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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Blessed are the Persecuted

Matthew 5:10-12

Prayer: *Father, I just again, I thank you that it is the blood of Jesus that enables us to stand before you, and I thank you for that incredible gift. And Father, once again we are opening up and examining another of your gifts and that is your word, and so I pray this morning as we open up your book, as we look into the Sermon on the Mount once again that you would accompany us by the power of your Holy Spirit, that what we take in once again might be of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

This is Matthew 5:1-12, it says this: *Seeing the crowds, -- this is Jesus -- he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see*

God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Well, we have come to the eighth beatitude in which Jesus describes what's going to happen if you practice the first seven. Now the first beatitude says blessed are you when you recognize your own spiritual poverty, understanding that you bring before God absolutely nothing but your nothingness. And the second beatitude describes us as blessed when we mourn what our sin has done to this fallen creation, what our sin has done to our Savior as well. And the third tells us that we are blessed as meek when we refuse to exercise our own power, trusting instead that God is good and that he doesn't make mistakes. And the fourth is that we are blessed with a hunger for righteousness by a God who alone gives us that appetite. The fifth says we are blessed as merciful when we recognize that mercy is an absolutely critical part of our identity because we recognize the incredible abundant mercy that we've already received. Sixth, we are blessed when we rejoice in the pure hearts we've been given knowing that our old heart of stone

has been removed and has been transplanted with a new heart of flesh by a divine act of God's mercy. Seventh, we're blessed as peacemakers when we recognize that we have been given the task of peacemaker, not so much in the horizontal world, man to man, as critical as that is but really in the vertical realm where we recognize that the real war is not between man and man, it's between God and his creation. And so it's that war that we are passionate about bringing an end to by presenting the gospel to our fellow man. And as I've said many, many times, the sermon on the mount, it's not about what you do. It's about who you are. And if you are a kingdom citizen and you fit the description the Lord Jesus is giving here in these beatitudes, you're going to pay a price. And that's what we're going to speak about this morning.

This again *Matthew 5:10-12*. Jesus says: "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*" Jesus is telling us that persecution is going to be part and parcel of life itself if you are a kingdom citizen. Paul says it as well in *2 Timothy 3:12*, he says: *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* And so we want to ask three

questions of our text this morning. Who are the persecuted that Jesus is speaking of? What does real persecution consist of? And why of all things should we be rejoicing at persecution? Who, what, and why?

Well, who are the persecuted? You know, there's a great deal of people in the entire world who are suffering persecution. There's the Falun Gong which is not even remotely Christian, it was a group started in China in the 1990's, subject to severe persecution. They've scattered all around the world, most notably settling in Orange County, New York. Some of you know they are our neighbors. There's the Rohingyas, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority with an estimated 800,000 living in Myanmar and millions elsewhere. I bet you never heard of them. I know I'd never heard of them before, but according to Religion News Service, most Rohingyas practice a blend of Sufi and Sunni Islam and the United Nations describes them as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. They're but one of hundreds and hundreds of groups. And the persecution that they suffer is real and the need to find a political solution to it is real as well. But these are not the people that Jesus is referring to. When he said: "*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you,*" he was not referring to Jews or Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus either or any other religious group who finds themselves suffering at the hands of

others. Persecution's not limited to Christians only. As Christians, we should always be concerned when any group is singled out for oppression, but persecution that is blessed by God, it's uniquely targeted at believers in Christ. Jesus actually said: "*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*" So the "who" of blessed persecution is limited to those who are suffering on account of their faith in Jesus Christ.

There's another limitation that Jesus makes in this very same passage. He says: "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.*" See, the persecution that Jesus describes as blessed, it's not only Christ-centered, it is limited to Christ as the source of the offense. I mean, there are people who present the gospel in such a way that the offensive part is not Christ, it's them. And I know that well because I was one of them for many, many years. You know, for many, many years I treated people as potential notches on my spiritual belt, you know, I thought it was my job to argue you into the kingdom and if you didn't buy it, I would belittle you as foolish for not seeing something that's as obvious as the nose on your face. And so when I received push back from that kind of behavior, I just naturally chalked it up to being persecuted for righteousness' sake. Well, in fact I was not being persecuted. The fact is I was a jerk and I was paying the price

for that. People were simply responding accordingly. You see, the task that each of us have been given by Christ is to present the gospel speaking the truth in love. I mean, there has to be both, there has to be truth and there has to be love as well. You know, if I walked up -- if I walked up to a complete stranger, and I said to him, "Hey, buddy, you're going to hell," and I told him that he was a sinner condemned already unless he had asked Jesus into his heart and I told him as I'm sticking tracts into his pocket that if he accepted Christ, his life was going to be infinitely better, and every single thing that I'm telling him is the truth, I'd only be speaking half of it though. I'd only be speaking the half of that truth that's supposed to be delivered. The love part would be missing. That would be setting him up most likely for -- not for his benefit but for mine. See, Jesus never approached the gospel that way and he was the only one who really ever had a right to do it that way. If the persecution you are suffering is truly blessed by God, that is persecution specifically identifying with Christ and it's persecution for the offense of his name rather than mine, and you know, this is a distinction that we really only have to make on this side of the world where persecution is almost unheard of. You know to be sure, if you were a wedding photographer or a baker and you're facing picketing and you're facing people who have active campaigns to try to put you out of business and fines of \$135,000, you would be feeling the sting of genuine persecution as

well. But that type of persecution is so new to our culture that the people who are involved in it are well publicized and we understand who they are. Not so for believers on the other side of the world. You see, largely they suffer in silence, they suffer in obscurity. It is the "who" of persecution that the *Voice of the Martyrs* has been so helpful to us with. You know, Gao Zhisheng and Asia Bibi and Saeed Abedini and his wife Naghmeh among many others, these are now people to us, these are real people who we've come to know and pray for, and so we can rejoice when Gao is released, and we can still suffer and ache over the fact that Saeed has been abandoned once again by what's taken place in these negotiations with Iran, and so we continue to pray for them. It's incredibly important that these names not go unnoticed by the church. Jesus expects nothing less than what God says in *Hebrews 13:3* where he says: *Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you are also in the body.* You know, the *Voice of the Martyrs* has a list, you can always -- you can go on the website, they have lists of persecuted believers. It would be a real blessing to you, it would be a blessing to your family if you could look up some individuals that maybe we haven't discussed, somebody that you could put on your refrigerator that you as a family could pray for. You can also sign up as I have for an email called Icommittopray.com, and they give up-to-the-minute prayer requests for those who have been -- who are actively caught

up in persecution. And you know, every time I see their heading in my in box, I see the title and it says "I commit to pray" and it reminds me again that if you do it, you do -- you commit. And so I pray for these people on a daily basis.

Now the second question is: What does real persecution consist of? Well, one very helpful resource for us has obviously been the *Voice of the Martyrs*. But there's another organization that's been around for about 60 years, it's called Open Doors. Some of you may have heard of it. Open Doors used to be associated with Brother Andrew, and what they did was they were chiefly involved in smuggling bibles into countries that wouldn't allow them. They've expanded to include being a watchdog for persecuted believers around the world, and they define Christian persecution this way. They say: "Christian persecution is any hostility experienced from the world as a result of one's identification as a Christian. From verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes and actions, Christians in areas with severe religious restrictions pay a heavy price for their faith. Beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation, rape, severe punishment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and employment, and even death are just a few examples of the persecution they experience on a daily basis." Open Doors compiles statistics, and they are stark. According to them, each month 322 Christians are killed for their

faith. Each month, 214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed, and 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians. They have also compiled an extensive list of the top fifty countries that are persecuting Christians and as a surprise to no one, ranked in order from one to ten, are North Korea, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran, Pakistan, Eritrea and Nigeria. And again, every night on Wednesday night at the prayer meeting, we pray specifically for people in these countries especially. So I invite you to participate in that. You know, we have a pretty good sense of who the persecuted are, thanks to these organizations, and we have a pretty good idea of what persecution is, thanks to them as well.

But the big question is the third question. And the third question is: Why should we be rejoicing at persecution? Well, the first reason is obvious, and that's because Jesus said to. Let me go back to our text. It says: *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* Well, let me give you some possible reasons why Jesus would say that, and the very first reason has to do with the grace of God. You know, there's an old

saying I've heard many, many times, I've said it many, many times: You don't get boiling oil grace until you get thrown into boiling oil. And when God says that his grace is sufficient, he also means that it's applied right there at the point of need. It's never applied at the point of an anticipated need. And God's grace for persecution is not at all given to us who are onlookers, who are rubbernecks who are not part of the immediate circumstance. I look at Saeed Abedini and I look at his life in an Iranian jail and all I can see is the harshness, the fear, the loneliness, the sense of abandonment. All of these things is what I assume he is feeling exclusively. And so I feel his pain. But I've never felt the grace that he's received. In other words, only those who are going through persecution really know the reality and the extent of the grace that God has given to them. But we can draw some conclusions from the typical responses to persecution that a great many believers have. And this is astounding to me. There's an almost universal response from the persecuted community that is summed up well by a statement from Open Doors. This is what they say. They say: "Persecuted Christians, no matter what country they are from, do not ask us to pray that persecution would end but rather ask us to pray that they stand strong through the persecution. They do not wish to be delivered from the persecution but rather ask us to pray that they would be able to overcome the trials that they are facing in a way that is honoring to God."

You know, Nik Ripken in his book *The Insanity of God* makes the exact same case. You know, he said persecuted believers never -- and he emphasized "never" ask for the persecution to stop. They only ask for the grace to withstand it and withstand it well. And after reading *The Insanity of God* which is still one of the top five books I think I've ever read, I think I understand why. You see, persecuted believers, they pay an enormous price but they uniformly think that they're getting the bargain. The best context I can put it in is from the movie *Rocky*, I'm sure most of you have seen that. If you remember, Rocky decides that he's going to start training for the heavyweight crown, and so his life drastically changes and it starts to go from very easy to very hard. And the movie shows him getting up, and he's up at 4:00 o'clock in the morning in the predawn darkness and it's freezing cold, he's out there running and running, his diet has changed drastically, he's no longer eating the junk that he used to eat, there's one scene showing him cracking a half dozen eggs into a glass and drinking the raw eggs, do you remember that? He borrows time at his friend's butcher shop and he's in a freezer for extended periods of time boxing with slabs of beef. From everything we can see from the outside, his life has taken this drastic and somewhat painful turn. In fact, so drastic and so painful we're tempted to help him find some relief. But you know, if you went up to Rocky and you said, "Don't worry, we can make this pain stop," he'd look at you

like you had two heads. I mean, he'd say, "This pain has a purpose. There's a reason why I'm doing this. I'm going for a crown." So it is with believers who are undergoing persecution. Listen to what Paul said in *1 Corinthians 9*. He said: *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.* You see, the persecuted church understands exactly what Paul was getting at here, because they, too, were going for a crown, except it's a crown that'll never fade. And every day, in spite of the hardship and the pain and the fear, they have a sense of Christ's presence that is more real and more immediate than anything you or I have ever dreamed of. They have a deep abiding sense of God's grace and approval, and along with that, constant reminders that he is there right alongside them through it with them no matter what it is. Now these folks might look at us and they see that we live in a place of great ease, great comfort and great wealth and that basically nobody in our society is ever really satisfied. And it is they who are wondering who really got the short end of the stick. I mean, they've got Christ, they've got the Holy Spirit, they've got the joy of the Lord and they have

profound hardship. They see us, they look at us and they say, okay, you got Hollywood, you've got iPads, you've got Wal-Mart and profound existential boredom. They think we're the ones who desperately need prayer, and they're right. I mean, there's a reason why the persecuted seldom ask that the persecution would stop. It's because the presence and the grace of God is so great a pleasure that even persecution can't take it away. So one cause for rejoicing is the presence of God on a level that only the persecuted really know. They understand what Christ was saying when he said: *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

Another cause for rejoicing and suffering in persecution has to do with this, a concept of bona fides. Say what the heck are bona fides? Well, bona fides, it's actually two different Latin words, it means "good faith." And what bona fides are, it's part of your record that backs up your claim to be who you are and what you do. Bona fides are what you would bring to a job or an interview that demonstrate you can back up your claims about yourself with something more than mere words. I mean, for example, if I was

competing for the job of a high school football coach and I demonstrated that I had a good knowledge of the game and I sort of explained myself well and I found out that I was competing with somebody else who actually was a player from the NFL, I would say, "Uh-oh, I'm in serious trouble, his bona fides are much better than mine." If I was competing for a job teaching French and I found out that the guy I was up against had lived in France for ten years, I'd say, "Uh-oh, his bona fides are much better than mine." You say, so what does that have to do with persecution? Well, I say this to underscore something that is pretty much meaningless here but incredibly meaningful in persecuted countries, because there in persecuted countries, suffering is your bona fide. Nik Ripken describes exactly how this worked when he recounted an exchange that took place at a secret house church conference in China. It took place between himself and a church leader who had suffered intense persecution. This is how he described this meeting. He said this, he said: "He ushered me around the room and made individual introductions before we sat down for dinner. One of the younger men in the room, perhaps twenty-five years old, was already anxious to set a time for an individual interview appointment. He and I set a time for later that night. After we were out of earshot from that young house-church leader, my host leaned toward me and whispered: 'He's going to be someone God can use in a powerful way someday. But you cannot trust what he says

now; he hasn't been to prison yet.' This was an attitude that I would encounter often in China. Personal trust and respect for spiritual maturity were often in direct proportion to the amount of suffering that had been endured for the faith. If someone had not yet experienced personal persecution and suffering, trust was withheld until that happened. What was perhaps most remarkable about that was the underlying assumption that the suffering and persecution would inevitably happen!" Jesus says we are to rejoice in suffering and for these Chinese brothers, part of that rejoicing is realizing that suffering is a genuine bona fide in persecution cultures. It's a way of proving your worthiness. And it's not so odd as you might think. In fact, if you go back to the book of Acts, you find Peter and the disciples doing the same thing. You find them rejoicing in their sufferings because they, too, were counted worthy of persecution. They, too, were arrested and they were ordered to remain silent and when they refused, they were arrested again and they got dragged before the Sanhedrin and what followed in Acts 5 is a speech by Gamaliel who was one of the temple leaders, and this is what he said. He says: *"Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."* His speech persuaded them. Then they called the apostles in and had

them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. They too had established their bona fides. You know, Jesus did say: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Now another cause for rejoicing in addition to grace, in addition to bona fides is the freedom that the persecuted have. They may think what? It seems to me the exact opposite. They lose their freedom. Well, those who are persecuted often times lose the freedom of ownership, of security and even personal liberty when they get thrown into jail, yet one abiding thought among the persecuted is that persecution itself brings freedom. I mean, Kris Kristofferson summed it up nicely when he sang: Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. And it has been said and I can readily acknowledge the truth of this, I bet you can as well, that every single thing that you and I own in a sense owns us. That's what Jesus was getting at when he said in *Matthew 6*: "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*" Having my stuff stripped away may seem like, may feel like a bitter pill to

take, but what if instead of bitterness you begin to realize that moths and vermin and thieves or any other thing that might keep you up at night can no longer reach or touch your stuff because it's now stored in the safest place there is, it's stored in heaven. And furthermore God says he will reward you greatly simply for being willing to store it there. God says this in *Hebrews 10:32*, he says: *Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.* You know, we look at that passage we think I'm looking at the musings of a mad man. I mean, you joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property? Well, you joyfully accepted it because you knew your confidence is going to be richly rewarded. You see, if you understand God's economy as essentially being completely the opposite of ours, then things begin to make sense. You know, God says he who humbles himself will be exalted, he who exalts himself will be humbled. He says the first shall be last; the last shall be first. God says in *Galatians 5:1*: *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a*

yoke of slavery. Well, would it not also follow that those who try to steal your freedom in Christ either by the law or against the law, while those whose freedom in Christ is threatened by them, well, when they fully understand the freedom that Christ has given them, they're by far the most free regardless of the circumstance they find themselves in.

Once again this is easier to illustrate than to explain. It might be tough to grasp what I'm saying here. And once again, Nik Ripken gives an excellent example of the type of freedom we're talking about that you find in persecution. When somebody's trying to take something away from you, they actually are giving you something. Listen to how Ripken describes how a Chinese church leader might respond to threats of persecution. This is a classic example of the freedom I'm talking about. He says this: "The security police regularly harass a believer who owns the property where a house-church meets. The police say, 'You have got to stop these meetings! If you do not stop these meetings, we will confiscate your house, and we will throw you out into the street.' Then the property owner will probably respond, 'Do you want my house? Do you want my farm? Well, if you do, then you need to talk to Jesus because I gave this property to him.' The security police will not know what to make of that answer. So they will say, 'We don't have any way to get to Jesus, but we can certainly get to you! When we

take your property, you and your family will have nowhere to live!' And the house-church believers will declare, 'Then we will be free to trust God for shelter as well as for our daily bread.' 'If you keep this up, we will beat you!' the persecutors will tell them. 'Then we will be free to trust Jesus for healing,' the believers will respond. 'And then we'll put you in prison,' the police will threaten. By now the believers' response is almost predictable: 'Then we will be free to preach the good news of Jesus to the captives, to set them free. We will be free to plant churches in prison.' 'If you try to do that, we will kill you!' the frustrated authorities will vow. And, with utter consistency, the house-church believers will reply, 'Then we will be free to go to heaven and be with Jesus forever.'" You see, the freedom of the persecuted extends beyond property; it extends to their own lives. And once you've given up the claim to your own life, you find you've discovered yet another extraordinary freedom, the freedom of life itself.

David Platt gave a memorable sermon at the T4G Conference in 2012. It was entitled: "Divine Sovereignty: The Fuel of Death-Defying Missions." His title was well chosen. He spoke of the freedom and the joy that accompanies giving up your claim to your own life, giving it up to the sovereignty of God. And he spoke of the example of a Romanian pastor named Josef Tson, and his example

illustrates the point better than anything I can say. Again, I need a lot of examples to get this across. This is what Pastor Tson recounted about a time he was being interrogated by six men, and this is what he said. He said: "During an early interrogation I had told an officer who was threatening to kill me, 'Sir, let me explain how I see this issue. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Here is how it works. You know that my sermons on tape have spread all over the country. If you kill me, those sermons will be sprinkled with my blood. Everyone will know I died for my preaching. And everyone who has a tape will pick it up and say, 'I'd better listen again to what this man preached, because he really meant it; he sealed it with his life.' So, sir, my sermons will speak ten times louder than before. I will actually rejoice in this supreme victory if you kill me.' After I said this, the interrogator sent me home. Another officer who was interrogating a pastor friend of mine told him, 'We know that Mr. Tson would love to be a martyr, but we are not that foolish to fulfill his wish.' I stopped to consider the meaning of that statement. I remembered how for many years, I had been afraid of dying. I had kept a low profile. Because I wanted badly to live, I had wasted my life in inactivity. But now that I had placed my life on the altar and decided I was ready to die for the Gospel, they were telling me they would not kill me! I could go wherever I wanted in the country and preach whatever I wanted, knowing I was

safe. As long as I tried to save my life, I was losing it. Now that I was willing to lose it, I found it." See, whether it's establishing your bona fides as someone genuinely worthy of the privilege of suffering for Christ or whether it's sensing God's grace or God's presence or God's freedom in ways you've never experienced before, it's a fact that suffering and persecution is often times a cause for rejoicing. But you know, most of this takes place on the other side of the world. We are just starting to get a tiny, tiny little taste of it here, but trust me, things are going to get a lot more interesting in the next few years.

And so the question is: How do we bring this eighth beatitude home to us in Port Jervis, New York? Well, first I want to remember an obvious fact. It's a fact that Nik Ripken points out in his book over and over again, and this is the fact. Persecution for a Christian is completely optional. Just think about this for a second. What Ripken is saying is you don't have to suffer even the tiniest trace of persecution for your faith if you don't want to. All you have to do is learn to keep your mouth shut. I mean, if you never breathe a word to anyone about Christ the Savior, you will never suffer persecution at all. Now, you may be haunted by scriptures like *Matthew 10* in which Jesus says: *"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will*

disown before my Father in heaven." But you'll never have to worry about any type of persecution because, like I said, it's strictly optional. Persecution for us is by invitation. I mean, maybe you're tempted to take another tact that has become very popular today. It is simply redefine who Jesus is. I mean, make him into an icon who wants nothing but tolerance and love. Well, if you do that, you just might find this scripture daunting as well. This is *Jude 1:4*, describing what I think is taking place right now. Jude says: *For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.* Like I said, life for us is about to get a lot more interesting.

So how do we prepare? First I think we have to understand what is this battle all about, and again I turn to Nik Ripken because he sums it up better than anything I could say. Let me just read to you his assessment of what this is all about. He says: "Satan's greatest desire is for the people of this planet to leave Jesus alone. Satan desires that we turn away from Jesus -- or that we never find him in the first place. If Satan cannot be successful at that, he desires to keep believers quiet, to diminish or silence our witness, and to stop us from bringing others to Christ. It is that simple. Once we understand the nature of this spiritual

battle and the strategy of the Enemy, we see clearly the role that believers have been called to play. We also see the importance of our choices regarding witness and faithfulness and obedience. At the beginning of every day, we choose. It is simply a matter of identification. Will we identify with believers in persecution -- or will we identify with their persecutors? We make that choice as we decide whether we will share Jesus with others or keep him to ourselves. We identify ourselves as believers by taking a stand with, and following the example of, those in persecution. Or we identify with their persecutors by not giving witness of Jesus to our family, our friends, and our enemies. Those who number themselves among the followers of Jesus -- but don't witness for him -- are actually siding with the Taliban, the brutal regime that rules North Korea, the secret police in communist China, and the Somalis and Saudi Arabias of the world. Believers who do not share their faith aid and abet Satan's ultimate goal of denying others access to Jesus. Our silence makes us accomplices."

So here's the big question: How do we conquer our silence? Well, there's a principle that Jesus spoke about and I think it applies right here, right now today. This is something he said in *Luke 16:10*, he said: "*One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in very little is also dishonest in much.*" See, here's the problem that we're facing.

Folks love to think, you know, when ISIS takes over, when they come marching into the church and they put a gun to my head and they say, "Deny Christ!" I will say, "No, I won't." But you and I know that's not going to happen, at least not here. See what's far more likely to happen here is my neighbor using Christ's name like a dishrag. That's the thing that's going to happen. It's going to be friends and acquaintances heaping scorn on the bible's positions on marriage. Maybe it's a Facebook post challenging the goodness of God himself. Well, the question is, on these little things, do we stay silent? Or by God's grace do we speak up? Listen, I know this may be the scariest thing you've ever done, but God's going to give you the grace and the wisdom to do it. Listen to what Jesus said in *Luke 21*, he said: *"But before all this" -- he's explaining to the disciples that things are going to get bad for them, he said: "But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict."* Now we may not be appearing before kings and governors but we can still count on God to walk us through. And the worst that any of us are likely to face in terms of persecution is mild embarrassment, maybe some rejection. I know

I've been there, I know I've felt that, it just moved me to pray more and to prepare more. To be sure, some of our brothers and sisters are facing real persecution right now, but they are the exception. And they need our support financially and prayer wise, but mostly the things that we are going to be challenged with today are not big things. They're going to be little things. I want you to consider those little things the training wheels that God has given you. He wants these wheels on our bikes so that we can get up and get running and get ready.

Ripken quoted another leader who had suffered greatly at the hands of the Communists who said this: "Don't ever give up in freedom what we would never have given up in persecution! That is our witness to the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ!" So I beg you to consider today while we're still basking in that freedom, while it still cost us almost nothing to witness the power of the resurrection of Christ. And so the question is: Are you willing to trust God in this? I find if you are willing to trust, he is willing to give you opportunity. Would you like to taste the pleasure that drives our brothers and sisters to risk everything? Would you like to experience the pleasure of God's grace, God's presence, and God's delight in what you're doing? Well, now's the time to start claiming that freedom every time God gives you that opportunity, no matter how small, no matter how insignificant.

Just remember, "One who is faithful in very little is also faithful in much." "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Let's pray.

Father, again, I've heard it said many times that the Chinese say: May you live in interesting times. We are living in interesting times. I just want to pray, Lord, as times get more and more interesting, that you would give each of us the courage, not to go out and become Ph.D.s and how to do apologetics but just to simply be willing to be a vessel for your Holy Spirit to flow through, to take those risks. God, give us the ability to take those risks while they're still small so that we can establish a pattern of being willing to take those risks as they get bigger and bigger. Give us the sense of your pleasure in this, of the freedom in this. Give us the opportunity to prove our bona fides, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.