

<sup>21</sup> “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. <sup>22</sup> You will be hated by everyone because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. <sup>23</sup> When they persecute you in one town, flee to another. For truly I tell you, you will not have gone through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. <sup>24</sup> A disciple<sup>[a]</sup> is not above his teacher, or a slave above his master. <sup>25</sup> It is enough for a disciple to become like his teacher and a slave like his master. If they called the head of the house ‘Beelzebul,’ how much more the members of his household!

<sup>26</sup> “Therefore, don’t be afraid of them, since there is nothing covered that won’t be uncovered and nothing hidden that won’t be made known. <sup>27</sup> What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light. What you hear in a whisper,<sup>[b]</sup> proclaim on the housetops. <sup>28</sup> Don’t fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup> Aren’t two sparrows sold for a penny?<sup>[c]</sup> Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s consent.<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>30</sup> But even the hairs of your head have all been counted. <sup>31</sup> So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

<sup>32</sup> “Therefore, everyone who will acknowledge me before others, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. <sup>33</sup> But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven.

### **More than Many Sparrows**

What’s the most common command in the Bible? You’d think it would be to, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul with all your strength,” Or maybe, “Love neighbor as yourself.” The golden rule. To be honest there are many commands in scripture and many of them are repeated. There 613 commands in the Old Testament. Such as “*Sing to the LORD a new Song.*” There are many commands in the New Testament as well. Such as “*Do not neglect to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing.*” Then there is the unique summary of these laws called the Ten Commandments.

But the most often repeated command in scripture is rather simple, “Don’t be afraid.” God says to Jeremiah, “*Don’t be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.*” God says to Mary, “*Don’t be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.*” When Paul was met with opposition in Corinth God reassured him, “*Don’t be afraid, but keep speaking and don’t be silent!*” (Acts 18:8).

I don’t know about you but that’s one of my favorite commands found repeated on the pages of scripture. But I’m not very good at following it. I’m afraid on a regular basis. I’ve lost sleep in the last months worrying about lawless mobs, violent thugs that are out of my control. When a government official tells me, “Don’t be afraid,” I’m immediately cautious and scrambling to make plans because it’s obvious, they’re powerless to help. What really matters when it comes to commands like this is whether or not one can place confidence in the God who calls to us, “Don’t be afraid.”

So why can we trust God? Why can we be confident in the face of sickness, imprisonment, or death? Jesus tells us, “You’re worth more than many sparrows.” Still not confident? Not a single sparrow falls without his knowledge and this God, Jesus knows you, and nothing happens outside of his governing will.

Our lesson takes place as Jesus prepares his disciple to go out among their brothers and sisters, neighbors just like them. Jesus warns them, *“Brother will betray brother, and a father his child. Children will rise up against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of my name.”* That doesn’t instill a whole lot of hope or confidence to fearlessly proclaim you before the nations. That’s terrifying. But, what’s better? Lie to them and say life will go well. You’ll have a private jet, all the comfort and amenities this world can provide. Or, the truth. Jesus doesn’t fill their heads with greed for all they can gain in this world. He’s realistic and points out the reality that they will be rejected. Even the most intimate of family connections will come under attack.

They are then instructed to go from one town to the next and then, *“Truly I tell you, you will not have gone through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”* This refers to an event within their lifetime that will bring to end the mission to Israel before they visit all of Israel’s cities. What is that event? Some say it was when the Son of Man came in judgment, through the agency of the Romans in 66 AD. That ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of that mission field but the beginning of another.

Jesus wants them to know that they are not entering neutral territory. His Kingdom is at hand and they are entering into a hostile world where the ruler of this world won’t go down without a fight. As soon as they follow the footsteps of their Savior they better know they’ll be treated the same way, *“You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.”* So he sends out the 12 with his name and his authority, to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. They are heading out into a hostile world. But, *“Don’t be afraid.”* still stands.

Martyrdom, those who are killed for witnessing still happens to this day. Especially in Muslim lands around the world. Christians are murdered for their faith in Sudan, Nigeria, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Our brothers and sisters in Christ are disowned by their families, persecuted and imprisoned, dragged out by mobs and put to death. We are being put to death in our country, at least not yet. Opposition can take other forms, *“If they called the head of the house, ‘Beelzebul,’ how much more the members of his household?”* If they criticize Jesus, how much more shouldn’t we expect to be spoken against as stupid, ignorant, bigoted, self-righteous, and anti-science.

But none of this comes as a surprise to God. He’s not up in heaven wringing his hands, *“Oh no, they’re persecuting me... Whatever will I do?”* Jesus doesn’t hide the fact that the world will hate us. You and I are not one of the 12 whom sent out to the cities of Israel. But we are privilege people who have benefited tremendously from the work God did through them. We are heirs of the kingdom of God because of their Word which has been faithfully passed from one generation to another. And now it’s been given to us. What will you do with it? Some have set it aside, put it up on the shelf and forget about it, (we have plenty of excuses now don’t we? Pandemic, Lawlessness, Persecution) Luke 14:15-20 lists a number of excuses people have used as why they can’t come to the wedding banquet, *“I just bought some land, I bought five yoke of oxen, I just got married.”* Some simply won’t say anything. Still more may be tempted to compromise the Christian faith for the sake of avoiding persecution. Some might feel that they can avoid such conflict and ill treatment and still be a Christian. A few verses after our Gospel reading, Jesus said quite bluntly: *“And anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of Me.”*

Have you stood firm in the face of persecution? Neither have I. I'm more worried about standing before God on judgment day and having to answer the question, "Why were you more afraid of them than Me?" Don't just fear those who can destroy the body, fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell.

And yet the very God, the mighty warrior that Jeremiah describes is also the one who commands, "Don't be afraid." Don't be afraid of them because they can't destroy you eternally. The worst, the most frightening weapon is death but they cannot destroy the soul. But there is more. You're worth many sparrows!

Think about that for just a minute. I gotta go check the endangered species list, but I'm fairly certain the sparrow isn't topping the charts. It isn't. It's one of the most popular birds. Two sparrows are sold for a penny. That's 1/16 of a day's wage. A sparrow was caught, skinned, roasted, and sold as tid-bits, a bird to a mouthful. That doesn't sound like the mighty eagle but that's not the point either. You are worth many sparrows. I like to imagine Jesus disciples puzzling over the comparison, wondering if this is an insult or if Jesus has a sense of humor. God knows of every sparrow that falls to the ground, how much more are you worth to him? How many sparrows is the Son of God valued at? How much more doesn't God know and cherish you?

Jesus calls to us and says, "Don't be afraid of me." Isaiah 41:10, "*Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will surely help you; I will uphold you with My right hand of righteousness.*" Scripture says that God so loved the world that he sent his son to save. He came to live for me. He also came to die for me and in my place. He also rose from the dead to prove he has control over life and death, and so we can be certain that we too shall rise.

God's love for you is undeniable. This is the God who can take life and restore it, the God who is in control of all things. The one who knows you so well he even knows what you don't know, "How many hairs are on your head?" I don't know, but God does.

Not only that but he promises to preserve and strengthen us. As the Christian focuses on God's great mercy, the eternal joys of heaven, the fear of being "unpopular" tend to disappear. We are led to rejoice, because we've been forgiven. We're forgiven for compromising, forgetting, ignoring, and even being afraid of the world. God forgave the disciples when they abandoned him too. We can give thanks to God for the constant reminders he has placed in our midst. His Word handed down to us by the apostles and prophets, his supper which he has given us to eat and drink as a constant reminder of his forgiveness. Having feasted on his Word which is more than a mouth-full we can witness God before men without fear, though we may be terrified, because God has delivered our souls from death. So sing, *speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,*

Don't pretend there is nothing to fear. Don't pretend that God hasn't given you any hope either. He is in control. You are worth more than many sparrows. And he knows we need to be reminded, "Don't be afraid." Which is why he has told us so many times. To God be the Glory. Amen.