

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – July 8, 2018

2 Timothy 3:10-4:5

10 You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, 11 persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. 12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 13 while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. 3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. 5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

As we look out into our culture, how is Christianity perceived? What are the some of the stereotypes that are assigned at times to Christians? Some might call us hypocrites: “Christians say they’re good people and yet they do all these terrible things.” Some might call us hateful or bigoted: “Jesus was all about love and yet Christians tell others how they should live their lives and that what they’re doing is wrong.” Some might call us stupid or ignorant: “Christians hide behind their fairy tales instead of acknowledging facts and the truths of science.” As with any stereotype there is an element of truth behind them. Sadly there are Christians who may do things at times that misrepresent our faith and what God says. At the same time such stereotypes can also simply be the resistance of the sinful human nature to anything that has to do with God or religion. Such attitudes in our culture are just one example of the persecution we may face in our lives as Christians. As we look again this week at Paul’s last letter to Timothy, we will see that he encourages **Faith in the Face of Persecution**. We will check first to see if we are facing persecution in our lives and then focus on a specific form that persecution might take.

The apostle Paul certainly knew about facing persecution in his life. After all he was writing this letter from Rome because of persecution—he had been imprisoned there and was awaiting his death by execution. But this was just the latest in a pattern he had faced throughout his missionary journeys. He described some of it as our text opens: “You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured” (vv. 10-11). Paul had visited these cities on his first missionary journey with Barnabas. In Antioch and Iconium some of the Jews had stirred up persecution and so he had to leave. In Lystra those same Jews followed him there to again stir up the people and this time “they stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead” (Ac 14:19). Paul knew that Timothy knew about these instances of persecution specifically because Lystra was

Timothy's hometown. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he had presented a list of persecutions up to that point: flogged five times, beaten with rods three times, stoned once, and multiple imprisonments (2 Co 11:23-25). Paul had known all kinds of persecution and "Yet," as he wrote here in verse 11, "the Lord rescued me from all of them." By God's grace he had survived. Even though now he knew that this imprisonment would end in his death, as we heard last week, his death would mean his rescue from this world to his home in heaven.

When it comes to the question of whether we are facing persecution in our lives, we can look at Paul's list of experiences and feel blessed that we do not have face such overt forms of persecution and direct physical threats to our lives. And yet we have verse 12: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." So what form might that persecution take in our lives? In a country where we enjoy religious freedom, we are able to gather for worship and practice our faith. And yet others may harbor those stereotypes mentioned before and so at times being a Christian could mean the loss of various opportunities in our lives, the damaging of certain things we enjoy. This could include job or business opportunities, social interactions with friends, or even close family relationships. We may or may not know that such losses are a result of the faith and beliefs that we hold.

But if we feel that we are not facing such persecution in our lives, are we doing something wrong? Are we not living our godly lives in Christ Jesus? Or are we being silent to avoid those losses in our lives? Do we remain silent when it comes to telling others about Jesus or defending our faith or pointing out sin because we would rather preserve our peaceful relationships with family, friends, classmates and coworkers? If we are avoiding persecution for our own comfort, we are not only hurting ourselves with our sinful actions but hurting those around us as well because they will not hear the truth that they need. Being a Christian is about more than being a part of the club, it's a life or death situation, the difference between an eternity in heaven or hell.

This is not to say that we if we aren't being persecuted all the time, we must be doing something wrong. God does give us times of peace and blessing in our lives. By God's grace through the work of the Holy Spirit people will respond in a good way when we defend our faith or point out sin. For the times when we are persecuted, we know that God will rescue us from all of them, whether now or later. For the times when we avoid persecution, we know that God will forgive us for those sins as well. For strength in times of persecution, we follow Paul's advice to Timothy: "Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of" (v. 14) because those Holy Scriptures "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (v. 15). When we are facing the consequences of holding to God's Word we go back to that same Word for the strength to continue forward. Whatever persecution we face is temporary until the Lord rescues us to heaven.

In these verses Paul addressed a very specific form that persecution might take. He hints at it in verse 13: "evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." Persecution does not just come from outside of the church, from those who are clearly enemies of God and his word. Sometimes it comes from inside of the church, from those we wouldn't expect because they are impostors and deceivers. He expanded on this in chapter 4: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (vv. 3-4). These impostors and deceivers are not satisfied with sound teaching and so will change things,

either adding to or subtracting from God's Word in order to scratch the itch of those who want to hear something different than the truth.

The excuses for such behavior are often, "Well, this is logical and just makes sense" or "Well, this is the loving and tolerant thing to do." The persecution then comes when we don't agree with their line of thinking. This is where those stereotypes can come into play. "You are just hypocritical or hateful or ignorant if you don't go along with these changes." And so persecution can come up over things like: teaching creation in the face of the more "educated" view of evolution; teaching God's plan for marriage in the face of doing what makes me feel good from living together outside of marriage to divorce for any reason to same sex marriage; teaching fellowship principles in the face of joint worship or joint prayer or open communion practices. Persecution in all these areas certainly comes from those outside of the church, but it is harder and hurts more when such attitudes come from inside of the church, from those who have heard the truth and yet chosen to ignore it.

So what encouragement did Paul give to Timothy on this? Verse 2: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." What can we do when there are those who are turning away from the truth and perhaps even persecuting us? Continue to preach and share the word. Use it to correct, rebuke and encourage. Note that this may not happen overnight, it will take great patience and careful instruction. The only solution for itching ears is God's Word. We will continue to share it so that the Holy Spirit can do his work of changing their hearts and bringing them back to the truth.

How Christians are perceived in our culture, sadly, is probably not going to get any better. The stereotypes will continue and may affect our lives even more. But we know there will always be persecution. In our other scripture readings we heard how Ezekiel faced it as the Lord's called prophet and how Jesus faced it, even in his hometown. And so we will face it too. But we have faith in the face of persecution because we know the Lord will deliver us from this suffering as well. Paul wrote to Timothy in verse 5, "But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry." Whatever hardship may come, we will remain calm and endure it because we know what's coming next in the heavenly life to come. We will continue to share the word that alone is able to make us and others wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.