

Sheep Amongst Wolves

Matthew 10:16-23

Sunday 7/19/2026

Becoming a Christian means facing persecution

Intro

This will **not** be a warm and fuzzy sermon today.

My goal today is to make you aware of truth, both good and bad, so that you will not be blind sided when faced with it.

Persecution is as real today as it was in the time of Jesus.

We have all been blessed to have been born in a country that still allows us to openly exercise our faith without fear of moderate to extreme persecution.

None of us here today are worried about losing their freedom or their life just for coming to church.

This is unfortunately not the case in many other places around the world.

Before we dig into our topic today, I want to start out with a message of hope.

“The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears, and delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is near the brokenhearted; He saves those crushed in spirit. Many adversities come to the one who is righteous, but the LORD delivers him from them all.” Psalm 34:17-19

No matter what battles we face in life, Jesus has already won the war. **The final victory is already his!**

4 points to breakdown

1. God wants us to be prepared to face persecution.
2. Persecution will come from both religious and secular origins.
3. Persecution comes from those that are both close to us and strangers.
4. The fear of persecution should not dissuade us from sharing the Gospel message.

Matthew 10:16-23

What did persecution look like during the early church?

3 examples:

1. 1st Christian martyr

Stephen was stoned to death by an enraged mob for preaching the truth of the word of God.

“When they (the mob) heard these things, they were enraged in their hearts and gnashed their teeth (clenched) at him. But Stephen, filled by the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw God’s glory, with Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (proclaiming Jesus to the end) Then they (the mob) screamed at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. They threw him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses (those that heard him preaching) laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul (Paul before his conversion). They were stoning Stephen as he called out: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then he knelt

down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin!” And saying this, he fell asleep.” Acts 7:54-60

The Roman government did not allow the Jewish religious authority to carry out a death sentence against even one of their own.

This is why Jesus was taken to Pilate, to get permission to kill him.

2. Nero’s persecution

Nero blamed the burning of Rome, in 64AD, on Christians.

As punishment, Nero burned Christians as human torches in his gardens.

Often while they were still alive

He crucified Christians

Most notable was Peter crucified upside-down.

These accounts can be read about in the works of the Roman historian Tacitus who is viewed by most historical scholars as having the most accurate accounts.

3. Domitian’s Persecution

This Roman Emperor used prison, execution, and exile as tools to persecute Christians

In 95AD John, the brother of James, received a sentence of exile to the Island of Patmos.

This is where he received the vision we know as the Book of Revelation.

Patmos is a 13 square mile island located in the Aegean Sea (modern day Turkey)

It was made up of volcanic hills and rocky cliffs.

What does Christian persecution look like now?

According to the 2026 World Watch List, put out by Open Doors International, there are more than 388 million Christians (roughly the entire population of the Us and Canada combined) worldwide experiencing high to extreme levels of persecution.

That's 1 in 7 of our brother's and sister's worldwide that are risking everything just by being a Christian.

Here is a list of the top offenders, who is responsible, and how the persecution is delivered.

1. North Korea

The Kim regime viewed themselves as deity and will punish anyone who strays.

Punishment takes multiple forms but the most common ones are: prison, execution, and torture.

This punishment doesn't just happen to the Christian convert; it can extend to the entire family even if they are not Christians too.

2. Somalia

Clan based Islamic forces

Punishment includes: Execution, shunned by family members, forced marriages.

Christians are rejected by their families and forced to survive on their own with no support.

3. Yemen

Houthi and Al-Qaeda regional forces

Punishment includes: Prison, torture, and violence from family members.

Islam has a very strict convert or die policy

Converts from Islam to Christianity are usually killed on the spot

Point 1: Be prepared for persecution WHEN it comes.

Verse 16. 2 points

1. To be “sheep amongst the wolves” does not mean that we are to be perpetual victims.

As Christians we will have a target on our backs from the enemy

The enemy will pursue us like wolves pursuing a helpless sheep.

Paul second letter to Timothy reaffirms this

“...What persecutions I (Paul) endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from them all. In fact, all those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. 2Timothy 3:11-12

Jesus said it, Paul reaffirms it, we should listen and take heed to what they are saying.

2. Because persecution is coming, we need to be “shrewd as serpents and harmless as doves”

What does it mean to be shrewd?

To be cunning, artful, or astute.

This is not a passive trait that we have, it takes work

None of us wake up in the morning smarter than we were when we went to bed

We need to actively and intentionally pursue the things in life that add value to our lives (like the Bible) and spend less time with our faces glued to a screen.

Let's break down the “harmless as doves” portion of this verse.

This doesn't mean we should be punching bags for the world around us.

Harmless: comes from the Greek word *akeraios*
(ah-KEH-rye-oss)

Meaning: innocent, pure, not mixed with evil

We should not respond with anger or with a desire to harm the other person.

Instead, we respond with the truth, being a good example of the fruits of the spirit.

For those of you that need a reminder of what they are:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,
faith, gentleness, self-control

Galatians 5:22-23

Let's tie it all together

When we are attacked by those who wish to persecute us, we need to be cunning in our response, and defend ourselves with pure intentions, being a good example of the fruits of the spirit.

Point 2: Persecution will come from all directions.

Verses 17-20 2 parts

1. Persecution will come from those proclaiming a faith in God and from the secular world.

How many churches have strayed from the core values of our Christian faith and embraced woke ideology passing it off as Christian theology?

We have recently seen denominations split and churches fall apart due to embracing these dangerous ideologies.

What happens to the people that don't agree with or fight against these unbiblical practices?

We get labeled as intolerant, bigoted, unloving, hateful, and closed minded.

Who can forget Jack Phillips, owner of the Masterpiece Cakeshop, who was sued in 2012 for refusing to bake a cake that went against his Christian beliefs.

He was made to defend his Christian faith for 6 years before he was exonerated of wrong doing.

During this time, and after, Jack saw a 40% decline in business and received multiple threats of violence.

During this process God was walking with him just as he promised in [Philippians 4:13](#)

“I am able to do all things through **Him** who strengthens me.”

God promises to be faithful in our time of persecution too.

2. When you are being persecuted or being dragged into court for your faith God tells us to not worry about what we will say.

This doesn't mean that we should forgo getting a lawyer or go on autopilot.

We need to use our common sense when faced with these trials.

Remember: wise as serpents

We need to prepare with the understanding that God is responsible for the outcome and he will guide and direct us towards it.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; think about Him in all your ways, and He will guide you on the right paths. Proverbs 3:5-6

God sees the whole picture better than we ever could.

Point 3: Persecution from strangers and family

Verses 21-22

How many of us have family members that are not believers and don't like the faith we have?

I have more than a few family members that get really uncomfortable with any mention of my faith.

One in particular gets angry quick whenever we discuss theological subjects.

She will try to reason with me on why she thinks my views are wrong.

When she realizes she can't, she turns to agitation tactics to try and ruin my day.

The world doesn't understand the faith we have and views it as foolish and sometimes even as dangerous.

“But the unbeliever does not welcome what comes from God's Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to know it since it is evaluated spiritually.” 1 Corinthians 2:14

Because of this lack of spiritual understanding, we are often met with criticism, sometimes hatred, by those of the world.

Why does this world hate us to the point of death?

“You will be hated by everyone because of My name...”

In the book of John, Jesus expands on this teaching a little more.

“If the world hates you, understand that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the

world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, the world hates you. Remember the word I spoke to you: 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will also keep yours." John 15:18-20

The persecution does not come from a hatred of you; it comes from a hatred of God.

God finishes out the verse with a promise of deliverance.

The trials, tribulations, and persecution we face on a daily basis are temporary.

When this life is over, we get to receive the promise of eternity with God!

Point 4: Persecution should not stop the spread of the Gospel.

Verse 23

Stay diligent in sharing the gospel to people you meet.

If it is not being accepted with an open heart then its time to move on to another place with the message.

"Don't give what is holy to dogs or toss your pearls before pigs, or they will trample them with their feet, turn, and tear you to pieces."

If all you are doing by sharing the gospel to a group of people is making them angry to the point of physical violence, then it's time to move on.

Not all people will be ready to hear the word of God in that moment.

“But the Jews incited the prominent women, who worshiped God, and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and expelled them from their district. But they shook the dust off their feet against them and went to Iconium. Acts 13:50-51

The act of shaking off the dust from their feet symbolized a complete rejection of the town.

They brought nothing from the town when they left leaving even the dirt from their feet.

If you are in a place that is persecuting you for the truth of Gods word or you get run out of a place to the same word, share the word to the people you meet next.

Conclusion

1. Persecution is a reality for all of us. It is going to happen.
2. We need to be ready to face persecution when it does happen.

Be in the Word everyday

We need to pray on the armor of God daily

"Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by His vast strength. Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the tactics of the Devil. For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens. This is why you must take up the full armor of God, so that you may be

able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand." Ephesians 6:10-13

3. Persecution will come from those that claim to be of the faith and those that are of the world.

We don't get to pick where the persecution comes from.

We do get to decide how prepared we are to face it.

In the end God's strength is what gets us through it.

"I am able to do all things through **Him** who strengthens me."
Philippians 4:13

4. Persecution will come from those that are close to us and from those that are strangers.

We should expect some pushback from the unbelieving people that are close to us.

5. The fear of persecution should not keep us from sharing the gospel

We are not obligated to beat our heads against a wall trying to get unbelievers to accept the message.

Our job is to faithfully deliver God's message to people that need to hear it.

We are not responsible for the conversion of people.

That is God's place not ours.

End with a message of hope

God has already won the battle

"I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have overcome the world." John 16:33