

Matthew 10:24-39

More Than Many Sparrows

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

How many sparrows are you worth? That's probably not a question you have ever pondered. Normally we measure our self-worth by other means. There are five fairly common ways that people in our world like to measure themselves. The first is physical appearance, how much attention they can attract. The next is the size of your bank account. Then it's whether you know the right people, have the right social connections. What you do makes the list. Is your career one that's respectable and valued by society? And the last is similar – what you achieve. Have you made a lasting impact on society?

And all of us use these, and others, to compare ourselves to each other. Depending on the day and who you meet, you might feel like you don't measure up. You might even think that you're not worth anything to anyone. But according to Jesus in this text from Matthew, sparrows are a good point of comparison. How many sparrows are you worth? The answer is many. You are of more value than many sparrows. Of course, scripture gives another answer to the question of what you are worth, and that is, to God you are worth everything. God gave up his only begotten son for you. Jesus died a painful death on a cross for you, because in his love for you it was worth it.

But here, Jesus talking is to his disciples about the persecution they will face because they are sent in his name. They will be rejected. They will be hated. And so Jesus says to them "do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." God cares for every single one of these insignificant birds, and so God definitely cares for you. So Jesus says, "do not be afraid."

This is the most repeated command in the bible. Nearly every time an angel of God shows up with a message, the first thing they say is "do not be afraid". And Jesus says it on multiple occasions to the disciples when their journey with him brings them to all sorts of strange events. Here, Jesus tells them not to be afraid straight after giving them a whole bunch of reasons to be afraid. He's warned them that the authorities will be after them; that they will suffer physical and emotional violence; and, now, that people will start calling them the sort of names they have already begun to call him. Plenty to be afraid of there. And yet he says, 'do not be afraid.'

Why not? What reason does he give? We might imagine that he would say 'because God will look after you'. And in a round-about way he does. But his main point is that even when your fellow humans are at their worst, they are limited to hurting the body, the physical and material self. Why fear that? The great tragedy, the only one to be feared, is the destruction of the soul, cutting the bond that connects the disciple with God. That deep spiritual connection with God, eternal and glorious, can be destroyed only by rejecting the faith in disobedience. And because of Christ Jesus, not even our death will cause that to happen. The text today from Romans chapter six tells us that we have been united with Jesus in his death, which means we are also united with him in his resurrection. So there is no need to be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

There is no need to be afraid, because to God you are worth more than many sparrows. This actually has an impact on how we pray. Sometimes we might get the impression that we should only pray about the really big heavy spiritual stuff. Things that are trivial, like nice weather for an outdoor event, or help finding some missing car keys, don't seem to make the cut. Of course, there are far more important things to pray for, and we should be sure we are doing that. But if God really takes note of every single sparrow in the sky, and every single hair on our heads, nothing is too small, too trivial, too insignificant for him to care about.

So the message from Jesus to his disciples is plain. You are worth more than a great many sparrows; so rest assured that God knows and cares about the details of your life, even as you face the temptations and dangers which so easily surround you. We have a God who blesses and rules over all creation. And that sounds like it could be rather peaceful.

But that is not the reality that disciples will face. Jesus encourages disciples to remain firm in their commitment to him and their mission, even when that mission generates inevitable conflicts, even within their families. Although Jesus has called his disciples to be peacemakers, his mission does not bring peace, but a sword, so long as the powers of this world resist God's rule and will.

At first glance, this sounds contradictory to calling Jesus the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), the one whose birth brought greetings of peace on earth (Luke 2:14). It is true that Christ came to bring peace. Peace between the believer and God, and peace among humankind. Yet the inevitable result of Christ's coming is conflict. Conflict between Christ and the antichrist, between light and darkness, between Christ's children and the devil's children. And Jesus tells his disciples they can expect this even within their own families. This is the price they would pay for putting Jesus above all things.

By some of the measures of this world, they would no longer be worth anything, rejected by friends and family alike simply for following Jesus. But Jesus says, do not fear, you are of more worth than many sparrows. Because you belong to him, your future is secure. Because you belong to him, not even death itself is something to be feared. Because you belong to him, you will find peace. Not the peace the world gives, but the true and everlasting peace of eternity in his presence.

So thanks be to God that he values us and all his creation. Thanks be to God that he gave up everything for us, that we might have true life in him. And thanks be to God that following Jesus means we need not fear even the worst things this world can throw at us, and that we will have eternal peace with him. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.