

"The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!

²⁶ "So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. ²⁸ Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care.^(a) ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

³² "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

³⁴ "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn

"a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

³⁶ a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'^(b)

³⁷ "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Overcoming Fear

What are you afraid of? I'm afraid of lots of things. Tigers, crocodiles, man-eating sharks. We don't have many of those here though. What else? I don't relish the thought of serious physical harm in any form — injury, illness. What else? Fear of ridicule or shame — no one wants to look like a fool, but some of us are more precious about our self-image than others. To some degree a lot of us fear standing out in any way — humankind is a social animal, we find safety being part of the crowd.

But we also know that fear is massively limiting, don't we? It is obvious in the stories of obsessive compulsives who demand a spotlessly clean environment — or reclusives, who imprison themselves in their own homes. Also obvious in the stories of those who appear fearless, the explorers, scientists and entrepreneurs who stake everything in pursuit of their goals and succeed. Which of us might have been like them with more confidence?

In Matthew 10 we continue Jesus's pep-talk on sending out his disciples to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is both encouraging and realistic here.

First realism: if *he* receives opposition, then those who proclaim his message are bound to get it too.

Then encouragement: But *don't be afraid!* They can't say or do anything that God doesn't see. Don't be afraid of coming to physical harm, he says — they can't hurt your soul! Jesus wants them to be God-fearing, not human-fearing. And there's quite a difference — to be God-

fearing is to be sincerely in awe of God's love. To fear humans is not respect — it's just fear of the judgement or evil we can mete on one another.

Instead, Jesus reminds his disciples firstly of God's love and care (you are worth more than many sparrows and he cares even about them!) and then to keep the goal in mind — the prize is to stand before the Lord God and receive God's acknowledgement for what you have done. Respect!

Then Jesus shocks us by telling us his mission is to stir up family enmity and division. Is this the same Jesus we're talking about? Yes, it is. And his warning is fair, too.

Of course, the longterm goal is the kingdom of heaven — all people sharing the same mind, the same spirit as Jesus. Peace and love. But in the meantime, it's not all peace and love. Because as soon as you show that you have minority religious views there will be opposition. Jesus has been talking about fear all along — who doesn't know the fear of putting their head above the parapet to be really outspoken, really contentious? As hard as it is to proclaim a different message and be persecuted for it, to receive that condemnation from your own family is so much harder. It is still present today too — converts from Islam to Christianity find their life is at risk. Even in this country the atmosphere of not talking about politics or religion at the dinner table can be used to shut down and excommunicate the person who became a Christian from a family of atheists.

And this is why Jesus brings this up — he is addressing the fears of his disciples, and the fears we have of being different. He knows this will happen, he is not sugarcoating the message.

But — he knows, and his disciples know that it is right to proclaim that the kingdom of God is near. It is right to proclaim God's love, and it is right to fix our eyes on the goal — knowing that loving and proclamation of the good news is transformative, and *does* bring peace, and *does* bring healing and health and truth and light, and freedom and goodness.

A year ago I came across an interesting little book called 'On confidence' — a mix of philosophy and practical common sense. It was a useful little reminder that you and I have a real part to play in history, that while we have those weaknesses of body or character that we are all too aware of, others have the same and are just as ridiculous, and that life is short, and it is tragic to waste life on worry. I found it interesting and helpful in its way. But I think it missed the biggest sources of confidence — unconditional love, unconditional grace, and the assurance that even death is not a limiting factor. Perfect love drives out fear, and builds confidence. Many of us love and are loved very deeply by spouse, family, close friends. This is a huge resource. But we who know Christ have one more hope — that God genuinely loves us, forgives us those failings we are so prone to get hung up about, and genuinely is delighted when we work towards his goals in his Spirit.

In the next two chapters of Matthew it turns out that Jesus's prediction of opposition is all too true — he receives opposition from the pharisees, from his own family and is even apparently doubted by John the Baptist. He was right about opposition. But he is fearless, as we can be fearless, rooted in the comprehensive goodness and love of God. And Jesus's disciples soon enough prove this fearlessness too, as they rapidly spread the faith through Jerusalem, Judea and all Israel, and across the world.

May God release us from all the fears that hinder us in goodness, too.

Amen.