

At this point in Acts, Paul is on his second missionary journey. Silas has been with him from the beginning. Along the way they picked up Timothy and Luke. The missionary team could not find success in their evangelistic efforts until Paul received a vision to go to Macedonia. Leaving the Asian continent, they sailed to Europe, where they made their way to Philippi.

The first church that Paul helped to establish in Europe was in Philippi. Its founding member was a woman named Lydia, who was instrumental in leading her whole household to the Lord. She opened her home to the missionaries, and gave them financial support. Paul was back in his element. As he and the others shared the gospel, people surrendered their life in faith. The church began to grow and flourish, but as we see in our passage this evening, the devil would not allow the movement of God to go unchallenged.

This spiritual dynamic is real in the church today. We should not live in fear, but mature Christians come to expect that when everything is going well, that the devil will attack where he believes we are the weakest. He tries to catch us off guard. Satan is sneaky, wicked, dishonest, and he does not care about who gets hurt. All he cares about is who he can use to advance his agenda, which is to oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If there is any good news in all of this, it is that while the devil is not all-powerful, and he is not very original. He uses the same old tricks, over and over. God has placed limits on his power, and we have to remember that greater is He that is in us, than he that is in the world. In our passage of scripture this evening, we get a picture of some of the spiritual dynamics that we may have to face as we take our stand on the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Please read along with me, Acts 16:16-24.

The opening verse in our passage reminds us that there was no significant Jewish presence in Philippi. This was a thoroughly pagan city, so over time we gain discernment about his schemes. There were no Jewish synagogues, and the newly formed church continued to meet down by the river at the place of prayer. As they were going to the place of prayer, the missionaries met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination.

In mythology, the python represented the embodiment of the Greek god Apollo, and anyone who had the python spirit could tell the future. The spirit of a false god, which empowered her to tell the future, possessed this slave girl. We would call this a demonic possession today. In our culture, it has become politically incorrect to speak of demonic possession, but it is very real. It is more comfortable for us to talk about the mentally ill. I am not saying that every person with a mental illness is possessed, but a lot of people discount the spiritual aspects that affect a person's behavior. Some who exhibit traits that make them appear to be demonically possessed need a doctor's help, but those who have a demon have no hope apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

The bible does not give us sufficient information to say how this slave girl became demon possessed, but at some point in her life she opened herself up to demonic influence. When a person opens that spiritual door, he or she gives the demonic spirits permission to take hold of their life and circumstances. It begins with a temptation, accompanied with the false promise of satisfaction. In most situations, the person affected has an awareness that they are doing something that they know they should not do, but they choose to yield to temptation, and ignore the consequences. The longer he or she persists without repentance, the more deeply the demons become entrenched.

When dealing with the spiritual realm, we cannot save ourselves with semantics, or parsing our words, as if we can make an argument to justify our sin. The bible teaches that the devil and the Holy Spirit cannot possess a person at the same time. Using this idea, people confessing to be Christians sometimes try to rationalize godlessness, saying that Jesus blood will cover their sin, so they give themselves permission to yield to temptation. This is dangerous because Christians are not immune to demonic influence. We only have to be honest with ourselves before God to know this. I think that the devil takes great joy in being able to use professing Christians to advance godlessness in the world. If he can cause one of us fall, it is easier for him to destroy others who might look up to us.

We rationalize the difference between demonic influence and demonic possession as a matter of degrees. When temptation comes, sometimes-professing Christians rationalize that they can get away with something, because they have trusted Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. When the devil gets a foothold, it becomes increasingly difficult to have a living, active, personal relationship with the Lord. He or she then wonders how far they can push the limits before the consequences catch up with them. Before long, the influence of Christ in his or her life has little or not effect, and the demonic forces take over.

I am not saying that at this point a person loses their salvation, but if a person is able to persist in sin, without the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and without bowing their knee to the Lord Jesus Christ, it may be an indication that their professed faith was in vain, and that they were never really born again. We cannot judge others, but there is a judge who does not respect semantics, and He knows who truly belongs to Him.

Notice also that the devil exerts his influence, not only on the person possessed, but also upon the other people associated with that person. This girl had owners who were making a tidy sum of money off of the power of the demonic realm. By using her in this way, they opened themselves up to the spiritual forces of evil. The bible does not say that money is evil, but it does say the love of money is the root of all evil.

There is nothing wrong with being blessed by God with material wealth. When used responsibly, and with godliness, the Lord often uses the generosity of the wealthy to advance His purposes. Mature Christians understand the blessings that come through the discipline of tithing. God blesses the church when its members have their hearts right in worshiping the Lord with their tithes and offerings. But the lure of money promotes all sorts of greed, and covetness, and if not resisted, it gives the devil a foothold.

The love of money, and its associated power, is why we have corruption in government. In the upcoming election, we have two of the wealthiest people in America, vying for control over the nation's economy, which gives them influence, and power, over the economies of the world. Donald Trump has made his fortune taking advantage of every law and loophole that would allow him to build his economic empire, often at the expense of others. Hillary Clinton, in addition to personal wealth, has control over the Clinton foundation, which has been built up by large donations, from people seeking political favors. I cannot fully trust either candidate, but I read something on the Fox News web site last week that I found very interesting.

As of last week, Hillary Clinton has received \$48 million from hedge fund managers, for her campaign, and Donald Trump has received \$19,000. The inequity in giving is highlighted by Hillary Clinton's stump speech where she blames Wall Street for the nation's economic woes, while at the same time; Wall Street, as a block, is one of her biggest supporters. I cannot believe that the hedge fund managers would give that much money to one candidate, if they did not believe that they would profit in some way if she were elected.

This demon-possessed girl followed the missionaries around proclaiming, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” What she said was absolutely true. The bible says that she did this for many days, so we wonder what was the problem? Her presence greatly annoyed Paul. It wasn’t what she said, but how she said it. Her affirmation was actually a hindrance to the spread of the gospel.

Everybody knew that something wasn’t normal about this girl. Often the demon-possessed speak with an unnatural voice, move about demonstratively, or speak in mocking tones. The fact she was the source of this information probably made people suspicious or afraid of Paul, his companions, and the message of the gospel. Those influenced by the demonic realm sometimes say things that are true, but they never promote the gospel in a positive way. Every lie has to contain a partial truth in order for people to believe it.

After many days of putting up with her, Paul finally had enough. He commanded that the evil spirit come out of her. He performed an exorcism, and she returned to her right mind. You would think that this would be a time of great rejoicing, and praising God, but the slave’s owners only saw that it was going to affect how much money they could put in their pockets.

They seized Paul and Silas, took them before the magistrates, and accused them. “These men are Jews,” was the first thing that came out of their mouths. Apparently Jews were not welcome in Philippi. This would explain why there was no synagogue in this large city. Anti-Semitism was as alive back then as it is today.

Hatred of the Jews happens for many reasons. We cannot justify bigotry, but prejudice comes from our differences, and all parties are culpable. Sometimes it is because of jealousy. Jewish people in the United States often network with each other. They run successful businesses, but they are loyal to only do business with other Jews, whenever possible. They are somewhat exclusive in their culture. Conservative Jews do not recognize marriages between Jews and Gentiles. Sometimes they are not very nice to gentiles. Much of the resentment between Jews and Arabs has been built in over generations. When you truly believe that you are among God’s chosen people, and exclude all those who do not fit your mold, it promotes prejudice. At this point, the Romans and most of the world made no distinction between Christians and Jews, and what ever prejudice the Philippians had for the Jews, they immediately extended to the missionaries.

The accusers went on to say that these men were disturbing the city, and advocating that people break Roman law. The only disruption we know of from scripture is that Paul’s accusers lost their source of income when Paul delivered a demon-possessed girl. But the accusation of promoting unlawful Roman practices is what got them into trouble. According to Roman law, people were free to exercise their religious practices, but they were not allowed to try to proselytize Roman citizens. Our missionaries were winning people to Christ by sharing their faith and personal testimonies, and they were encouraging new converts to share their faith as well. In fact the whole purpose of their missionary efforts was to lead people to saving faith in Jesus Christ, and that was against the law. Christians who never share their faith today will probably face little opposition. It’s when we take bold stands for the Lord and the Word of God that we get into trouble.

This is why Paul, and the whole church, for the first 300 years, faced Roman opposition. When the crowd heard that these men were Jews, they joined in attacking them. Remember, Rome had two basic objectives. Keep the tax revenues coming in, and in order to insure the steady flow of income, they kept peace in the empire, no matter what.

Because of the strong military presence in Philippi, we can be sure that Paul and Silas' punishment was swift and severe. Paul mentions this experience in 2 Corinthians 11. The Romans beat them, put them in the most secure area of their jail, where they were chained and shackled. The jailor was given strict orders about keeping them under lock and key.

As we reflect on this event, I want you to see that wherever the gospel advances, the devil is going to do whatever he can to raise up opposition. In the first half of the book of Acts, that opposition came primarily from the Jews. In the second half the opposition comes from Jews and gentiles.

Today we see increasing opposition to our faith from factions within our own government. There is opposition from Islam and other cult religions. We face opposition from the very people we try to reach with the love of Christ. Expect opposition, it has always been this way. But also understand that when God calls us and uses us for His purposes, great things can happen, as we will see in our passage next time.

Once the missionaries endured suffering for Christ, God honored their efforts. God delivered them from the persecution. People surrendered their lives in faith. The church grew and became a model for other congregations. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke were able to continue to be used of God to spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

As we continue to be faithful in our witness, and we face opposition from the world, let us rest in the hope that is ours. Our Lord is sovereign over all. Through faith we give our lives to Him, so let us trust Him with whatever happens in the future, as we do His will.