympics are held
- Pray for people experiencing droughts and turmoil in Africa

Meditation

Can you count the great blessings God has given to you,
Can you know all the wonders of His amazing love?
Do you know that He will produce the fruit of His Kingdom,
From the smallest of deeds of faith you perform?
Do you know that He can save someone by using your love,
Through a smile, a word, a gesture or a deed?
Do you know that He can heal a broken soul by your prayer,
And liberate it to glory both for now and for eternity?
Do you know that He will use everything you say and do,
And make it into something beautiful for His Kingdom?
Do you know that He has prepared a place for you in glory,
Which is far better than anything you can experience now?
Do you know that even though great glory awaits you,
He wants you to enjoy what He has for you now?
He has placed His confidence in you!

Bible Study - Matthew 10:16-23

¹⁶ 'Look, it is I who sends you out like sheep among wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Be wary of others, for they will hand you over to Sanhedrin councils and flog you in their synagogues; ¹⁸ and because of me, you will be hauled up before rulers and kings, as a witness before them and the Gentiles. ¹⁹ When they hand you over, do not worry about how to speak or what to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at the time, ²⁰ as it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹ Brother will hand over brother to death, likewise a father his child, and children

will rebel against parents and have them put to death.²² You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved.²³ When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. Amen, I tell you that you will not finish going through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.'

Review

After all the instructions given by Jesus for the mission of the twelve disciples, their expectations may have been high! However, Jesus gave them honest and frank news; the work they were embarking upon would be hard! We have already seen that these words have come down to us as a guide for the missionary activity of the church today. There has been much debate about this passage because it appears to have been said at a different time than the earlier words in chapter 10; for example, Jesus talks about Gentiles in verse 18, when earlier He told His disciples to mission Jews only (10:6)! There are some other ways to explain how this speech of Jesus fits together, but it is possible however, that Jesus was simply expanding what He said in order to give the disciples instructions for the future as well as the present, and this is how we will read it.

Jesus began by using the well known image of Israel as 'sheep' to describe the disciples on mission. The disciples as 'sheep' would undoubtedly be vulnerable amongst wolves just as the old Israel had been, but this time they were acting under the guidance of Jesus Himself and had His advice and protection. This advice was that the 'sheep' had to be 'as shrewd as serpents' and 'as innocent as doves' (10:16). These two images were well known; firstly the serpent's cunning is a reminder of Genesis 3:1 and a symbol of Satan, but Jesus had shown His authority by casting out demons, so in His name, the disciples could do the same, and serve people with godly discernment and wisdom. Secondly, doves were historically identified with innocence (from the natural observation that they had no 'bile'), and with this advice, Jesus called on His disciples to live the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount about meekness, and humility. Both were required for the Lord's work.

The remaining verses of this text are a trio of sayings about being 'handed over' (see v17,19,21). Firstly, they had to be wary of being 'handed over' to earthly authorities (10:17-18). The Kingdom of God had enemies in Jesus' day and has enemies today. Jesus knew His enemies and that He would be taken to the Cross, and He warned the disciples about this three times (16:21f. 17:9f. 20:18f.). He envisaged that those who followed His call would always be in danger of having their liberty taken from them and be subjected to various legal processes in which they would have to answer for what they said and did. Clearly this is what the Early Church experienced in the first few centuries, and many Christians down the ages have done so as well. We should always be vigilant to the possibility of religious and governing authorities turning on Christians and rejecting them.

In this context, Jesus warned about the testimony we should give when 'handed over' (10:19). He said 'do not worry about how to speak or what to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at the time ...' Jesus was not giving a general instruction about preaching in church on Sundays; far from it. His advice was for those on trial for their faith before their accusers, and much as some preachers may wish it to be otherwise, this text should not be used as a 'get out' clause for laziness in sermon preparation! If you have had to give an account of your faith in a hostile environment, then you will know what these words of Jesus really mean. In adversity, Christians need not be consumed by worry, but show their trust in Christ by solidly building their lives upon Him. It is the greatest privilege to know that at our time of greatest need, the Father will be so close that He will speak through us (10:20)!

The third 'handing over' is a sign of terrible division which will accompany the proclamation of the Kingdom. Rejection by authorities is one thing, but rejection by family members is another. Amongst the religious literature well known in Jesus' day were works that

described the 'day of the Lord', such as the book of Jubilees 23:19 which reads: 'and they will strive with one another, the young and the old, the old with the young, the poor with the rich, and the lowly with the great, and the beggar with the prince'. Also, 1 Enoch 56:7 reads: 'a man shall not know his brother, nor a son his father or his mother, till there be no number of the corpses through their slaughter' (see 10:21). Jesus was not the first to say that families would be torn apart, but He was clear that this would happen 'because of my name' (10:22). It is impossible for us to understand the deep heartache of this unless we have experienced it, but the evidence is that many Christians do indeed know such rejection even today. For them, a special promise comes from God, 'those who endure to the end will be saved' (10:22). Such promises from the Lord are a rare treasure.

Finally, Jesus presented a picture of the disciples fleeing from one town to another as their presence became increasingly unacceptable (10:23). This would have to be endured until the coming of the 'Son of Man', the final coming in Glory of the Messiah at the end of time. All the images in these warnings of Jesus may seem frightening by themselves, but they contain some of the most treasured of Jesus' promises; the presence of the Spirit in our speech when we have to defend ourselves and the promise of Salvation for those who endure. This is the first time that such promises occur in the New Testament, and it is easy to gloss over them because similar promises are found in the well known writings of Paul and other New Testament letters. These words, however, come directly from our Lord.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Can you give an example of what it might mean to be as 'shrewd as a serpent' or 'as innocent as a dove' whilst about the work of the Lord?
2. Have you experienced any form of persecution like that mentioned in our passage? Has this strengthened you or made your faith more difficult?
3. Is the mission of Christ taken this seriously in our church? Why do we act as if 'mission' was a type of optional interest for the church?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find this a powerful but re-assuring piece of scripture. The treasures within it are startling and powerfully encouraging. Although I do not believe that 10:19,20 should be used to get out of sermon preparation, I do believe that the preacher and prophet must always be prepared for the Holy Spirit to use them in unexpected ways, even in the midst of a sermon! The real test comes, however, when we are handed over to those who are out to put us down and slander us. This is where we most need God's wisdom to defend the Faith.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Does your church see mission as an optional extra for those people who are so interested? Do you think this is an adequate response to the call of Jesus to be a disciple? How can mission best be expressed today?*
- *Write down your own list of instructions for mission which you feel is appropriate advice for those seeking to proclaim God's work in your society. Share this list with others and ask them amend it. See what you come out with.*

Final Prayer

Praise God! Praise Him for the glories of His everlasting Kingdom! Praise Him for the hope we have of eternal life! Praise Him for the work He has done so that we might join