

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## Avoiding Unnecessary Conflict

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**“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore come-to-be shrewd (‘thinking’, prudent, wise) as serpents, and innocent (lit., ‘unmixed’; harmless, pure, guileless) as doves.”**

Matthew 10:16

**“But refuse foolish and uneducated disputes, knowing that they produce quarrels. <sup>24</sup> The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, <sup>25</sup> with meekness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to a recognition of the truth, <sup>26</sup> and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare (trap) of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.”**

2 Timothy 2:23-26

**“Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to (more than, other than) the doctrine which you learned, and turn away from them. <sup>18</sup> For such people are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own inner-feelings; and by their smooth (plausible) and flattering speech they lead-astay the hearts of the unsuspecting. <sup>19</sup> For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise (perceptive, skillful, clever) in what is good, and innocent (lit., ‘unmixed’; harmless, pure, guileless) in what is evil. <sup>20</sup> And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.”**

Romans 16:17-20

The world around us is a hostile place, full of snares, traps and stumbling blocks that can disrupt our focus and divert us from what is important. Jesus Himself lived in this world, ...a world fraught with all kinds of problems, distractions, debates and diversions. It was a world of corruption and injustice, in virtually every area of life. Judea was a country that was under the military occupation of Rome, ...and the Romans were not afraid to flex their muscle to remind them of that. The priesthood had become formalistic and corrupt. They were wealthy collaborators with Rome, going through the motions of religion in the temple to maintain their power and security. Most of them did not even believe in an afterlife. To them, there were no demons, no angels, and no resurrection. Many of the Pharisees had become so focused on their religious traditions, and their pursuit of “purity”, that they had lost compassion for the common person. In fact, they often disdained them. They were the leaders within the synagogues. Even though they often seemed arrogant and unapproachable, they were more popular with the common people, because they seemed to be personally devoted to following God. Many of them, however, had also become corrupt, using their positions of influence for personal gain. Then there were collaborators with Rome, like the tax collectors, who were hated and ostracized by the people. And there were first-century terrorists, like the Zealots, who were trying to actively foment rebellion and revolution. They were attempting to recruit followers and supporters behind the scenes. And, there was plenty to be dissatisfied with. There was injustice in the courts, the open abuse of power, extortion by threat of violence, rape, murder, and very high taxes. At times, the Zealots, and other brigands, attacked Roman forces, or sabotaged and vandalized Roman property. In the end, their influence grew to the point of open revolt, and brought the crushing hand of Rome down upon the nation. Their agitation brought about the total destruction of the nation.

It was into a world like this that John the Baptist came on the scene. John was imprisoned for speaking against the king. Before that happened, however, he was able to baptize and identify Jesus as the Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world. He pointed Jesus out to his first disciples, and bore witness that Jesus was the one who was “greater than I”. Jesus also began to preach the coming kingdom of God, ...a message similar to John's.

John's arrest and ensuing death was an important warning for Jesus. He had to walk a tenuous path. He had to learn to stay focused on His mission, and yet be careful not to get caught up in snares, conflicts, and traps that His opponents were devising in order to report Him to the authorities. Jesus was a master at this. He purposefully couched much of His teaching in parables to avoid unnecessary confrontation with those who wanted to argue, but who had no real desire to know the truth. He redirected conversations away from things He did not wish to talk about. He refused to answer questions designed to make Him appear to be teaching sedition or rebellion. When asked about paying taxes, He asked whose image and inscription was on the Roman coins. When the people stated that it was Caesar's, Jesus told the people to give to Caesar what was Caesar's, and to God what was God's. Neither John the Baptist and Jesus spoke against the right of the government to collect taxes. Jesus often simply walked away from people who were trying to box Him in, or when things were getting argumentative and dangerous. When Jesus was brought before both the Jewish and Roman courts, He did not rail against them as unfair, unjust or illegitimate. He quietly endured their procedural inquiry, and spoke out plainly when directly questioned. He calmly said, “You would have no authority at all, if it had not been given to you from above.” He acknowledged the authority of the governor and the leaders, even when they were misusing it. He refused to discredit or attack them. He just quietly spoke the truth. He said, “My kingdom is *not* of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is *not* of this realm” (John 18:36).

Jesus did not want His servants fighting *then*, what would possess us to think we should be fighting *now*? Those sentiments and motivations do not come from Jesus, ...they come from some other source.

When He sent His twelve disciples out, He cautioned *them* about the need to live “shrewdly” to avoid unnecessary conflict. Things could quite quickly go from bad to worse, and they could find themselves on the undesirable end of a whip, ...or worse. They were not to foolishly put themselves into unnecessary danger. They were to be wise, thoughtful and crafty, at times, like He Himself was. They were to faithfully declare the message that they were assigned to bring, but to be watchful to avoid heated arguments with people who were trying to divert or entrap them. When they were brought before the Jewish court, they did not mock or discredit the court. They plainly and respectfully told them when they could not, in good conscience before God, comply, but they did not verbally attack them, even when they were imprisoned or mistreated for their continued preaching about Jesus.

Paul was probably the most imprisoned of the apostles we read about in the NT, ...yet he wrote more about submitting to (voluntarily-ordering-oneself-under, deferring to) the governing authorities than anyone else (Rom. 13:1-7; Tit. 3:1-2). In Titus, he wrote, “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient (persuaded, responsively-compliant), to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all people.” The emphasis is that *we are to be good citizens. We are to be good news in people’s eyes*, by virtue of the good deeds we do to help others, and our positive, kind demeanor, ...so that our lives adorn the Good News we are trying to proclaim. The apostle Peter reinforces this message: “Keep your behavior excellent among the nations, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may *because of your good deeds*, as they observe them, glorify God... Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that *by doing right* you may silence the ignorance of foolish (lit., ‘unthinking’) people. Act as free persons, but do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king” (1 Pet. 2:12-17).

Interestingly, most of the persecution that the church endured from the larger Roman world was not about religion, it was about loyalty. The Romans didn’t care too much about what beliefs people had, as long as they did not interfere with their governing authority. The Romans saw the refusal to offer sacrifices to the emperor as an act of treason and disloyalty to the government. The persecution was political in nature, not primarily religious. Jesus and the apostles understood that we need to live in such a way as to avoid unnecessary conflict. If we focus on living lives that people see are positive and good, they will have nothing bad to say about us, ...nothing of substance, anyway. What the government wants is for us to be good, law-abiding citizens, ...people who are responsible, pay taxes and cause no trouble. That gives us a lot of room to share the gospel with people on a personal level. Jesus will change lives, disrupt family systems, and “turn the world upside down”. The kingdom of God will advance disruptively within the kingdom of this world, ...but those upheavals are *not the message*, they are *the outworking of that message* in the lives of people. And those radical changes will be good and beneficial in the lives of those who follow Jesus.

People come up with all kinds of strange ideas. They advance negative, provocative, and distracting teachings. If nothing else, these things take people’s minds off what should be their focus: intimacy with Jesus and doing His will. More than simply a harmless distraction, however, they are a hindrance that causes strife and dissension among believers. We are to be helping one another grow into a unity of the faith, and an experiential-knowledge of God (Eph. 4:13). The unity of the faith is only possible if we stay within the confines of God’s revealed Word. Paul counseled the Corinthians to “not go beyond what is written, in order that no one may be puffed up one against another” (1 Cor. 4:6). These people, however, are introducing *other* doctrine or teaching. In 2 Timothy 2:23, Paul says to “refuse” such foolish and uneducated controversies. The word for “refuse” means to “beg off from” or “excuse yourself from”. Basically, it means to “disengage from” such arguments or lines of reasoning, and have nothing to do with them. Why? Because they produce quarrels and disagreements. We aren’t to be quarrelsome, or negative. We are to be united, and to be in agreement on the truth that we have in common: Jesus, ...life in the Spirit, ...*agapē*-love, ...the Word of God, ...our calling to demonstrate and communicate the Good News through our lives and lips. In Romans 16:17, Paul tells us to turn away from people who are promoting other, negative or divisive teachings. They are driven by their strong inner-feelings, not by Jesus. They may be passionate, and convincing, ...but the bottom line is that they are leading us *away from* what we should be focusing on. They are *not* keeping the main THING, the MAIN thing. Typically, their OTHER thing becomes the MAIN thing, ...the thing they talk about and focus on in their interactions with others. Also, these mixed messages, ...these additional ideas and emotions can present a message that comes across as subversive, rebellious and defiant. *We are out of step with Jesus, if that is the flavor we are communicating.* Be wise. Be thoughtful and circumspect. *We walk a tenuous path. We must remain focused. Avoid unnecessary conflict. Don’t give the enemy an opportunity to criticize you or the body of Christ. Keep your heart and focus pure, ...single, ...unmixed from other influences. Jesus first. Jesus only. Jesus always.*