

2 Timothy 3:10-17

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

You Lead...and the World Pushes Back.

First I'd like to say "thank-you" once again to those of you who have taken on the responsibilities of leadership in this church. And I once again remind you that you are first and foremost *servants*. A leader is not a person who gloats over their title as leader, but one who humbly serves, as Jesus serves, as he set an example for us when he washed the feet of his disciples on the night when he was arrested. As leaders this is one of your responsibilities, to humbly serve the Church which in turn serves the community around it and the world at large.

But as leaders, you have to know *how* to serve. You need guidelines. And again, we have to look to Jesus for our example. Because we live in a world full of conflict and confusion, of lies and deception. We live in a world where service to one person will be seen as betrayal to another. We have people on the right and people on the left, people who will expect opposite things from you, and it would be impossible for you to make both sides happy. What you must do is make *God happy*. *That is exactly what Jesus was striving to do*. It's rather striking that on the same night that Jesus washes his disciples' feet he's also arrested by a company of Roman soldiers and carried off to trial. As Jesus is demonstrating to his followers the right way to act toward others, another group comes to stop Jesus because they don't like the way he's acting toward them. They wanted his blood spilled because of the way he was leading his followers. And so leadership is a double-edged sword; you serve God and you serve others, but not everyone is going to be happy with who you're serving or how you're serving. And this is why the church is not set up as a democratic institution. It is organized to be led by people who are led by God to tend to the needs of their congregation and their community, and the *needs* of the congregation and the community are determined by God, not by worldly authorities and not even by popular consensus, not by the people who put the most money in the offering plate. Leaders in the church are those who are led by Christ.

As Paul was led by Christ. And just as many people were upset with Paul as they were with Jesus. True the authorities did not hang Paul on a cross, but they certainly made him suffer. Whereas Jesus received forty lashes, Paul received forty lashes on five separate occasions, he was beaten with rods, he was stoned, he spent a lot of time in prison – to see a full list, read 2 Corinthians 11:21-33, but he does mention persecution and suffering in today's passage from 2

Timothy. And he writes something that is a little unsettling: **“All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”**

“All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Is that still true? Do we live in a time and place where Jesus’ message is so well received that we are no longer persecuted? Is persecution restricted to places that openly restrict Christianity, places like Saudi Arabia, Iran, North Korea, and China? Do we live in a post-persecution era here in the United States? OR could it be that we have settled into a comfortable form of Christianity that no longer demands the level of commitment, the level of discipleship that invites persecution, that upsets the apple cart? Is Christianity all about basking in the warmth of God’s love and forgiveness, of resting in the assurance of our own salvation and everlasting life in heaven? Pastor Martin Borg points out that Jesus wasn’t crucified for telling folks that God loves them and forgives them and will take them to heaven when their life here has ended. That kind of message wouldn’t upset anyone. Jesus was crucified for declaring God to be the highest authority on earth as it is in heaven, and for following what was truly God’s will and leading others to do the same. And the fact is that God’s will was in such conflict with the will of men that following one necessarily upset the other. So Jesus and his followers were in direct conflict with ways of the world.

The question then is this: Is our society, here in the Staten Island, here in the United States, in such perfect alignment with the will of God that living a godly life no longer results in persecution? Have we instilled those values and that lifestyle to such a degree that no one would have any reason to persecute us? **Is the message of the Church so well-received that it no longer poses a threat to anyone, or has the church distorted the message to the point where it no longer poses a threat?**

Writing for *The Atlantic* back in 1942, Bernard Bell writes about a church in decline, and the reason for the decline is that the essential teachings of Jesus have been ignored to the point where Christians themselves are ignorant of them and no longer know it means what to be a Christian. And this is because Christians themselves have rejected the essential teachings of Jesus. Bell writes:

When they (the congregation) hear a preacher re-echo these Christian precepts, they take offense. "Let the parsons keep their hands off economics and their voices out of politics." So say many, even most, professing Christians nowadays, quite unaware that they are rebuking, not the preacher who repeats the maxims, but Him who in the first place proclaimed them as having a changeless and divine validity.

The church has strayed so far from anything that anyone would consider controversial that it has rendered itself irrelevant. It tries to bolster itself with modern music or popular entertainment or professional orators, but it has so neglected the challenging ethics of Jesus and his emphasis on living in tune with God’s will that few people outside the church care anymore about the church. Bell writes:

The masses of the folk, observing the Church as of late the Church has been willing to present itself, say, "There is nothing here to bother with. These people bear within

themselves no salvation. They are as mad as all the rest of us. They are not worth listening to. They are not even worth crucifying."

Not even worth crucifying.

Last week I explained that the first order of business for anyone who is serious about being a disciple of Jesus is to *plant yourself by living water*, to humbly seek God's will because we are broken and we are incapable of fixing ourselves...we're incapable of even *knowing* ourselves apart from God. Today I tell you that we have to gird ourselves for battle. We have to acknowledge that the ways of Christ are **STILL** in conflict with the ways of this world, and therefore we as a church...and we as individuals who claim the name "Christian" ...have an ethic and a message for the world that are absolutely necessary and totally unpopular with most folks, even those within the church. Leaders – get used to it, but don't back down.

"All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

But I would go on to say that all who live a godly life in Christ Jesus will experience true joy, true peace, true freedom, and true salvation.