

Therefore, Do Not Fear (Matt. 10:26–33)

By Jacob D. Gerber

After calling his twelve disciples to himself, Jesus has given them a bold mission. They are to go throughout the lost house of Israel, preaching the message of the kingdom, healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, and casting out demons. This is an extraordinary mission, and, to make matters more difficult, they will also face extraordinary opposition. This must have been a lot for Jesus' disciples to digest. How were they supposed to feel? How were they supposed to respond? In this next section, Jesus bolsters the courage of his disciples by focusing their work on a single point: himself. As Jesus continues to send his people out into the world to this day, his purposes remain the same as what Jesus intimates here: *Jesus reveals himself through our preaching.*

Do Not Fear Men (Matt. 10:26–27)

In the previous section, Jesus warned his disciples of the dangers they would face, and he urged his disciples to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, fleeing persecution when necessary (Matt. 10:16–25). This new section begins with the word “therefore” or “so” (v. 26a), by which Jesus draws the implication that we should take from his previous warnings. Surprisingly, this implication is that Jesus' disciples should “have no fear of them [i.e., the wolves who would harm Christ's sheep], for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known” (v. 26b). Their own Master will suffer in the same ways that they must suffer, but, as Morris writes, “He will in due course be vindicated, and so will they.”¹

Yet, Jesus promises much more than mere vindication. When Jesus speaks of the things that are covered and hidden, he speaks in what is called the “divine passive,” signaling that these things have been “hidden by God.”² As Osborne explains, these “covered” and “hidden” things do not so much refer to apocalyptic secrets, but rather to the mystery of the gospel of Jesus.³ The disciples, then, will play an integral role in *revealing* these secrets by their preaching, by which the gospel would thunder throughout the whole world.⁴

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 261.

² Osborne, *Matthew*, 396.

³ Osborne, *Matthew*, 396; see also Calvin: “The saying, *nothing is covered that shall not be revealed*, has some appearance of being a proverb: but we restrict it in a special manner to the doctrine of salvation, which Christ promises will be victorious, whatsoever may be the contrivances of men to oppose it.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:461.)

⁴ “In no part of the earth was there ever such thunder heard as the voice of the gospel, which resounded through the whole world.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:461.)

Thus, despite the intense opposition and outright persecution that they will face, Jesus disciples can remain confident in their work: “The gospel and its outworkings in the disciples may not now be visible to all, but nothing will remain hidden forever. And if the truth will emerge at the end, how wise to declare it fully and boldly now.”⁵ Indeed, Jesus was commissioning his disciples to amplify his message, speaking in the light what he had told them in the dark, and proclaiming (lit., “preaching”) on the housetops what Jesus had only whispered. Even at this early stage before Jesus had revealed to them everything that he would eventually teach, the disciples knew enough to proclaim with John the Baptist and Jesus, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7).⁶ The flat roofs of the houses of the cities and villages they would visit would serve as their “pulpits” from which to preach Christ and his gospel boldly.⁷ As France writes, “The disciples’ duty is not merely the negative one of avoiding fear, but the positive one of bold proclamation in the face of opposition.”⁸

Rather, Fear God (Matt. 10:28–31)

In v. 28a, Jesus exposes the weakness of their opponents: “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” While our enemies may indeed inflict much damage to our bodies, even by putting us to death, they can do no more. Specifically, they cannot touch anything relating to our eternal state, so that their persecution is sharply limited. Instead of fearing those who may inflict temporary harm, Jesus teaches us to fear the one who can inflict eternal harm on our souls: “Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (v. 28b). In the Bible, the fear of the Lord is called the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10). Specifically, we read in Job 28:28 that, “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.” It is wisdom to fear the Lord in such a way that emboldens us to proclaim Christ’s gospel, and understanding to turn away from the temptations to deny Jesus before men.

Jesus’ contrast here serves as a litmus test for our faith. If we would rather cling to safety in this life than the next, is “it not very evident that we set a higher value on the shadowy life of the body than on the eternal condition of the soul; or rather, that the heavenly kingdom of God is of no estimation with us, in comparison of the fleeting and vanishing shadow of the present life?”⁹ Importantly, as the rest of the Bible clarifies, the way that hell will “destroy” our body and soul is not by annihilation, but by eternal torment (e.g., Matt. 25:46; Mark 9:47, 48; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 7).¹⁰ Only a fool would trade temporary security for eternal peril.

Still, fear is not the main motivation for Jesus’ disciples. In vv. 29–31, Jesus compares our lives to the lives of sparrows, which were incredibly “cheap marketplace item sold for 1/32 of the minimum daily wage (‘penny’ is literally an *assarion*, which equaled 1/16 of a denarius).”¹¹ Even so, not even a

⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 295.

⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 469.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 409.

⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 402.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:462.

¹⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 471–72.

¹¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 178.

sparrow “will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (v. 29b). By this comparison, Jesus intimates that “nothing happens to the children of a loving Father which falls outside his providential care; it neither takes him by surprise nor frustrates his purpose.”¹² Even down to the number of hairs on our head, God keeps minute watch over his children, since we are of even more value than the sparrows (vv. 30–31). Notice how, by *fearing* God (v. 28), Jesus is teaching us *not* to fear, as we come to know our heavenly Father’s love for us (v. 31).

As Jesus has done so many times through the Gospel of Matthew, he again directs our attention to the fatherly compassion of God. John Calvin rightly applies this doctrine, then, when he writes that “we ought to contemplate Providence, not as curious and fickle persons are wont to do, but as a ground of confidence and excitement to prayer. When he informs us that the hairs of our head are all numbered, it is not to encourage trivial speculations, but to instruct us to depend on the fatherly care of God which is exercised over these frail bodies.”¹³ To take this a step further, Jesus is telling us (1) not to fear men, despite their hatred of us, but (2) to fear God, even though (3) that fear of God ultimately recognizes not God’s hatred toward us, but his love for us. Even in the manner of proclaiming the gospel, we see the fullness of our Father’s love for his people.

Specifically, Fear Christ (Matt. 10:32–33)

In the final part of this section, Jesus lays down the basis of our love and acceptance by our Father: the mediation of Christ himself: “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (v. 32). Jesus promises that he himself will claim as his own all those who confess him before men—and not merely that he will claim them, but that he will confess and acknowledge them before his Father in heaven. What good news! Calvin rightly observes, “how much more valuable is that which Christ promises than that which he requires?”¹⁴

Then, as good as the gospel of Christ’s mediation is, the opposite warning is equally bad: “whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (v. 33). As France observes, this statement flows from Jesus’ former words about whom we should fear: “The question of priorities—whom to fear—leads to a radical choice of loyalty between Jesus and ‘people’ (assumed to be in opposition to him).”¹⁵ Furthermore, this also displays in the starkest terms the wisdom of one course of action, and the foolishness of the other: “Nothing but men who are on earth for a little while—the eternal Father in the glorious, heavenly world (Luke 12:8). Who would exchange the latter’s approval for that of the former?”¹⁶

We should note, however, that the word for “deny” is the same word that appears later in the Gospel of Matthew to narrate Peter’s denial of Jesus on the night of his Lord’s betrayal (Matt. 26:70, 72). By the example of Peter, Jesus may clarify the true object of his warning: “Peter’s subsequent rehabilitation adds a reassuring suggestion that the stark verdict of this saying may be understood to refer to a settled course of acknowledgement or denial rather than to every temporary lapse under

¹² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 404.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:464–65.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:467.

¹⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 405.

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 413.

pressure.¹⁷ Even so, this does not soften Jesus' words, but only deepens our understanding of our Lord's grace.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the initial “so” (or, “therefore”) of v. 26 connect back to the previous section? What makes the conclusion “have no fear of them” so surprising, in light of everything Jesus warned his disciples about in Matthew 10:16–25? What does Jesus mean when he says that the covered things will be revealed, and the hidden things will be made known? By what method does Jesus intend to reveal God's hidden plans for the salvation of his people through Christ?
2. What additional reason does Jesus give so that his disciples will not fear men (v. 28a)? Instead of fearing men, whom should we fear (v. 28b)? What does the rest of the Bible teach us about the fear of the Lord? Beyond fearing the Lord, how does Jesus motivate us with our heavenly Father's great love for us (v. 29–30)? How, then, does Jesus intend to harmonize the command to “fear” God (v. 28), and the command, “fear not” (v. 31)?
3. What kind of a relationship with his Father in heaven does Christ describe in vv. 32–33? How is Christ's relationship with his Father different from our relationship to the Father? What is the connection between our relationship to the Father and Christ's relationship with his Father? What does this tell us about the unique nature, person, and role of Christ? How do we square Jesus' warnings of denying him with Peter's ultimate denial of Jesus (Matt. 26:70, 72)?
4. What does this passage teach us about the mission of the church? What role does preaching have in this mission (v. 27)? In what way does Jesus reveal himself through our preaching? How important is preaching for people to come to know Jesus by faith for salvation (Rom. 10:14–17)? How does preaching uniquely focus us on the person and work of Christ? Do you think preaching is still as important today, with our modern culture, communications, and technologies?

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 406.