

Historic Commentary

(Third Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 10:24-39 from Selected Church Fathers

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 10](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): What Christ is saying to the faithful is, I am now already sharing with you the same stigma you are presently suffering. That is sufficient for your encouragement. I, your Master and Lord, have felt the same grief you now feel. And if that distresses you further, remember this: that even from this foreboding you will soon be freed. For why do you now grieve? Are you troubled that someone is calling you a deceiver or a liar? So what? Wait a little while. In time you will be seen as benefactors of the world and champions of faith. For time reveals whatever is concealed. Time will refute their false accusations and make your good intent known. For as historic events unfold, a larger design will be recognized. Everyone will finally grasp the real state of the case and not merely the frail words used to describe it. Then your adversaries will be revealed as false accusers, liars and slanderers. With time lengthening to reveal and proclaim your innocence, you will shine brighter than the sun. Your voice will in time be heard more clearly than a trumpet. Your good intent will be attested by all. So do not let what is now being said demoralize you. Rather, let the hope of the good things to come raise you up. For the true story of your testimony cannot be suppressed forever.

[Hilary of Poitiers](#): Knowledge of things to come is very edifying for acquiring tolerance, especially if our own will to endure has been molded by another's example. Our Lord, who is eternal light and the leader of all believers and the founder of immortality, sent consolations in advance to his disciples for the sufferings they would endure. This was so that no disciple would think himself above his teacher or above the Lord, when in reality he is a servant. For some call the master of the house by a demon's name out of their ill

will. If we were indeed equal to our Lord or to the circumstances of his sufferings, how much more would they commit every sort of injury and insult on those of his household who have more fully entered the realm of glory?

Chrysostom: The point is not that Jesus was literally whispering into their ears or speaking in physical darkness. Rather, he was here pressing a strong figure of speech. He was conversing with them quietly and alone in a small corner of Palestine. In contrast with this tone of voice, they would soon be preaching with a boldness of speech that would in due time be conferred upon them. The metaphor of whispering in the ear in a dark place, in this present quietness, is contrasted with what is to come. For they were soon to be commissioned to speak not to one or two or three cities but to the whole world. They would soon be traversing land and sea, amid inhabited countries and across deserts, addressing both princes and tribes, philosophers and orators, telling it like it is with an open face and with all boldness of speech.

Augustine: The gospel is life. Impiety and infidelity are the death of the soul. So then, if the soul can die, how then is it yet immortal? Because there is always a dimension of life in the soul that can never be extinguished. And how does it die? Not in ceasing to be life but by losing its proper life. For the soul is both life to something else, and it has its own proper life. Consider the order of the creatures. The soul is the life of the body. God is the life of the soul. As the life that is the soul is present with the body, that the body may not die, so the life of the soul (God) ought to be with the soul that it may not die. How does the body die? By the departure of the soul. I say, by the departure of the soul the body dies, and it lies there as a mere carcass, what was a little before a lively, not a contemptible, object. There are in it still its several members, the eyes and ears. But these are merely the windows of the house; its inhabitant is gone. Those who bewail the dead cry in vain at the windows of the house. There is no one there within it to hear.... Why is the body dead? Because the soul, its life, is gone. But at what point is the soul itself dead? When God, its life, has forsaken it.... This then we can know and hold for certain: the body is dead without the soul, and the soul is dead without God. Every one without God has a dead soul. You who bewail the dead rather should bewail sin. Bewail ungodliness. Bewail disbelief.

Hilary of Poitiers: What is sold is the body and soul. It is a sin to sell them to anyone, because Christ redeems from sin and is the Redeemer of body and soul. So when persons sell themselves for the sake of an insignificant sin, it is like two sparrows being sold for a penny. They were born for flying and to be carried to heaven on spiritual wings, but they are overtaken by the price of their immediate pleasures, and by such actions they trade away all their eternal treasures for the sake of temporal luxury

Chrysostom: What do you see in creation of less value than a tiny sparrow? But even the sparrow will not fall without God's knowledge. Jesus does not mean that the sparrow falls by God's direct will because it is unworthy but that nothing that occurs is hidden from God. If then God is not ignorant of anything that happens in creation, and if God loves us more truly than the best human father, and if God loves us so as to have numbered our very hairs, then we need not be afraid. Jesus said this not to indicate that God literally has a number placed on the very hairs of our head but rather to show that God has perfect knowledge of everything about us and providentially cares for everything about us. Therefore, if God both knows all things that happen to us and is able to save us and willing to do so, then whatever we may be suffering, we need not think that God has forsaken us in our suffering. For it is not God's will to keep us wholly separated from that which elicits dread but rather to persuade us not to make an idol out of whatever we dread. It is this, more than anything else, that constitutes deliverance from dread. "Therefore, don't be afraid. You are of more value than many sparrows." Don't you see that God views your fear with more concern than the lives of many sparrows? He already knows the secrets of your heart. Hence Jesus adds, "Do not fear." For even if that which you dread prevails, it prevails only over your body; this is the limited part of yourself, which nature will surely take in due time and bring to an end.

Chrysostom: The Son does not here speak soothing words but rather speaks of the consequences of denial. Note carefully: It is not by some power within yourself that you make your confession but by the help of grace from above. But if you deny me, the Son, he is saying, then I will deny you in the presence of the Father. Someone may then object: "How then am I to be blamed if God, forsaking me, denies me?" The answer is, Your being forsaken is the fault of you yourself, the forsaken person, not of God.

“But why,” you object, “should I need to confess faith with my mouth if I confess faith in my mind?” No, we must confess with our mouths in order that we may be steadily trained to speak boldly. It is only through this more abundant love and determination that we will be raised on high. In this way Jesus addresses himself to each one of us personally. He is not here addressing his original disciples only but every one of us who follows after his disciples in accord with their witness to him. One who learns this lesson will teach it in boldness to others, prepared to suffer all things easily and with a ready mind. This is why so many have come to have faith in the witness of the apostles to this Word.

Hilary of Poitiers: And so when we are renewed by the water of baptism through the power of the Word, we are separated from the sins and ancestors of our origin; we are cut away from the inordinate love of father and mother as if by an incision from God’s sword, and we are divided from them. And as we shed our former self with its sins and unfaithfulness and are made new by the Spirit in mind and body, we will necessarily detest the habits of our old, inborn way of life.

Jerome: He had said previously, “What I tell you in the dark, declare in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops.” He now explains what follows after this proclamation. The whole world is divided against itself for the sake of faith in Christ. Every house contains both unbelievers and believers. And a necessary conflict has been sent to break an evil peace. It is written in Genesis that God did a similar thing to the rebellious people who streamed out of the east and rushed to build a tower, by which they meant to reach the heights of heaven. God divided their languages.¹⁹ For this same reason David prays in the psalm, “O God, scatter the peoples who delight in war.”

Jerome: For he had previously said, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” He adds that he has divided people against father and mother and relatives, so that no one will place familial loyalty before religion. He says, “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” We also read in the Song of Songs, “He established love in me.”²⁴ We must preserve this order in all our relations. Love your father, your mother, your sons. If a time comes when love for a parent and for the children of God are in conflict and both cannot be maintained, then forthright rejection of your family may be a higher form of familial loyalty in relation to God.

Chrysostom: He said this to bring fathers to greater gentleness and children to greater freedom, just at the point where love might be most tempted to hinder them. He bids parents not to attempt what is impossible by assuming that their love of their children can be rightly compared with their love toward God. He instructs the children not to attempt what is impossible by seeking to make their love of parents greater than their love of God. Then lest his hearers should become riled or count this saying as too demanding, see how he turns the argument even further in a more drastic direction. For after saying “who hates not father and mother,” he even adds, “and his own life!” So do not compare love of God merely with love of parents, brothers and sisters and wife. If you are serious, compare it with the love of your very life. For nothing is dearer to you than your life. Yet if you are also not ready to give up this love, in all things you must bear the opposite lot.

Augustine: Let a father say, “Love me.” Let a mother say, “Love me.” To these words I will say, “Be silent.” But isn’t what they are asking for just? Shouldn’t I give back what I have received? The father says, “I fathered you.” The mother says, “I bore you.” The father says, “I educated you.” The mother says, “I fed you.” ... Let us answer our father and mother when they justly say “love us.” Let us answer, “I will love you in Christ, not instead of Christ. You will be with me in him, but I will not be with you without him.” “But we don’t care for Christ,” they say. “And I care for Christ more than I care for you. Should I obey the ones who raised me and lose the One who created me?”

Cyril of Alexandria: Here Jesus calls the departure of life from the body the “loss of life,” speaking figuratively. “He who finds his life” refers to anyone who too highly values transitory existence and as it were sells it at a profit. He will face the hands of death when he is sent to unremittable punishment and death.

Vs 24. The disciple is not above his master By his own example he now exhorts them to perseverance; and, indeed, this consolation is enough to banish all sadness, if we consider that our lot is shared with the Son of God. To make us feel deeper shame, he borrows a twofold comparison from what is customary among men. The disciple reckons it honorable to be placed on a level with his master, and does not venture to wish a higher honor, and again, servants do not refuse to share that condition to which their masters willingly submit. In both respects, the Son of God is far above us: for the Father has given to him the highest authority, and has bestowed on him the office of a teacher. We ought, therefore, to be ashamed of declining what he did not scruple to undergo on our account.

But there is more need to meditate on these words than to explain them: for, in themselves, they are sufficiently clear.

Matthew 10:26. Fear them not therefore When the apostles saw the gospel so greatly despised, and recollected the small number of believers, they might be apt to throw away hope even for the future. Christ now meets this doubt, by declaring that the gospel would be widely spread, would at length rise superior to all the hindrances which might arise from men, and would become generally known. 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. Though he sometimes preached openly in the temple, yet, as his doctrine was rejected, it was still concealed in dark comers: but he declares that the time for proclaiming it will come; which, we know, happened shortly afterwards. In no part of the earth was there ever such thunder heard as the voice of the gospel, which resounded through the whole world. As this promise ought to fill them with courage, Christ exhorts them to devote themselves to it with boldness and perseverance, and not to be alarmed, though they see the gospel hitherto despised, but, on the contrary, to become its zealous preachers.

Vs 28. And fear not those who kill the body To excite his disciples to despise death, Christ employs the very powerful argument, that this frail and perishing life ought to be little regarded by men who have been created for a heavenly immortality. The statement amounts to this, that if believers will consider for what purpose they were born, and what is their condition, they will have no reason to be so earnest in desiring an earthly life. But the words have still a richer and fuller meaning: for we are here taught by Christ that the fear of God is dead in those men who, through dread of tyrants, fall from a confession of their faith, and that a brutish stupidity reigns in the hearts of those who, through dread of death, do not hesitate to abandon that confession.

These words of Christ ought therefore to be explained in this manner: “Acknowledge that you have received immortal souls, which are subject to the disposal of God alone, and do not come into the power of men. The consequence will be, that no terrors or alarms which men may employ will shake your faith. “For how comes it that the dread of men prevails in the struggle, but because the body is preferred to the soul, and immortality is less valued than a perishing life?”

Matthew 10:29. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? Christ proceeds farther, as I have already hinted, and declares that tyrants, whatever may be their madness, have no power whatever even over the body: and that therefore it is improper in any persons to dread the cruelty of men, as if they were not under the protection of God. In the midst of dangers, therefore, let us remember this second consolation. As God is the guardian of our life, we may safely rely on his providence; nay, we do him injustice, if we do not entrust to him our life, which he is pleased to take under his charge. Christ takes a general view of the providence of God as extending to all creatures, and thus argues from the greater to the less, that we are upheld by his special protection. There is hardly any thing of less value than sparrows, (for two were then sold for a farthing, or, as Luke states it, five for two farthings,) and yet God has his eye upon them to protect them, so that nothing happens to them by chance. Would He who is careful about the sparrows disregard the life of men?

There are here two things to be observed. First, Christ gives a very different account of the providence of God from what is given by many who talk like the philosophers, and tell us that God governs the world, but yet imagine providence to be a confused sort of arrangement, as if God did not keep his eye on each of the creatures. Now, Christ declares that each of the creatures in particular is under his hand and protection, so that nothing is left to chance. Unquestionably, the will of God is contrasted with contingency or uncertainty, And yet we must not be understood to uphold the fate of the Stoics, for it is one thing to imagine a necessity which is involved in a complicated chain of causes, and quite another thing to believe that the world, and every part of it, is directed by the will of God. In the nature of things, I do acknowledge there is uncertainty: but I maintain that nothing happens through a blind revolution of chance, for all is regulated by the will of God.

The second thing to be observed is, 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.

A more public confession of faith, no doubt, is demanded from teachers than from persons in a private station. Besides, all are not endued with an equal measure of faith, and in proportion as any one excels in the gifts of the Spirit, he ought to go before others by his example. But there is no believer whom the Son of God does not require to be his witness. In what place, at what time, with what degree of frequency, in what manner, and to what extent, we ought to profess our faith, cannot easily be determined by a fixed rule: but we must consider the occasion, that not one of us may fail to discharge his duty at the proper time. We must also ask from the Lord the spirit of wisdom and courage, that under his direction we may know what is proper, and may boldly follow whatever we shall have ascertained that he commands us.

Him will I also confess. A promise is added to inflame our zeal in this matter. But we must attend to the points of contrast. If we draw a comparison between ourselves and the Son of God, how base is it to refuse our testimony to him, when on his part he offers his testimony to us by way of reward? If mortals, and men who are of no worth, are brought into comparison with God and the angels and all the heavenly glory, how much more valuable is that which Christ promises than that which he requires? Although men are unbelieving and rebellious, yet the testimony which we deliver to them is estimated by Christ as if it had been made in the presence of God and of the angels.

Matthew 10:37. He who loveth father or mother As it is exceedingly harsh, and is contrary to natural feelings, to make enemies of those who ought to have been in closest alliance with us, so Christ now says that we cannot be his disciples on any other condition. He does not indeed enjoin us to lay aside human affections, or forbid us to discharge the duties of relationship, but only desires that all the mutual love which exists among men should be so regulated as to assign the highest rank to piety. Let the husband then love his wife, the father his son, and, on the other hand, let the son love his father, provided that the reverence which is due to Christ be not overpowered by human affection.

Vs 38. He who doth not take up his cross From particular cases he proceeds to general views, and informs us that we cannot be reckoned his disciples unless we are prepared to endure many afflictions. If we are vexed and tormented by the thought, that the gospel should set us at variance with our father, or our wife, or our children, let us remember this condition, that Christ subjects all his disciples to the cross Yet let us also bear in mind

this consolation, that, in bearing the cross, we are the companions of Christ, – which will speedily have the effect of allaying all its bitterness.

To find the life means here to possess it, or to have it in safe keeping. Those who are excessively desirous of an earthly life, take pains to guard themselves against every kind of danger, and flatter themselves with unfounded confidence, as if they were looking well to themselves, (Psalm 49:18:) but their life, though defended by such powerful safeguards, will pass away; for they will at last die, and death will bring to them everlasting ruin. On the other hand, when believers surrender themselves to die, their soul, which appears to vanish in a moment, passes into a better life. Yet as persons are sometimes found, who heedlessly lay down their life, either for the sake of ambition or of madness, Christ expressly states the reason why we ought to expose ourselves to death.