

Matthew 10:16-23 *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. ¹⁷Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. ¹⁸On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²²You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. ²³When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

How about this for a job description: I am sending you out like a sheep among wolves. All people are going to hate you because of me. You will be arrested by the authorities because of me and dragged before princes and kings. You will be betrayed by people who are close to you—even family members—and handed over to the authorities. You are going to face persecution that's going to cause you to have to move from place to place. Imagine applying for a job and seeing this description. Whose taking that gig? Who would put themselves into that kind of situation?

Yet this is the reality into which Jesus sends his people. This was not just for Jesus' disciples in our text but for you and me today. Today, we celebrate the Reformation of the Church. It's been 501 years since the Reformation began with Martin Luther nailing the 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. While many things in our world have changed since that time...many things have not. Over the years as the Lutheran Church has celebrated the Reformation, the focus has been on standing firm on the truth and protecting the truth of God's Word. And this is a major thrust of the Reformation. But I think if we honestly evaluated ourselves, we'd admit that at times we have done this in a less than loving way. It's almost like we have circled the wagons around the truth of God's Word and see it as our responsibility to make sure that nobody else touches it. We can become even a little arrogant and see our entire purpose being to defend the truth of God's Word and keep it away from anyone else who might do it harm. Sometimes we are like a dog chewing on a juicy bone. What happens if you try to take that bone away? Even if it knows you it may growl and even snap at you to keep you away from it. Even an ordinarily nice and friendly dog can become possessive and vicious when defending a juicy bone. Sometimes in defense of doctrine, we get the same way—we try to keep it for ourselves and snap at everyone else to keep them away from what we have. For many the entire focus of their ministry centers around just defending the truth.

Yet that isn't what the Reformation taught us. From the beginning, Martin Luther and the other reformers had only one goal: the salvation of souls. They stood firm on the truths of God's Word and defended them from attacks not for the sake of pure doctrine itself but for the salvation of souls. Only the truths expressed in God's Word bring salvation to souls. For souls to be saved, we cannot keep these truths to ourselves but must be about the work which God has given us to do which is to proclaim that Word to our world. As we go about this work, we need to stand firm on the truths of scripture and not deviate from what God says. We need to be on alert from attacks which may come from spiritual wolves who are ravenous and seek to devour us. But we can't let that stop us from going out into the dangerous world to proclaim the love of God for the salvation of souls. We are here not simply to stand on the truths of salvation in Jesus but also to proclaim those truths to our world. A Reformation church is one that not only defends the truth, but is active in proclaiming that truth to the world. Our heritage is not just a rich history of defending the truth, but of proclaiming that truth for the salvation of souls. We want to celebrate the Reformation today and thank God for the work of Martin Luther and the reformers under this thought today: ***Stand Firm in the Truth as You Take it to the World.***

In this text from Matthew, Jesus encouraged the disciples to stand firm on the truth of his word. But you notice that he did this in context with sending them out into the world on a mission trip to spread his word. Jesus wanted them to see the realities of the work before them. This mission work of spreading his Word and bringing salvation to the world was not going to be easy work. While perhaps blunt and a little bit scary, Jesus wanted them to be prepared for exactly what they were going to face. Even though they were going out in love for every person they came into contact with to bring them the message of salvation for their souls, being faithful to God and his Word would mean hostility and persecution. What a picture Jesus uses: *I am sending you out like sheep among the wolves.* Wolves don't care who you are—their goal is to devour you. They don't care if it's a newborn calf worth a great deal to a rancher. They don't care if it's a beloved family pet. They don't care if it is a human. They know one thing: it is food. They do what wolves do—they kill and eat. It's hard enough to stand up against wolves when you can defend yourself. Sheep can't defend themselves. They are vulnerable. Now, Jesus tells his disciples he is sending them out like sheep among the wolves. Notice, he didn't say there would be a wolf among the sheep. One wolf among a flock of sheep would cause some damage and result in the death of a few sheep. But sending a sheep into a pack of wolves means certain death. As Jesus faced opposition and hatred while he was on this earth to bring salvation to all people, his followers should expect the same. Sometimes that will come from outside the church. Sometimes it will come from inside the church. He says sometimes it will even come from within one's own family. He wants his people to be aware of the situation and understanding of the context into which he is sending them to proclaim his word to the world.

This is the same world into which Jesus sends us as his disciples. He doesn't want us hiding in fear behind the doors of the church like his disciples in the upper room protecting his word and keeping it to ourselves. As his disciples, he has clearly given us the commission and sent each one of us into this world to go and make disciples for him. The only way to make disciples for Jesus is to proclaim his word—the truth of his word and all of it. But Jesus also makes us aware of the situation before us. As we proclaim the truth of his word, expect to face persecution and hatred because of it. Trust in Jesus and the salvation he brought to us does not

guarantee the absence of persecution and hatred. In fact, it means the opposite. It guarantees it. Jesus promised it. Yet he asks for faithfulness despite it. Even though we know people will hate us and persecute us, he doesn't want us to stop our proclamation of his truth to the world. It's natural that people will hate us. The sinful nature in every person is hostile toward the Gospel of Jesus. This is the nasty reality of our sinful condition. The sinful nature stands openly opposed to anything and everything God has to say. The sinful nature doesn't want to hear the message that it can't live however it wants to live. The sinful nature doesn't want to have boundaries established for it. The sinful nature doesn't want to submit to God as ruler over it. It will fight against that in hostile and vicious ways.

Luther experienced this same thing. Luther didn't expect the response he received to his 95 theses. He posted those 95 statements in hopes of simply having a debate about them. He truly thought that he could have an honest discussion about the topics. He thought surely the leadership of the church must not know the things being taught in Germany and would want to stand on the truths of God's Word. When he went to the meeting of the church at Worms 4 years later, he thought he was going there to finally have his debate. Yet he was only asked 2 questions: Are these your books and will you recant? When he stood firm on what he had written as an accurate truth of what God said in the Bible, he was expelled from his monastic order, excommunicated from the church and outlawed from the empire. Jesus' words to his disciples had come true. The world hated Luther for proclaiming the truth.

Yet Luther continued. Why? Because the truth of God's word meant the salvation of souls. For Luther, his work was always about the salvation of souls. Luther didn't defend the truth of God's word simply for the sake of defending the truth. He did so because it meant the salvation of souls. Standing firm on the truths of God's word meant not only would his soul be saved, but also the souls of those who heard God's Word and believed it. This is where Luther found his comfort. It's the same comfort Jesus gives to his disciples. He said first, "I am sending you." As you go out into the world to proclaim God's word, remember this is not something you do alone. God himself is sending you. This isn't pastor saying this is what you should do. This isn't your parents telling you what to do. God himself says, "I am sending you!"

God offers more: As you go about the work I'm sending you to do... don't be afraid or anxious. I'm going to send you into situations that seem extremely tenuous, but I'm doing it so you have the chance to witness about me—even if that is before kings and princes and authorities. And not only am I giving you the chance to do so, I'm also going to give you the words to say. Yes, they will fight against you. They will mock you, slander you, insult you and persecute you. But through your word, some will be saved. Whoever stands firm in my truth to the end will be saved—including yourself. To save souls, you can't be quiet. God is sending you out of this church today after this service into your personal mission field. God brings you into contact every single day with people who need to know the truth of salvation through Jesus alone. God doesn't share this message with you this morning simply for your own benefit and so that you can keep this truth to yourself. He shares it with you and then sends you out into the world to bring it to others. A Reformation church is one that not only defends the truth and stands firm on the truth but who is active in bringing this truth to the world. This will not be easy work. There will be difficulty and persecution. Don't let that soften the truth which you bring. Don't apologize for it or shy away from it. Stand firm on this truth regardless of what you might face knowing that it means the salvation of souls.

As you go about your witness, Jesus also gives us some good advice: *be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves*. Snakes are knowing for their cunningness. Because they are low to the ground and can be easily trampled, they need to be aware of what is around them. They have the ability to quietly flee from danger when wise to do so but are not afraid to stand and defend themselves when it is called for. Doves are animals of peace. Doves aren't known to be trouble causers. As we go out like sheep among wolves carrying out God's Word, we are to be aware of the attacks which will come. We will need to know when to quietly retreat and when to stand up and defend. We are to go out compelled by our faith and love for the Lord and be gentle and filled with nothing other than the desire to see people blessed through the Gospel. Don't start trouble, but don't be afraid to speak the truth of God's Word in love. This is important to keep in mind. Many in our world today struggle with the ideas of love and inclusion which this world offers and the moral truths which God clearly lays out in his Word. They struggle to see how saying that a lifestyle is wrong is loving. They really are torn in trying to understand how if God makes all people and they are born with certain tendencies God would also say those tendencies are wrong. They wrestle deeply to see how God's command to love everyone doesn't mean he is ok with every lifestyle. Maybe we face those same struggles. We need to be careful and wise in the way that we present God's Word. We don't want to give anyone the impression that we are judgmental or condescending. Yet we need to stand firm on the truth of what God says. This can be difficult. Even when we present it in the most loving way, there will still be some who mock and hate and get really upset at us. It will be tempting to soften the truth or even to back away from God's truths.

We always need to keep in mind the goal of our witness: the salvation of souls. What a powerful message Jesus presents when he says, "*the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.*" In the end, these are not your words or truths and they aren't my words and truths. They are God's words and truths. And he sends us out into this world as beacons of light to point people to the path which leads to eternal life in Jesus our Savior. He doesn't want us to unnecessarily bring hostility or trouble upon ourselves, but to proclaim his word and truth in the most loving way that people will hear it, repent and trust in him alone for salvation.

We are so thankful for the truths which God clarified in the Reformation, especially the truth that salvation is found only in him alone, comes to us only through faith alone, and is given only because of grace alone. We will do everything we can to defend these truths and protect them from outside attacks. But let's not be that dog protecting our juicy bone and keep these truths to ourselves. Jesus sends us out into this world to proclaim this truth. Be confident that Jesus put you in these positions to be his witnesses. Be confident he will give you the words to say and the love to say them in a way which will be beneficial for others. Through these words of Jesus, be emboldened for your mission to be his witnesses to the world. A Reformation church is one that not only defends the truth of God's word but is active in taking that truth to the world. Stand firm on the Truth as you Take it to the World. Amen.