



## **Guilty by Association**

### **Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42**

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Earlier in the chapter from which today's gospel comes, Jesus gave his first disciples instructions and advice before he sent them out to minister, namely to preach, teach, and heal (10:1-8). We, his disciples today, are also called to proclaim the good news wherever we go, and like those first twelve, we may wonder why anyone should be interested in what we have to offer. We're not sure that we are good enough with words to persuade anyone. We're not sure that we are good enough with skills to be helpful with practical tasks. We're not sure that we have the financial resources to change lives with charitable giving. Often, we're not sure that we are brave enough to even try. Often, we feel inadequate and ill prepared. We question: is it really our job?

Admittedly, it is rather intimidating to be sent out on a mission to advance the kingdom. After all, not all of us have read theological and spiritual books; not all of us are eloquent and know how to articulate a faith statement; not all of us feel comfortable speaking in public; and not all of us are comfortable with conflict and rejection. We console ourselves by thinking that we do not want to infringe or impose our views and religion on others. What Jesus asks of his disciples is quite the undertaking.

Yet, all of us can be sure of the promise of God to be with us always and give us the necessary words to speak at the right time (Matthew 10:19-20), when we are called to articulate a faith statement (1 Peter 3:15). We only need to be aware of our fears and our insecurity, tap into our relationship with God, and simply communicate our own experience of the love of God for us. There is no need to sound smart. The important thing is to sound true and come from an inner experience of God. Then, God will do the rest.

Jesus never sends us out alone. He always comes with us! That's why he can say that anyone who welcomes us welcomes him. And those who welcome him welcome the Father. What a wonderful gift to be able to bring to the people we meet: the opportunity to meet Jesus himself and ultimately, the Father! It is him we bring to people when we bring the news of the kingdom come near and "peace" (Matthew 10:7.12-13).

Incredible to say but not everyone will want to hear about Jesus. His very words, out of his own very mouth, were rejected. Should it be a big deal if people reject us also? Should we be so thin-skinned to forego of the opportunity to proclaim him our Lord and Savior? Not everybody will care for our testimonial, but we don't want to miss the opportunity to revamp in our heart the flame and the joy of knowing God. In addition to that, we are responsible for others to at least hear the message. It will be their responsibility to respond in the way they think is best for them.

In fact, when the message is announced, people have a few options: respond positively to the invitation; dismiss it as nonsense; or ignore it with indifference. Unfortunately, even Christians do not always respond positively.

Speaking about the righteousness of the kingdom and the need to show mercy and compassion is not something the world wants to hear about. The world considers those things as weakness. And the world still has a domain in people's hearts, whether they sit in pews or not: the world comes to church, but it isn't totally converted yet. We don't check the world at the door, we carry it inside the sanctuary well lodged into our heart. Yet, the truth is, it should be the opposite: we are the Church and the Church lives in the world, like yeast in the dough (Mt 13:31-33).

We can tell that is the case when we resist a message we don't want to hear and we can't wait for the worship service to be over with. Not true? Check it out: how many of us are quick to say we are Christians, but our Christianity is only nominal and default to the ways of the world when the "poor," the "dejected," and the "neighbors" we are called to love become real persons with real faces, real needs, real habits, and real life choices? Then, our prejudices, our judgments, our disdain flood us.

Practicing our faith puts us at odds with the "world" necessarily. We feel it in our heart as we resist the call to welcome, to honor, and to embrace the "other" we try so hard to avoid because "we are not like them" and condemn their life choices (see Luke 18:11).

Who wants to be in constant conflict with the world? Do we have the stamina, the internal resources, the courage to face rejection, loneliness, and contempt? If not, what needs to happen to build that muscle up?

Yet, there are blessings for those who receive the messengers. In the first part of chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus told the disciples what to do for "free." (Matthew 10:8) In the second part, just so that the disciples may not feel anxious about offering the message or guilty for accepting hospitality (food and lodging) without "working" for it, Jesus assures them that those who respond by showing hospitality will receive a reward.

The "reward" for people's acceptance of a prophet, a just person, and a missionary is the same as the one for the prophet, the just person, and the missionary is the experience of the Kingdom which is Jesus and the Father who sent him. Receiving the messenger stands for receiving the message, which is that of an intimate "knowledge" of and "openness" to the will of God, a relationship with God, a dwelling place in God.

Openness of one's eyes/ears/heart to the message invites the disciple into the daily life of the Body of Christ. Life in Christ with all the kindness, compassion, understanding, support, and mercy is all about sharing in the joy of the Father.<sup>1</sup> The more we share in the life of the Spirit the more we grow in faith, we advance the kingdom, we produce spiritual fruits, we get strengthened for hard times and persecution. By developing our God-given talents, and letting God prune us so we can produce fruit, we will have something worthwhile to share. In sharing this fruit, we produce happiness in others.

Sometimes Jesus sends us to faraway places. Sometimes he sends us deeper into our own communities. Sometimes he sends us to welcome others, and sometimes he sends us to be

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<sup>1</sup> Matthews 25:21; Psalm 16:11; John 10:10; 15:11; Romans 15:13

welcomed by others. In all of those times, and in all of those places, Jesus has this reminder for us: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me” (Matt. 10:40). We can depend on that because we can depend on him. Jesus is with us when we experience amazing hospitality and when we feel like we are all alone. Jesus is with us whether we are brave or timid. Jesus is there for the people we meet along the way, and Jesus is here for us. The promise is as certain as the waters of baptism, as real as the taste of bread and wine. Let our hearts be at peace. Amen.