

Snatched Out of Sin Catapulted Into Discipleship
Matthew 10:5-23; Jeremiah 20:7-12

Jesus' instructions to his followers before he sends them out to proclaim the good news about the kingdom of God make it clear that being his disciple can be a difficult and even dangerous business. Disciples will be like "sheep among wolves" and therefore they must be "shrewd as serpents" as they negotiate their way through a hostile world--yet remain as "innocent as doves" as they do so. They are to be "in the world, but not of the world." To labor in the vineyard without acquiring too much of a taste for the wine. To be salt and light in a tasteless and darkened world, yet stay salty and bright. To eat and drink with sinners as Jesus did, yet not be drawn into their sins. And they must do all this knowing that unbelievers around them are waiting and watching for them to slip up so they can point their finger and shout, "hypocrite!" As Jesus said, "if they hate you remember that they hated me first." Jeremiah said it about as clearly as it can be said: "i am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me...the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach...all my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying 'perhaps he will be deceived, then we will prevail over him...'" It's tough duty to live a life of a committed Christian disciple in this world full of Christ-hatred. The first thing we have to understand is that when the lord chooses us to be his disciple, we become strangers in our own land. Our primary citizenship is no longer in the country where we live, it's in the New Jerusalem of God. No longer look forward to greener pastures here on earth, we look forward to the great and glorious day of the coming of Lord. We have been conscripted as guerilla soldiers in the Lord's army and sent behind enemy lines to set spiritual prisoners free from their bondage to the prince of this world. It's a hard job and we who have been chosen to do it are not always grateful for having been given the opportunity. Sometimes we feel like Jeremiah, who complained, "O Lord, you seduced me and I was seduced! You overpowered me and prevailed!" Still, we are what we are and we would not change it, even though it causes us pain and discomfort. In the first place, disciples live in a perpetual state of self-reproach. We have the Word of God living in us and we know we should speak it boldly, but we're afraid that if we do, we will cause offense and provoke retaliation. So we shut it up within ourselves until we're around our Christian friends and then we preach to the choir. Once again, we end up feeling like Jeremiah, who complained, "...if I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I weary of holding it in..." We're between a rock and a hard place: we're ashamed of not witnessing to Christ but we're afraid that if we do we'll give offense. As a brother Pastor of mine once remarked, "it's a hell of a thing to be a committed disciple of Christ in this world."

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus describes our predicament bluntly: He says, "do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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. A man's enemies will be the members of his own household." Like the civil war, which set brother against brother over the issue of slavery, the Gospel can set family members against each other over the issue of Jesus Christ. Many of us can attest to the truth of that after we've tried to witness to an unbelieving member of our own family. After a few of those conversations we give up and stop talking to them about it because we know what their reaction will be. Even worse, we stop talking to other members of our family because we fear what their reaction *might* be. Then we feel guilty and are haunted by Jesus' words: "if anyone is ashamed of me before men I will be ashamed of him before my father." Then we find that the sword that Jesus brought divides more than families. The author of the *Book of Hebrews* writes: "...the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow..." The word of God doesn't only divide members of the same family against each other; it also divides us against ourselves and starts a civil war raging inside us. We are attacked by our own sinful nature which hurls temptations at us all day long. Paul said, "I do not understand what I do, for the good that I would do I do not do, but the evil which I hate, I keep on doing." Internal spiritual warfare is a fact of life for a disciple. Temptation versus resistance; judgmentalism versus forgiveness; blame versus mercy; despair versus hope. To add to it all, the devil eggs us on, saying, "how much more of this do you think God is going to put up with? You keep returning to your sins like a dog returning to its vomit! Give up your faith and you'll feel a lot less guilty! Anyway, God is merciful--he doesn't want you feeling guilty all the time! Just accept the fact that you're sinful and your life will be a lot easier." By the way, there are lots of psychologists and counselors and even, I'm ashamed to say, Pastors who will gladly offer you that kind of advice. And like all good lies, this one has an element of truth. It's true that if you decide to stop letting your faith interfere with your enjoyment of life in the here and now, and you start drawing away from worship and prayer and communion and bible study and Christian fellowship—your life will get a lot easier--at least initially. For one thing, you'll be free to do whatever you like on Sunday morning. For another, you won't be plagued with self-reproach for not witnessing. You won't worry so much about your sins. You'll begin to wonder why people get so worked up over immorality and write them off as being judgmental. You'll become more open-minded. You won't offend people by mentioning the name of Jesus Christ. Your family will breathe a huge sigh of relief because they won't have to listen to your attempts to convert them anymore. The spiritual warfare inside will settle down and you will be at peace with your sinful flesh--and the one whom it serves. Your conscience will quiet down and you'll start enjoying the brave new world you've discovered.

Your heart will gradually harden against God and you'll feel more at home in this world than at church. You will have peace and pleasure—and you will be eternally lost. There's much in our society which encourages us to follow this line of thinking. Never has the Christian faith been as libeled and reviled in America as it is today. Christians are called racists and bigots simply because of their faith. The Governor of New York recently said that we "don't need any help from above to beat this virus—we can do it ourselves." I am not aware of any nationally recognized clergyman who has dared to suggest that this pandemic ought to arouse a fear of God in our hearts. The public discourse consists of tweets and social commentary from self-promoting politicians and celebrities and other nitwits. Even if there were Christians who had the nerve to say something about the moral and spiritual rot in our country, there is next to no interest in what they would have to say. If ever there was a time for Christians to stand up for their faith, that time is now. When God saved us, it wasn't a two-way deal, a contract we entered into which provided benefits and penalties for both sides. God initiated the covenant and only God can consummate the covenant. We were snatched out of our sins, plunged into repentance, enlivened with faith and catapulted into discipleship. We didn't necessarily ask for it--in fact many of us were trying to avoid it. We were hiding behind the tree with Adam and Eve when God came looking for us; we were sleeping peacefully and didn't want to be aroused from our slumber. But God found us and jarred us awake, and like people who have been roused from a comfortable nap, we resent it even though we wouldn't trade it for anything. We have to face the fact that a life of Christian discipleship, if it is done with any real degree of commitment, is much tougher than living as an unbeliever. The unbeliever is at peace with the world. The believer is at war with the world—and with himself. Our strength lies in the words of our Sovereign Lord, who promised us that not a single sparrow falls apart from the merciful father; that our job is to take up the cross of Christian discipleship and follow our master, and that only in losing our life for the sake of our Savior, will we find it. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.