

Ministry in the Midst of Conflict: Part 1

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In Revelation 12 John records a vision from Jesus that describes the supernatural conflict between good and evil at work in our world today. The great dragon, the serpent, who is the devil is constantly aiming to destroy the work and people of God. God has a plan: from God's people a child is born, one who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron (who do you think that is? Jesus!). The dragon aims to devour this child and destroy him. But he can't; instead, the dragon is defeated and thrown down from heaven onto the earth along with his angels. At the end of this chapter we read this (vs. 17), "Then the dragon became furious with the woman [the people who Jesus came from] and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea." Who are the rest of her offspring? The verse says; it says, "those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus." Friends, that's you. You, church, hold to the testimony of Jesus, confessing his name as your Lord and your Savior. And with the Spirit of God living inside of you, you will keep his commands more and more as a fulfillment of the new covenant. And vs. 17 says the dragon, the devil, has come to make war with you. Did you know this? Did you know that there is not only a war going on, not only are you caught up in this cosmic battle, but you're a target of the most ferocious adversary in all of creation?

This conflict is at the center of our next section in the Gospel of Luke; turn with me to Luke 10. Put your finger on vs. 1 and then put your other finger at the end of vs. 20; the verses between your two fingers are all related; they are about the conflict the church of Jesus Christ experiences while on the mission of God. That's what happens when we do what we're called to do; when we commit our lives to faithful service in the name of Jesus to our world around us, we will experience conflict and opposition. Satan does not want to see the glory of God's grace spread to all nations or lifted high in praise. So, he works against the spread of the good news of Jesus.

Think with me for a moment about the ways he does that. Satan doesn't want the glory of Jesus to spread into Athens, into Abbotsford and Colby, into Rib Lake or Medford. So he's at work right now; today, Sunday morning, he's at work. Do you see him? Do you notice the work of the Evil One around you aiming to thwart the work of God? Here are a few ways how he does that. When people resist the message of the gospel, when they ignore it, that's because of the darkness; 2 Cor. 4:4 says, "In their case the god of this world [that's Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Satan is blinding people from seeing Jesus. The mockery of the Gospel in our culture that sneers at it's sexual ethics, at it's meekness, at it's praise of Jesus as the only way to True Life is from the darkness. The distractions you and I experience from our pure and holy passion this very morning is from the darkness. The sin that we so easily get

tangled up in that renders us ineffective in our work is from the darkness. Friends, there is opposition and conflict to the gospel all around us; do you have eyes to see that?

And this conflict will impact us and here's why: we are gospel people. It's our calling, it's our privilege, it's our responsibility. We are *evangelicals*; that word, *evangelical*, is a term given to those who make a point, who make a commitment to spreading this good news to others. It's too good for us to keep it to ourselves. In recent years, that word has taken on political significance in our culture; evangelicals, pundits say, are a voting block who tend to vote a certain way. Ignore that reference or those connotations. First, it's not true; we have an array of political values and convictions; we're not a homogenous political group. Secondly, evangelical is a term that describes our obedience to Jesus to "Make disciples of all nations." That's what unites all evangelicals in spite of our many differences; we must spread the good news of Jesus to others. Since that's who we are, Luke 10 is very relevant to us so let's read it together (READ vs. 1-20).

We're going to spend three weeks teasing out important information from these teachings of Jesus; and we're going to jump around a lot. Today, I want to focus on the nature and response to the conflict. Let me start briefly with the context of this passage and then we'll dig in.

Jesus has more followers than his close 12 disciples; he has many disciples. And here we see Jesus commissioning 72 of his followers for a short term missionary experience. We know it's short term because we read at the end of our passage (in vs. 17) about when they get back. You might remember at the beginning of chapter 9 Jesus sent out his 12; this feels a lot like that, but the instructions and the information he gives are expanded. I think it's expanded because Luke wants us, the church, to learn the same lessons about the nature of the conflict as Jesus wanted the 72 to learn.

The first thing I want to point out is that Jesus draws a direct line between his workers, to himself, and ultimately, all the way to God the Father. Look at vs. 16 (READ). Right before he sends out his followers he tells them this final piece of news. I think it's meant to encourage them; he's saying, "Don't take this personal. If they receive you, it's because they are receiving me. And if they reject you, it's because they are rejecting me. And if they reject me, they are actually rejecting the one who sent me, God the Father."

I honestly believe one of the reasons we shrink in the face of gospel ministry is because we take things too personal. We're so afraid of experiencing personal loss that we're timid and cautious. Now, on one hand, it is personal. True faith in Jesus isn't some casual thing; it's all encompassing. It transforms every aspect of our lives. Jesus transforms every part of my being. He transforms my relationships; he transforms my values and loyalties. He transforms not only what I do in public, but he transforms what I do in private (because I'm never in private - I always have an audience of One). People with authentic faith are all in - it's personal.

But there's a way that it's not. And here's how: we die when we come to Jesus and he lives inside of us. There's a sense in which our very selves are taken over and consumed by God. I'm guessing Galatians 2:20 is a favorite for many of you: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who died for me and gave himself for me." When we come to Jesus, we say goodbye to personal offense. You don't count your life as valuable or precious because you've died with Christ. It's not that we don't have a self; we obviously do. But our new selves are supernaturally new where God says, "you've died; Christ now lives in you." Now, this is a journey; what I mean by that is you'll live your whole life learning what this means. God will graciously show you and train you what it looks like for you to be primarily concerned and focused on Christ in you rather than the part of you that's died and has been done away with. It's a beautiful thing. And the more this happens, the less you'll be concerned by personal offense.

Look at vs. 3. After he tells them to "Go your way," he says, "Behold!" We don't use that word much - behold. We say, "Look!" or "Check this out!" When Jesus or a scripture writer uses the word *behold* he's trying to grab your attention. So, what does he want the 72 to pay extra attention to? He says, "I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves."

Looking to find family-friendly shows, sometimes I'll sit down and watch a nature show with my boys; of course, the most exciting ones are about predator and prey (family friendly?). One of things I've noticed in these shows about wolves is that they are vicious. They tear their prey apart with brutality. The other thing that's significant about this image is that Jesus says, "I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." Wolves live and hunt in packs. They surround, pounce, and destroy together.

What an image for the 72, right? "I've got this mission for you," Jesus say, "and I'm sending you out like sheep and you'll be going to people who will treat you like wolves." Maybe the most immediate impact this should make on us concerns our expectations. We all have them, right? Expectations. When we come to Jesus we have expectations. And, quite frankly, many of those expectations are wrong. And we're not alone; God's people have always struggled with wrong expectations. Abraham and Sarah expected to conceive and have the baby God promised much earlier than they did. Moses expected to enter into the Promised Land, but was kept out. David expected God to protect his reputation while he was wallowing in the mud. The disciples expected to see Jesus triumph over his enemies in glory. And we have expectations, too, and many of them are wrong. That's why God brings trials. God graciously corrects our misguided expectations with trials so he can lead us into a more pure and holy passion.

So, what kind of expectations should we have based on this image? The first one is danger; danger in the gospel ministry. This is one of the things that's so hard for us to wrap our minds around. Almost every single one of us are generations removed from any kind of religious danger or persecution. Only in recent years has our faith cost us anything of consequence; the

most being social disapproval for the most part. But for many Christians around the world and for many throughout history, being on God's mission is dangerous in every way. And throughout the Bible, God helpfully reminds us so we can adjust our expectations and so we can plan for it.

In one of my favorite passages, Romans 8, Paul is rejoicing in the unwavering grace and love of God in the face of opposition and even death. He asks in vs. 35, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?" And he's talking about opposition and conflict because of the Gospel. We know that from his word selection in vs. 35 and then he supports it in vs. 36 when he quotes scripture, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." There's our image - we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

I wonder what it will be like to faithfully, passionately follow and proclaim Jesus in 20 years? In 30 years? I think what we see in the scriptures is an expectation of a growing hostility as the Kingdom of God, the Coming age, invades this Present Age. As God's Kingdom and God's church keep spreading the good news of Jesus, the great dragon will grow stiffer and stiffer in opposition. I think that means followers of Jesus will need to be prepared to sacrifice more as. Some of us will be gone in 20-30 years; a lot of us will be gone in 40. But our children will still be here; so will our grand children. Those kids in the nursery and in beginners church, the ones we dedicate to the Lord and pray that trust in the saving grace of Jesus for salvation will be here. Will they have a faith that endures? Will they persevere and keep spreading the good news in a more hostile world than we know today? I think it will depend a lot on what they expect. And I think they will form their expectations about faith, about God, about the cost of ministry, about the rewards of heaven, based largely on what we tell teach to expect. I'm ready to tell my sons to follow Jesus even if it costs them friends, even if it costs them jobs, even if it costs them social status, even if it costs them personal safety and well being. What are you going to teach your children and grandchildren? What kind of example will you give them?

Now, you might recall at the very end of the our passage Jesus says this to his returning 72 as they rejoice in the success they experience (vs. 19), "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and overall the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you." How does that square with everything we've said here today? They are the sheep, but now the tread on their enemies like stomping snakes? The short answer is this: the harm that he's talking about is harm to their soul, not harm to their physical life. When Jesus says they have authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, he's making a specific comment about the ability withstand and overcome the powers of evil, not avoid harm in general. He clarifies that when he says, "and over all the power of the enemy." Friends, that's the real defeat; the real defeat is not you losing a job, being physically assaulted, or being persecuted. The defeat is if you lose faith because of it. (James 1:12) Blessed is the man or woman who remains steadfast under trial, for when he or she has stood the test he or she will receive the crown of life.

Our Romans 8 references says the exact same thing. Remember how vs. 35 he makes reference to persecution, famine, distress, and every other scary thing under the sun? In vs. 37

he says, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” In these things - so he’s talking about going through these harmful situations. But in spite of that, Christian, we are more than conquerors. Really? How are people enduring distress and persecution conquerors? Here’s how (vs. 38-39): 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 God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That’s conquering! Remaining in the steadfast love of God. It’s him never letting you go. It’s you never falling away. That’s the harm Jesus promises to deliver you from as you live your gospel mission in Luke 10.

I know these are some heavy things. In the second half of chapter 10 and then chapter 11, things won’t be this heavy, so hang in there. But these are good things. And God has given us these things to read and study; he’s a good father who knows what we need. Friends, rejoice that even though we are in the midst of conflict, God will give us the victory and we will remain in the love of God forevermore.

Questions for the week

- Does it feel like you’re in a conflict with evil? Why or why not? Should we trust our feelings on the matter?
- How did Jesus give us an example of accomplishing mission through suffering?
- What are changes you need to make to live more prepared for our gospel calling?