

A Biblical Perspective on Church History, #2

Church History
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Well, we're very glad to see you with us this evening. We started last week a short series titled "A Biblical Perspective on Church History" and we said that we were doing that in anticipation of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation which will be celebrated on October 31st of this year, 500 ago when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenburg Church, Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany, I should say. And so we want to spend this time on Tuesdays both tonight and in the coming weeks just kind of examining why the Reformation is still necessary as we will examine the teaching of the Catholic Church in several key areas in the coming weeks on Tuesday evening and I'm very much looking forward to that. I was working on the material even today and just can't wait to get back to it, but for now what we wanted to do here last week and this week was simply this: simply to give us kind of a preliminary look at how we can have the right perspective on church history. This is just a modest guide to discernment as we read what I expect to be many news reports and articles and social media comments on the Reformation in the days to come.

When you read church history, one of the things that you will find is that many writers for various academic reasons, will not even attempt to try to distinguish the true church from the broader termed "church" that they are describing and that makes it difficult for those of us that are committed to Christ, committed to Scripture, to try to discern where Christ was really at work and where there were just impostors that were in play. And we're mindful of the fact that there is the visible church, those who outwardly name the name of Christ, and then there are those who are inwardly truly belonging to Christ, and those two are not equivalent; there is overlap perhaps, but they are not coextensive. And one of the things that I really want to impress upon you as we open here this evening is this: to remember that not everything that is done in the name of Christ is truly of him, is truly from him. The mere fact that something claimed to be a church in the past or claims to be a church now, doesn't mean that it is a vehicle and an avenue of truth and we must have that clear in our minds.

You'll remember what Jesus said in Matthew 7:22-23, he said, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'" The structure of the Greek language there is very emphatic on, "Lord, it's in your name, in your name, in your name that we did these things!" Over and over again, "In your name we did this! How can you

be sending us away?" And Jesus said, "I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" Now this is a very clear and fundamental statement from our Lord that there will be many things done in his name that are not truly from him; that there will be false miracles; there will be false teachers that will arise; false prophets will arise. We'll see that in a moment.

So as we read about church history, we have to keep that in mind. We have to realize that not every writer is approaching church history from a biblical worldview, not every writer, even those that are Christians necessarily if they're in academic circles, are trying to give a sharp delineation between the true and the false and so we have to have in our minds a perspective that allows us to discern this so that we would read church history with the right perspective.

Now last week as we were together, we gave you three keys that I'll just mention here, three things that you need to remember as the priority of Scripture, the principle of divine Providence and the preeminence of Christ. Those were the three things that we looked at last week. If you weren't here, there are probably cd copies of that on the table in the lobby that you can pick up for free. As I was thinking about it, there is a sense in which we're talking about this in the context of church history but really the principles that we're talking about burst the wine skins of what we are presenting here because really what we are discussing here, what we're really addressing is an applied Christian worldview.

Everything that we are discussing here is the prism through which you should think about everything. These principles should always be guiding your thinking, that we're applying them in particular to church history but this would be fitting for parents to teach their children about the way they should think about all of life. This is the way that we should think about the work of God in our own lives and so these things have application that go far beyond the biblical perspective on church history that we're trying to give here this evening.

But let's move on, having given those three, the priority of Scripture, the principle of Providence and the preeminence of Christ, what else should we critically keep in mind as we consider and look at the work of God through the history of the church? Well, point 4 I would say is this, and there is a certain method to the order here, but point 4 is this: you need to remember the principle of justification by faith. The principle of justification by faith and we will talk about this exclusively on the final Tuesday in October, Lord willing, as we bring a full capstone to these series of messages. So I'm just going to introduce it a little bit here this evening, the principle of justification by faith. How is it that a man is saved from his sin? What is it that makes a person a true Christian? And when you read church history, you need to always keep in mind an understanding of how a man is saved from sin and from God's judgment.

Now, applying our principle earlier of the priority of Scripture, we start there. We start with what does Scripture say about how a man is declared righteous in the sight of God? Not by what men have claimed throughout history but go clear back to the source, go all the way back to the Bible and see what the Bible says about it. Well, Scripture teaches us that a man finds his salvation by faith in Christ.

Galatians 2:16, you don't need to turn there, I'll just read it. Galatians 2:16 says,

16...a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.

In that one verse alone, Paul affirms salvation by faith three times, and denies that it comes from the works of a man's hands three times. Let's listen to it again, "a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ." You see it, right? Faith in Christ. Believed in Christ Jesus. Faith in Christ. He couldn't be any clearer or more emphatic. Paul only had to say it once for it to be true, he's saying it three times in two different ways, a total of six times in this one verse. He goes on and says, "not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified." Elsewhere the Bible says in Ephesians 2, it's "by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

So sometimes the question is put quite simply: when you die and stand at the gates of heaven, this is just kind of a metaphor, God says, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" What is your answer going to be? Well, most people on the street, if not all of them, are going to say, "Well, I've been a pretty good person. The good outweighs the bad. I wasn't as bad as Hitler. I wasn't as bad as President Trump," or for those of you that are Republicans, "I wasn't as bad as President Obama." I'll hit it on both sides, how's that, so I can't be accused of bias there. "I wasn't as bad as somebody else," and that is a reflection of somebody who has never understood the first thing about salvation; it's someone who is trusting in their behavior and their good works and saying that, "That God, is why you should let me into heaven." And Scripture says no. Scripture says that all of our works are like filthy rags. There is none righteous, no not one. There is no one who does good, there is not even one.

So we have to put that realm of thinking out of our minds completely and remember what Scripture says is that we are justified by faith in Christ and by faith in Christ alone, by faith alone in Christ alone. Alone. Alone. Alone. You see, there is a way, there's a sense in which for a man to say that he is a Christian, to say that truly, for that to be true, is for a man to make an open declaration that, "I am a ruined sinner. I am spiritually bankrupt. There is nothing in me that commends me to God. I appeal to Christ and Christ alone in order to find salvation before him in the forgiveness of my sins." That's what it means to be a Christian and so, you know, it's probably worth saying even in a room of faithful attenders like this, is to just ask yourself what is it that you are resting on, what is it that you are trusting in, what is your confidence that you will end up in heaven one day. To the extent that you think that there is anything good about you, you're missing the whole point of the Gospel and I plead with you to go back to Scripture and start all over again.

What is justification? Paul uses that word frequently. How can we define the term, the theological term "justification"? The Westminster Shorter Catechism says this and this is just kind of a theological discussion of what we've just talked about from these Scriptures. It says this, "Justification is an act of God's free grace wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone." I'll say that one more time, "Justification is an act of God's free grace wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone." Our sins, justification means that God pardons all of our sins and he pardons them on the basis of the work of Christ on the cross. His shed blood is the price that was paid to extinguish our debt that our sin has incurred with God. It pays for our debt in full, that's why Jesus could say on the cross, "It is finished!" The work was done.

Now, that's the forgiveness of our sins but God goes further in justification. Sometimes people will define justification and say, "It's just as if I had never sinned." That's not an adequate definition of what the fullness of justification means because justification not only means that God forgives our sins, but he credits to our account the full perfect righteousness of Christ so that we have an equal standing with God that Christ himself does. It's not only that our sins are erased, a positive imputation of righteousness takes place so that we have a perfect legal standing with God and that is the basis upon which we can be saved and we receive that not through rituals, not through baptism, not through anything that we do, we receive it by believing in the Gospel when it's presented to us, by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this was always the message of the church. If you'll look in the book of Acts with me, the book of Acts 4, I'll just give you a couple of texts in the earliest church, the New Testament church, to just hang your thoughts on. Acts 4 and in verse 4, Acts of course being the account of the early days of the church after the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, in Acts 4:4 it says,

4 But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.

It was a believing in response to the word, not anything that they did, not any works of the law. They believed and they were added to the church.

You'll remember in Acts 16:31, that Paul told the Philippian jailer who came in trembling and said, "What must I do to be saved?" What did Paul say to him?

31 ... "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household."

So we see as we look at the early account of the church, as we look at Scripture we see this principle of justification by faith being the means by which a man is reconciled to God from his sins. Martin Luther said, "If this article of justification stands, the church stands. If this article collapses, the church collapses." This is the means by which a man

truly enters into the church of Christ. This is the means by which a man enters into the family of God, by faith alone, in Christ alone, not by the works of his hands. In fact, we repent of our works, we repent of any claim to righteousness. We disown that. We forsake the world. We forsake our sins. We forsake any claim to ourselves and we appeal outside of ourselves to Christ and Christ alone as our only hope of heaven so that the first word out of your mouth in the hypothetical situation when you're standing before God, the first word out of your mouth, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" Christ. Christ died for me. Christ saved me. Christ's righteousness. And appeal to something outside of yourself and nothing inside, nothing that you've done and that is the perfect answer to the holiness and the righteousness of God.

Well, when we come to church history, staying in the context of what we've chosen as our topic this evening, what happens when you stray from, when you abandon the doctrine of justification by faith? Well, you could illustrate this in limitless ways. I've chosen to choose just one from church history, something that perhaps you've never heard this account before, something new to introduce you to. What happens when you abandon justification by faith? You see it illustrated in the pope known as Gregory the Great who held the papacy from 590-604 AD. He believed that the sacrifice of the Catholic Mass could hasten the time of a dead man's release from purgatory and here's what he said, here's a story that illustrates this, and just stick with me as we go through this, okay, because I'll have some comments on the other side.

Gregory was grieving over a monk who had passed away. The monk's name was Justus, and Gregory believed that Justus was suffering in purgatory and one church historian says this, Gregory described it this way, what was happening in Gregory's heart at the time. He said and I quote, "As I considered with deep anguish the penalty he was enduring, I thought of a way to relieve him of his suffering. I called Pretiosus, the prior, and said to him sadly, 'Justus has now been suffering the torments of fire for a long time and we must help him gain his release. Beginning today, offer the holy sacrifice for his soul for 30 consecutive days.' The prior obediently accepted the instructions and left." Continuing the quote, Gregory is still talking here. Well, I'm quoting Gregory but you know what I mean by that. Continuing Gregory, "Days passed and I lost count of them. Then one night Justus appeared to his brother, Copiosus, who asked him why he came and how he was. 'Up to this moment I was in misery,' Justus said, 'but now I am well because this morning I was admitted to communion!'" Copiosus hurried to tell the monks the good news," he had just seen Justus who was dead and they thought was in purgatory. So Copiosus and the monks, they "take the exact count of the days and they discovered that this was the 30th consecutive day on which Mass had been offered for him. Previous to this, Copiosus did not know that the brethren were offering Masses for Justus, nor did the brethren know that Copiosus had seen him in a vision. They realized that the vision and the completion of the 30 Masses occurred at one and the same time. They were now convinced that the brother who had died was freed from punishment through the sacrifice of the Mass."

Now, brothers and sisters in Christ, there is all kinds of ugly in that story, isn't there? Starting with Gregory saying, "I thought of a way to relieve him from his sufferings." He

has already abandoned the priority of Scripture that we talked about. This is something out of the cogitation and imagination of his own mind, no doubt stimulated and helped along by demons in the way. But there is the start of it and as you read that story, you have communication with the dead, which God condemns; you have demonic visions, Justus was not appearing to them, this was a demonic vision that they say when Justus was supposedly talking to them; you have the false doctrine of purgatory, the idea that you can suffer in flames for a while and then get out, you burn off the sins that Jesus didn't take care of; and the idea that the works of men could achieve forgiveness for the sins of others. This is theological insanity all because the doctrine of justification by faith was abandoned early on and men turned to their own devices as a way to deal with the guilt of sin. This is where it goes. There is no limit on what the inventions and the demonic inspired doctrines of men to wash away sin can come up with when you abandon the simplicity of the Gospel that men are saved by faith in Christ and faith alone, in Christ alone. This is where it goes.

Well beloved, two things: the doctrine of justification by faith protects us from deception and it also gives us the ability to read church history with a measure of discernment. Whatever else is said about the name of Jesus and Christ and all of these things that you find echoed in different teachers and institutions of church history, you make a beeline and say, "But what are they saying about how a man receives the forgiveness of sin?" And that will give you great clarity on your understanding of where the true march of Christ in church history is to be found.

So we say without fear of biblical contradiction and we say in opposition to the Catholic Church and every other works based system that has ever existed in the history of man, forgiveness of sin is not obtained through baptism, through performing deeds of penance, it is not purchased by ritual, it is not aided by Mary or angels or the saints or icons, to just throw in a reference to the Eastern Orthodox Church just for fun. No, salvation is received only as a gift through faith alone, in Christ alone, based on the Scriptures alone, and we must hold that principle clear in our mind. That is the article, as Luther said, that is the article by which the church stands or falls. So we never get tired of telling people that the works of your hands cannot save you. We never get tired of proclaiming the complete sufficiency of Christ to save a man. We never get tired of saying that his work on the cross finished the work of redemption. Redemption was accomplished when Christ died, not simply making salvation possible, it did the work. So we call people and we call you to faith alone, in Christ alone, for the salvation of your soul and that will guide us as we consider church history.

Now, that leads us naturally into a fifth point as we consider a biblical perspective on church history, the fifth point is this: the presence of false teachers. The presence of false teachers and, boy, there are just so many ways that I want to go with this and I only get to choose one. Beloved, let's put it this way: when it comes to being a biblical Christian, you do not have the option of being gullible. You do not have the luxury of just being so easy-going that whatever somebody says as long as they somewhere mention the name of Jesus you assume that everything's okay. Even within the realm of the professing evangelical church, you don't let your guard of discernment down and Scripture warns us

about that and Jesus warned us about that so many times that the flabby discernment of today's evangelical church is absolutely without excuse. Absolutely without excuse.

Go back to Matthew 7. We have to be aware of the presence of false teachers. Jesus said in Matthew 7:15, he said,

15 Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? 17 So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So then, you will know them by their fruits.

Jesus says, he tells his disciples, he's speaking to his disciples there on the Sermon on the Mount and he says as he's coming to an end, as he's coming to the conclusion of his great sermon, he says, "You must beware of false prophets. You must beware of false teachers. There will be those who come in my name who look like the real thing but inside they're ravenous wolves who will just eat you alive; who will lead you away from truth; who in the name of Christ, will teach false doctrine and lead people into hell while all the while these undiscerning careless people think that they're on the path to heaven." Jesus says, "Be aware. This is a problem as my kingdom is being built." And so he tells us to be discerning and to watch out for it.

Then gives us simple tests to help us discern what's true and what's not. He says you look at a man's life. A man comes to you in the name of Christ, look at what's coming out of his life. A man could be a grandson of Billy Graham but if his life is filled with adultery, he's a teacher that you should avoid. You can know them by their fruit. You don't have to necessarily sort out every doctrinal issue and confusing thing of their teaching, look at the fruit of their lives. Look at the fruit of their ministry and evaluate them so as to protect yourself from a false teacher leading you astray. There is no excuse. There is no excuse. Jesus has warned us in advance.

Well, we just take that principle that Jesus established in the first century and we say, "Okay, I realize that as I read about church history, I need to apply that to what I'm reading here today as well. And when I read the history of the Catholic Church and I see that the popes in the Middle Ages were known for their illegitimate children, known for their mistresses, known for their debauched lifestyles, I know I'm not looking at the real thing. I'm not looking at a man of God. I'm not looking at a man of Christ. Even if he takes the title Vicar of Christ onto himself, that can't be real. That cannot be real. That cannot be true." So all of a sudden you have just based on the trustworthy word of Jesus, you have a principle that helps you discern the movements of history.

Look over at 2 Peter 2. We looked at 1 John 4 last time. John said, "Test the spirits. Many false prophets have gone out into the world." Well, 2 Peter 2:1 is equally clear.

1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

Watch what Peter goes on to say.

2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; 3 and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

Peter warns us. The Apostle John warned us. Jesus warned us. There are others, other warnings that you could look to in the Scriptures but just in what we've said here tonight, a threefold call to discernment, a threefold warning, this is a serious issue in the church of Christ, that we have to discern the true from the false. We have to know doctrine in order to distinguish true from false teaching. We have to have a sense of what the outworking of the new birth is, that it results in a holiness of life and a man who has an unbroken pattern of sin in his life has no claim, no legitimate claim to be a Christian at all, let alone to be someone teaching about the way of God to men. That was a very long sentence with a complex structure but the point was simple: we have to be aware of these things. We can never let our guard down and our place of safety, the fence that God has built for us to stay safe in the fold as the sheep under the care of the Great Shepherd is found in the teaching of God's word. That is our place of safety. Not in the speculations of men. Not in trusting ourselves to the most popular preacher, the most popular teacher, not going by name recognition or anything like that. We again and again and again go back like the Bereans did and we search the Scriptures daily to see whether these things are so.

You see, beloved, again I'll tell you we're talking about a biblical perspective on church history and I think that's absolutely correct but we're talking about the way that you approach all of life. We're talking about the way that Christians should think at all times and not just individual Christians but the way a church should think. It's important for the local church to have a body of believers, to have leadership that is committed to truth and is committed to being on guard, is committed to looking out for threats. Those of you with military experience, can you imagine being in battle and not having advance scouts to be on the lookout for the work of the enemy? To just sit in camp and wait for whatever comes to come? It's nonsense. How much more so if we fight earthly battles with diligence and defense and protection, how much more so should the people of God dealing with eternal matters and eternal souls and the truth of God, how much more so should we be following Christ's command, "Beware. Be on the alert. There is going to be false teachers." How much more so should we be on guard?

And yet even as we say that, we say that not from a spirit of weakness and defensiveness and fear, we speak it from a position of strength because we realize that in the Scriptures we have everything that is necessary for the man of God to be adequate, equipped for every good work, 2 Timothy 3:16-17. So it's not that we're defenseless in the battle.

Christ has given us everything we need but he's also given us the responsibility to apply ourselves to truth and discernment lest we be led astray by – I'll remind you as Peter said – lest we be led astray by people who want to exploit you for their own purposes and for their own gain. So we remember the presence of false teachers as we read through church history.

Now, here's a very important point of application to this and I'm delighted to remind you of this again and again. Some people, some writers, some teachers, will love to quote the early church fathers. They'll quote men who lived in the 2nd or 3rd century and they'll quote them in support of their doctrinal teachings and that sounds impressive at a superficial level because, for most of us, we're not familiar with the writings of the early church fathers and so we're immediately kind of put back on our heels. "Oh, I didn't know that," because we teach the Bible, not church fathers so much. So it immediately puts you on your heels and there is an assumption, there is a presupposition that is woven into that quoting so often and the assumption is this – watch it, mark it, I'm trying to help you here – the assumption is this: that those who were closer in time to Christ were necessarily more reliable than our teachers today because we're further removed in time. You know, we're removed by 2,000 years, they were just 100 or 200 years away. They were close.

What should we think about that? What would Scripture teach us about that? Does closer chronological proximity to Christ make a teacher more reliable? That's right, not necessarily. In fact, you could actually say not at all. We should never make that assumption. Here is the conclusive text on that. If you will go to Galatians 2, I've pointed you to this in the past. Galatians 2, and this will come up again maybe next week. Galatians 2 and the point of what we're about to read, here in Galatians Paul is defending the doctrine of justification by faith and as part of his discussion as he writes to the churches in Galatia, he brings up the fact that Peter himself, the Apostle Peter had strayed on the point.

Look at chapter 2, verse 11. He says,

11 But when Cephas [which is another name for Peter. You can see that in John 1:42] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. 13 The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. [And in verse 14 Paul says] 14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

The Apostle Paul is rebuking Peter and he is writing – mark it – he is writing, he is telling the account of that prior rebuke of Peter, writing to the Galatians now, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Paul writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit tells

the account of where he rebuked another apostle for the fact that they were straying from the Gospel in their conduct. Think about what that means. I mean, the implications of that go everywhere. But beloved, here's all I want you to see for that for tonight: if Peter could err when he was not writing Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, if Peter could err, how much more were the men after the apostolic era also subject to error?

You see, Peter was one of the apostles and Paul had found occasion to rebuke him. You cannot assume that chronological proximity guarantees anything about truth. So as you read church history, we do not, as you and I read church history, we do not naively assume that everything the early church fathers said was biblical at all. We read what they say, we profit from it, we get an idea of what was going on in the early church, but we realize that these men were not writers of Scripture, these men were interpreters and subject to fallibility just like anyone else so that the quotation of an early church father is interesting, you can go wherever you want to go with that, in one sense, but at the end of the day, you say, "Okay, okay, that's great. I'm so glad you've been able to read all that history. That's very impressive. You've read things I haven't read. Good for you. Impressive. But now let's ask the question that matters: what does the Bible say? What does Scripture say?" And you go back and you go back to Scripture and you compare what's being said with Scripture, not intimidated by the fact that someone is quoting ancient men that you've never heard of before. Scripture is the key. Scripture has the priority and we realize that false teachers were always going to be a problem, they were a problem from the earliest days of the church.

So we come back to the point that I come to again and again when I stand in this pulpit and teach and I never get tired of alluding to: do you see once more, do you see once more how sweet and how eternally infinitely precious this book is? This is the key to discerning truth and error. This is the revelation of God that tells us how our sins can be forgiven. This is the one place and the one place alone where we get sure testimony to God's work in salvation. There is no place else. There is no other place where we can repose our trust than what's revealed to us in Scripture. That's why God gave it to us. And down the road we'll talk about how that excludes the idea of people saying, "Oh, God spoke to me," and extrabiblical revelation and, "Oh, Jesus was telling me just today that I ought to park my car in the south lot." A true understanding, a true doctrine of Scripture gives you discernment against false teachers and it closes the door to any further revelation as well.

Well, those are five of our six points: the priority of Scripture; the principle of Providence; the preeminence of Christ; the principle of justification by faith; the presence of false teachers. One more to help us as we trace the hand of God throughout church history. We should remember this, point 6: the persecution of true believers. The persecution of true believers. We should expect as we read church history to find the true church suffering persecution because that's exactly what Jesus said would happen.

Look over at the Gospel of John 15, if you would. John 15:18-21. Jesus said,

18 If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. 21 But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me.

So people who do not truly know Christ persecute the ones who truly do. Jesus says, "This is going to be a principle of life in my church. This is a principle of life in the kingdom." The Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12 that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." And so we realize from that simple seminal statement of our Lord, that starting statement of our Lord just before his crucifixion, that we expect to see true believers suffering persecution as God's plan for his people unfolds over time. Christ suffered. The 12 apostles were all martyred with the exception of John who was exiled to the island of Patmos. The church in the first three centuries suffered 10 waves of persecution that you can read about in any history book that covers the area. So we find and we anticipate to see persecution even in the most violent, unfair, drastic forms taking place against the people of God and that was manifested even in the pages of Scripture.

Look over at Acts 7, if you would. Acts 7. You'll recall that Stephen had preached against the Jews in a brilliant sermon in Acts 7 and the Jews didn't like what he had to say. In fact, I'd like to remind you that when we read things like this, to remember that this was a brother in Christ that we're talking about. This was a man of like human flesh and like inclinations as ours and he is courageously standing alone preaching to these leading Jews and he brings up the issue of persecution himself. In verse 51 he said,

51 You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.

And what happened to Stephen as he boldly and courageously spoke the truth? Verse 54, what did his audience do?

54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. 55 But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man

named Saul. 59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

In other words, he died and he was ushered into the presence of the Lord that he had just seen. This is to be expected. Stephen was the first martyr of the church. Stephen was illustrating the truth of what Jesus said, "They hated me. They're going to hate you. They persecuted me, they'll persecute you." They killed Christ, sometimes they'll kill his followers in an effort to silence them.

Look over at Acts 12, again remembering we're reading the account of the earliest church, the New Testament church. In Acts 12:1,

1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. 2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword.

One more in Acts 16:22. It's not always death. It comes in other forms as well. Skipping the context of the fuller story, verse 22,

22 The crowd rose up together against [Paul and Silas], and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. 23 When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; 24 and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Beaten. Imprisoned. Completely unjustly treated for the name of Christ. And Jesus said, you know, and we think – I made this point long ago in the Sermon on the Mount but I want you to turn back to Matthew 5. This is a sign of shame. This is something we should be ashamed of, something that we should be afraid of. What is Christ's perspective? What is Christ's word to us as we read about the persecution of true believers? Don't ever forget, beloved, don't ever forget when your words are being twisted for the sake of Christ, don't ever forget if you're suffering financial loss or a broken relationship for the sake of Christ, don't ever forget when we read accounts even today of people wanting to take a principle of righteousness and they get sued and they lose their livelihood because they took a stand for Christ as they understood it, when you see it happening to yourself, when you see it happening to others, in time perhaps we'll see it happening to us here at Truth Community, don't ever forget, don't ever lose sight of the fact that Christ said that persecution, suffering persecution for his sake is actually a blessing.

Matthew 5:10, Jesus said and, again, you just come back to the utter sweetness of our Lord, his grace, his mercy, his unquenchable, undeniable love for us, his infinite goodness to his own. In verse 10 he says,

10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus says, "When this comes upon you, understand that you are a privileged recipient of divine favor from the hand of God." God has graciously given you the privilege of walking the same path that your Lord himself has trod; that you are given the privilege of walking the same path that the prophets of old who were beaten and imprisoned and killed simply for being faithful to the word of God. Even more, we realize and in our relatively comparatively peaceful society, realizing that our suffering comes down to insults and maybe a little bit of money, very few of us ever suffering to the point of shedding blood, very few of us even knowing those who have, and we realize how lightly the Lord has, how light the burden is of persecution that the Lord has assigned to us and we realize that even in that, the Lord said, "Blessed are you when men insult you, say all kinds of things, and just flat-out lie about you." He says, "Don't you be discouraged. You rejoice. You realize that God has given you a blessing of identifying with Christ and the outcome for you will be the kingdom of heaven." Keep it all in perspective.

So as you read the account of the early church, I'll wrap up with this: in the early church, those early three centuries, what was the great cause of persecution for those early Christians? It was their refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord. To the Romans from the Roman perspective, from the Roman mindset, the confession that Caesar is Lord guaranteed loyalty to the Empire and it was a means of enforcing peace and unity and ensuring a stable society. If everybody is making the same confession, then everybody's on the same page. To Romans, that's how they viewed it. To the Christians, it was nothing but idolatry. They could not confess that.

The historian, Bruce Shelley, writes this and I quote, he says, "Christian worship and Caesar worship met head on. The one thing that no Christian would ever say was, 'Caesar is Lord.' Jesus Christ and he alone was Lord. To the Roman, the Christian seemed utterly intolerant and insanely stubborn, worse, he was a self-confessed disloyal citizen. Had the Christian been willing to burn that pinch of incense and to say formally, 'Caesar is Lord,' they could have gone on worshiping Christ to their heart's content but the Christians would not compromise. That is why Rome regarded them as a band of potential revolutionaries threatening the very existence of the Empire." Three simple words, just say, "Caesar is Lord." You don't even have to mean it and you can go free. But the redeemed heart, the heart that knows Christ truly, the heart that's been born again, the heart that understands that it owes its whole eternal destiny to this gracious one who shed his blood for them can never say that. Can never betray that.

And here's the point, beloved: what is the extent of the Christian commitment to that confession that Jesus Christ is Lord? What is the price that we put on that confession? Well, push come to shove, push us all the way to the wall, we'll pay for it with blood.

After all, Christ paid for us with blood. Push us all the way, we'll trust him all the way even to death before we'll give the title "Lord" to anyone else. That's the pattern that the early Christians set for us. That's the rich heritage that we have as believers here today.

So what do we say about this? These are six things that we can read church history with some discernment. And beloved, just as a church, just as brothers and sisters joined together in a common cause for Christ, let's realize that we see something that gives us a template, a pattern, an example for ourselves today. We realize, beloved, we realize that biblical standards and a biblical philosophy of ministry will bring us opposition, it will bring us criticism. We may not enjoy that, I know I don't like it, but that's not the issue. The discomfort, the different things that come, that's not the issue. We understand that Christ is worthy of this; that Christ is worthy of our loyalty, worthy of our devotion; and that we're content to receive insults, we're content to receive persecution, yea, we're willing to rejoice in it when it comes when we're thinking clearly because we realize this is the mark of the true church opposition from the world.

So we accept the fact that biblical doctrine and biblical philosophy of ministry will bring us opposition and criticism. We're undeterred. We say, "That's just the cost of discipleship." We bear it joyfully for Christ and we pray for those who oppose us if perhaps God would still save them from sin. The prayer on Stephen's lips as the rocks were raining down on his head, "God, don't hold this sin against them." One of the martyrs in the Reformation said, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." We're not angry about this. We're not bitter. We're not retaliating but we're not going to move either. We can't move. We have no choice.

So we may not enjoy opposition but we're undeterred. We're unafraid. We don't move. We don't compromise. We don't back off those things that are fundamental to our faith. And all the while, all the while, beloved, whether we're talking corporately or whether we're talking you in the midst of the difficult relationships that your commitment to Christ has created, if you abandon Christ, all of those human relationship problems could go straight away and you say, "I can't do that." Maybe you don't even think about it in your heart but you just realize, "I can't do that. This is about Christ, not about me."

Well, when we walk into those valleys, when we walk into those situations even when they are chronic over years in life as some of you know, as I myself do, we draw our comfort from the fact that our eternal souls are in the hands of a faithful Lord who loved us and gave himself up for us and we rest in Christ and in Christ alone. And if there's no comfort from men, then all the more sweet is the comfort that we receive from the Holy Spirit who indwells us and affirms in our mind and in our understanding and elevates our sense of assurance, "Yes, you truly are one of mine," the Spirit says and speaks to your heart. "You truly do belong to Christ," and to belong to Christ is greater than all the riches in the world; to have the approval of Christ is better than to have the approval of men. And it is in that spirit that we find our courage, that we find the fearless nature that led other Christians to shed their blood for Christ. It is in that assurance that gives us the courage to suffer much lesser persecution in our day.

Our Christ suffered for us, our brethren before us suffered, and do you know what? We look at this world, on the one hand we look at these, metaphorically speaking, you look at these other despised and forsaken ones on the left, it's no choice, is it? This is not difficult. We walk over and we take our place with them and we prefer our fellowship with them than the approval of those who oppose us. This is Christianity 101. We gladly take our place beside our Christ, beside those who suffered for the sake of his name, always remembering that the one who saved us will always keep us in his hand until we are safe with him in glory.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Lord, we honor you and we thank you for the great privilege that is ours. Father, we recognize that persecution may come our way, that people may insult us, people may steal from us, people may lie about us all for the sake of Christ and, Father, we count that as nothing compared to the infinitely precious blood that was spilled to save our souls. So we gladly identify with you, we gladly identify with your people and, Father, our supreme prayer as we close this evening is that you would just so work in our hearts as to keep us right there. Keep us ever near the cross. Help us to be faithful, Father. And we thank you for the joy that you give. We thank you for the certainty that what you have begun in us, you will complete until the day of Christ Jesus, and one day we will enter safely into your heavenly kingdom because, Father, you will, you will, you will, you will deliver us from every evil deed and bring us safely into your kingdom.

So Father, we just pray that as we move forward in life, as we move forward from this place this evening, that you would just help us to walk so that when the end comes for us, Father, whether it's soon or far away, that we might be able to rightly say with the Apostle Paul, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race." Help us to that end, Father, and let us never be ashamed of the Gospel, to never be ashamed of Christ because we know in whom we have believed and we're convinced that he is able to keep us and keep that which we have entrusted to him until that great and final day. In the name of our Lord Jesus we pray. Amen.

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