

Commentary Resource
Matthew 10:16-25
The New American Commentary
Craig L. Blomberg

10:16 Jesus' conclusion ties back in with the reference to sheep in 9:36 and likens the disciples' opponents to those who would attack the flock. With incisive, proverbial language, Jesus calls the Twelve to exhibit great acumen without sinful compromise. "Innocent" literally means *unmixed* and refers to purity of intention. Shrewdness and integrity form a crucial combination not often found in the Christian church. In fact, we more often invert the two, proving to be as guilty as serpents and as stupid as doves!²² High Christology appears in Jesus' claim that one's eternal destiny is based on one's response to him and his emissaries.

c. Future Prospects (10:17–42)

With v. 17 Jesus shifts to predictions that were not fulfilled in the immediate mission of the Twelve. The events of vv. 17–22 took place only during the postresurrection ministry of the disciples. Verses 23–42 could be applied to both the immediate and distant future but seem to focus primarily on the experience of the later church age. Jesus' warnings predict the nature of coming persecutions (vv. 17–25), outline the implications of those persecutions (vv. 26–31), and restate the only two possible responses to his message (vv. 32–42), not unlike the concluding "Two Ways" section of the Sermon on the Mount (7:13–27).

(1) The Prospect of Future Hostility (10:17–25)

10:17–20 The worst rejection Jesus has so far predicted the disciples would receive is lack of a proper welcome. Now he warns of overt hostility. Although the disciples must remain innocent and pure (v. 16), they dare not be overly naive. Some will face arrest ("hand over" in v. 17 is the same verb as "betrayed" in v. 4), being brought before the Jewish courts ("councils" is literally *sanhedrins*, referring to the various local courts). Others will be flogged in the synagogues—the Jewish houses of worship. Yet persecution will not be limited to a Jewish milieu. Other run-ins with the law will bring disciples before Gentile officials ("kings" and "governors," v. 18) as well.²³ Such appearances before Jewish and Gentile authorities are amply illustrated in Acts (4:1–22; 5:17–41; 6:12–8:3; 12:1–19; 16:19–40; 21:27–28:31) and later church history.

Jesus views this persecution positively as an opportunity for the disciples to be "witnesses" to the truths of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:12–18).²⁴ Interrogation need not terrify Christians, even when their lives may be on the line. Relatively uneducated Christians would naturally have felt most inadequate when pitted against the professional prosecutors known for their rhetorical skill (cf. Tertullus in Acts 24:1–8). Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will give these believers the right words and enable them to proclaim his word boldly (vv. 19–20)—closely parallel to the ministry of the Paraclete promised in John 14:15–31; 15:26–16:13 and illustrated by the regular testimony of the disciples when they are "filled with the Spirit" throughout Acts (see comments under Matt 3:11).

²² H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 123: "Alone, [shrewdness] produces evil and [simplicity] results in gullibility. But together they produce the spirit which enabled the early Christians successfully to storm citadels of sin."

²³ "To them and to the Gentiles" in v. 18 does not mean the governors and kings are not Gentiles but carries the sense of "to them and to their peoples" or "subjects" (R. G. Bratcher, *A Translator's Guide to the Gospel of Matthew* [New York: UBS, 1981], 115).

²⁴ Cf. G. T. Montague, *Companion God: A Cross-Cultural Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 130: "In countries today where Christianity is outlawed, more people learn about the gospel in the courtroom than on the street."

Using this verse as a proof text for avoiding careful study and preparation for normal preaching and teaching ministries clearly violates its context, although it does remind us that without the power of the Spirit human rhetoric accomplishes nothing of eternal value. The necessary balance between anxiety and apathy closely parallels Jesus' teaching on "worry" about food, drink, and clothing in 6:25–34.

10:21–23 Hostility will come not only from civil and religious authorities but also from members of one's own household (v. 21). Here Jesus alludes to Mic 7:6. The "all men" of Matt 10:22 is more literally just *all* and probably refers to *all kinds* of people, i.e., even close relatives. It should not be taken to include other believers. As in 5:10–12, disciples are hated and rejected for their allegiance to Christ. Christians will be greatly tempted to apostatize, but perseverance will bring eternal life (v. 22b). "Saved" clearly cannot refer to the preservation of physical life since some believers are martyred for their faith. Jesus offers a sober reminder that the true colors of our faith may become visible only when our lives are on the line (as in the situation facing the readers of Hebrews; cf. also 1 Pet 1:7; Jas 1:2–4). The "end" most naturally refers to the end of the age but would also include the moment of death for those who do not live to see Christ return.²⁵

The flip side of encouraging bold testimony under persecution when one has no alternative is the command to flee hostility whenever possible (v. 23a). Jesus calls his followers to bravery but not foolishness. Believers must not seek out persecution.²⁶ God's word can go forth powerfully through the unspoken testimony of martyrdom, but it is often better for people to remain alive to speak it aloud.

Verse 23b, a uniquely Matthean text, is often misinterpreted as if it appeared in the more limited context of the immediate mission of vv. 5–16. Then it is taken as a mistaken prediction of Jesus' second coming during the lifetime of the Twelve. In this context of postresurrection ministry, however, it is better viewed as a reference to the perpetually incomplete Jewish mission, in keeping with Matthew's emphasis on Israel's obduracy. Christ will return before his followers have fully evangelized the Jews. But they must keep at it throughout the entire church age.²⁷

10:24–25 Jesus links his assurance that the disciples will be persecuted with the treatment he is already beginning to receive, hostility that will culminate in his crucifixion. Verses 24–25a are simply false if generalized and applied out of context (cf. Jesus' own prediction that the disciples will do greater works than he, John 14:12). Verse 25b gives the correct application and recalls 9:34. "Beelzeboul" (NIV marg.) most likely meant *lord of the high abode*, i.e., of the home of pagan deities, which Jews believed were demons.²⁸ Hence some textual variants use "Beelzebub" —*lord of the flies*—the common Hebrew parody of Beelzeboul.²⁹ "How much more" implies *how much more certain not to what a greater extent*. Even as they do not seek persecution and in fact actively shun it, all Christians can at times expect it. Promises of exemption from persecution offer false hope. People who have never experienced it probably have not sufficiently witnessed to their faith. But Jesus' words here must be balanced with the principles of 1 Tim 3:7 and 1 Pet 2:12; 3:15–16. To the extent that it is possible, Christians and their leaders should try to get along with and gain the respect of unbelievers in their communities.¹

²⁵ The expression "to the end" is idiomatic for "completely, totally, entirely, wholly" (J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [New York: UBS, 1988], 1:692), i.e., for the duration of the hostility however it may end.

²⁶ Cf. A. Plummer (*An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew* [London: E. Stock, 1909], 152): "To stop and meet useless risks, because one of is afraid of being called a coward, is one of the subtlest forms of cowardice."

²⁷ For a more detailed articulation of this view, see J. M. McDermott, "Mt. 10:23 in Context," *BZ* 28 (1984): 230–40. For a brief overview of other alternatives, cf. Carson, "Matthew," 250–53. A detailed history of interpretation appears in M. Künzi, *Das Naherwartungslogion Matthäus 10.23: Geschichte seiner Auslegung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1970). A helpful update is R. Bartnicki, "Das Trostwort an die Jünger in Mt 10, 23," *TZ* 43 (1987): 311–17.

²⁸ O. Böcher, "βεελλεβουλ" in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 211.

²⁹ See F. W. Beare (*The Gospel according to Matthew* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981], 278) for the textual evidence, which the NIV reading obscures.

¹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 173–177.