

Last Sunday Evening, as a church family, we watched *God Is Not Dead 2*. The writers of the script raised issues that are of concern to Christians in America today. There has always been opposition to the gospel, as we will see in our passage of scripture this evening. Today, however, professing Christians are under increasing pressure from our government, and certain special interest groups within our society.

In the movie, a student asked a teacher, in the public school system, a direct question about Jesus Christ. The teacher answered the question, and quoted scripture to give authority to her answer. The outrage of the school board, and the ACLU lawsuit that followed, threatened her job, her life's savings, and her way of life. Those opposing the gospel wanted to prohibit anyone from talking about Jesus, quoting scripture, or sharing his or her faith in the public schools, or anywhere else.

In a sub-plot, there was an effort to censor pastors, and to exercise control over what they preached. I thought it interesting that all of the charges brought against this woman, and the pastors, had nothing to do with law. It was a matter of policies and procedures, rules that were introduced by special interest groups, and enforced as if they were law.

I fear that there is a great number of Christians who truly believe that these things could never happen in the United States. Many of them are not aware that these things are already happening in China, and other places in the world. The truth is that the demonic realm is hard at work in our culture to suppress the freedoms protected by the constitution, in order to stamp out the spread of the gospel, and to conform the population into a godless, submissive, collective.

The issue of trans-gender rights, and the inappropriate use of bathrooms and showers, in our public schools, is just one example of liberal, progressive, ideals being forced upon our people without due process of law. The constant assault on home, family, and marriage is transforming America into something never imagined by our founding fathers.

What if the courts declared that no one could speak about Jesus in the public arena, would we defy the law, even if it cost us everything we have? What if the government demanded that they be able to review every sermon that pastors preach, in order to make sure that they did not say anything not approved by the government, would we stand against their actions? Personally, I want people to read my sermons. You can read the notes from every sermon I've preached over the last year at gregrobards.com for free. If you want to go back farther than that, all of my sermons, over the last five years, are archived in book form, and can be purchased for \$.99, per book, in digital format. I have nothing to hide in what I have preached. It is the truth of God's word. If the government tries to censor me, I will continue to preach the word in defiance of their godless decrees, even if I have to go underground.

Throughout Acts, we see a constant, struggle between the advance of the gospel, and the opposition that comes from those who choose to reject the love Christ, which the gospel extends to every person. Last time we saw this struggle during the missionaries' efforts in Thessalonica. In tonight's passage we see the same dynamics in the city of Berea, but with a twist. Please read along with me, Acts 17:10-15.

Paul and Silas had a successful ministry in Thessalonica. Many people gave their life to Christ, and they formed a church in that city. Jews and Gentiles alike were born again, sealed by the Spirit, and became a powerful witness to the people in their city. But, things got too hot for Paul and Silas to stay. As we saw in other cities, the Jews, who did not accept Christ, became

jealous of the missionaries, and set out to destroy them, and their ministries. They stirred up ungodly people, formed a mob, and set out to have Paul and Silas arrested, or worse.

Under the cloak of darkness, the brothers helped Paul and Silas escape town. Notice that Timothy is not mentioned. We learn of Timothy's presence in verse 14, so he either traveled with Paul and Silas to Berea, or he came some time later. Luke, the writer of Acts, was still in Philippi at this time.

Since Paul and Silas are the principle subjects, and the center of the action, it would be appropriate for Luke not to mention Timothy every time, because he served as a helper to the others. His role was still important, and we know that God used Timothy in great ways. He just wasn't in the center of everyone's attention like Paul and Silas.

This serves to remind us that we don't have to be the center of attention in order to serve God, and to be in the center of His will. I will use Brother Carl and myself as an example. God has worked in Brother Carl's life and ministry to give him a much broader sphere of ministry than what I have. I praise God for the potential of how he might use Brother Carl in ways that may be impossible for me, but I am not jealous of my brother, I am happy for him, but I have to focus on what God has for me to do.

I can't be Brother Carl; I have to be me. In fact, I don't want to be Brother Carl. I would go nuts trying to do all of the things he has to do. You can't be Brother Carl. You can't be Brother Greg. All any of us can do is to be true to ourselves, and submit ourselves to the revealed will of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let's don't worry about trying to impress others, let's focus on trying to impress Jesus, by being all that He desires for us to be.

The missionaries' next stop was Berea. True to form, when they arrived, they went first to a Jewish synagogue. The bible says that the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians. They received the gospel message with eagerness, and daily searched the scriptures to discover the truth for themselves.

We call our men's Monday night bible study group, the Bereans. That name comes from this passage of scripture. The Bereans, in Acts, are a model for the church today. When we sit under the preaching and teaching of God's word, or we hear some new philosophy in the world, we are open to the truth, but we verify all proclaimed truth by searching the scriptures and applying the principles of God's word. If it matches what we find in the bible, we accept it as truth. If it does not align with scripture, we reject it.

In our witnessing encounters today, people who are open to the truth are much easier to reach, than people who have hardened hearts, and are unwilling to listen to the gospel message. God has to go before us in order for our witness to have the desired outcome. We lift our prayers up to Him. He prepares people's hearts. We share the gospel, but Jesus does the saving. The people, who are open to the truth, and willing to search the scriptures, are not the ones who will oppose us, and our witness. It is those who have already hardened their hearts against the Lord that will give us the most trouble.

As in the other cities, a broad group of Jews and Gentiles received Christ as a result of the missionaries' efforts. The difference is that the opposition did not come from the Jews in the local synagogue, but when the Jews from Thessalonica found out the Paul and Silas were in Berea, they traveled there to persecute them.

This is the same thing that happened to Paul on his first missionary journey, when the Iconium Jews tracked down Paul, and Barnabas, in the remote areas of Galatia. It was no small feat for the Thessalonians to travel 45 miles, whether on foot, or horseback, just to make trouble for the missionaries. This gives us insight to the hatred of the Jews towards Paul and Silas, and

the fervor of their efforts to discredit them. Just as they stirred up a crowd of opposition in their own city, they now stirred up a crowd of opposition among the Bereans.

I will turn 65 in November. As I look back upon my life I see a stark contrast in our culture today, as compared to the years of my youth. While I was growing up, even non-believers held Christians in high regard. There was an overarching appreciation of the morality among believers. The term Christian was a word of honor and respect. Our national attitude was one of pride in being called a Christian nation. We were proud to proclaim in our pledge of allegiance that we were one nation under God, and with every dollar spent, declare that in God we trust.

All of that began to change in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. With each passing decade, our nation became less and less Christian, and more and more secular. Our values as a nation changed, and continue to change today. The bible went from being the cherished word of God to being banned in our public schools. The gift of life was exchanged for the declared right to dispose of innocent souls for the sake of convenience, and to cover sin. Our government increased taxes so that they could return a portion of the money to our public schools. It was not for the benefit of the students, but so that the government could have power and control over the curriculum, and the manner in which teachers shape our children's minds. With the advance in technology, and instant information and news exchange, our minds have been overwhelmed, and we are constantly in danger of being brainwashed to accept the lie as the truth, and to cast the truth to the ground.

The rights guaranteed by our constitution have been reinterpreted to rob citizens of their liberty, and to enforce godlessness never intended by the founding fathers. There are far too many people today who claim the name Christian without showing any evidence of being born again. More and more Christians are looked down upon by people in our culture. Now more than ever, people will hate us when we stand upon our faith in Jesus Christ and the principles of God's word. As the nation has spiraled downward in dissipation, and immorality, during the first 65 years of my life, I believe things will only get worse, right up to the Lord's return.

But, that doesn't mean that we give up. Whenever opposition comes we press on, trusting in the Lord, and drawing our strength from Him. The resistance from the world helps us to build spiritual muscle. The greater the opposition, the starker the contrast from the world when Christians take their stand, and the more the world will see our convictions, and take notice.

When the brothers in the newly formed church saw that Paul was in danger, they whisk him away to Athens, where he could begin his missionary efforts in a new city. Silas and Timothy remained in Berea. Perhaps they were not in immediate danger, and stayed behind to encourage the people in the church at Berea. On the other hand it may be the crowds were so outraged at Paul that his life was in imminent danger, and they rushed him out of town before they had an opportunity to get to Silas and Timothy. In any case, when Paul safely arrived in Athens, he sent for the others to come and join him as soon as possible.

It occurs to me that when lost people hear about the opposition and persecution that may come from following Christ, it might cause them to question whether or not it is worth it to become a Christian. We who have been born again know that it is absolutely worth it, but it is important to count the cost. Faith in Christ brings the blessings of God's grace. Our salvation is free, but it is not cheap. It cost Jesus His life. When we receive Him as Savior and Lord, our lives are no longer our own. We belong to Him, and represent Him to the world. We submit to His will for our lives, and sometimes we will suffer because of our faith. It has always been that way, and it will always be, until the Lord's return.

But when we suffer for Christ, God's grace is sufficient to see us through. We live in the hope that the Spirit confirms in our hearts. This world is not my home; I'm just passing through. In the mean time, in the midst of the trials of this life, we have the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, happiness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. We have the assurance of eternal life, and the personal presence of Christ in our hearts. We have been forgiven of our sins, and have new meaning and purpose in our lives. The joy of knowing Christ is difficult for the lost to understand, but we can show them the way of faith, by sharing the gospel, and living for Christ in this dark world. If there are any here who would like to know more about how to come to Christ, I will be happy to speak with you anytime.