

NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES!

by Steve Zeisler

Driving around town the other day, I happened to come up behind an old Volkswagen bug that was completely covered with duct tape. I was cast back to the memory of the very first car I ever owned, which was also an old Volkswagen bug. I don't think duct tape had been invented when I was driving that car, but it needed that much tape to hold it together. It rattled and shook, and the front seat was missing. Third gear didn't work. I remember once arguing with someone about how silly it was to pay money for air conditioning in the Bay Area, and for other things that seemed like luxuries at the time. In about that same era I lived for a summer on the edge of a commune off of Skyline Boulevard, and owned one pair of Levis and one pair of sandals.

Remembering that era of my life, I realized that I can measure the change in my thinking by what I now believe about cars and clothes and creature comforts. I have a certain attachment to things that make life pleasant and secure.

Worldliness is the subject that we're going to consider in this message. How is it that this world offers us a way to make sense of life that our flesh naturally gravitates toward? How do we come to embrace things that the Bible calls worldly?

We are studying together through the second missionary journey, which is covered in Acts 15-18. We will not study a specific text in this message, but I want to step back from the text a bit to consider this theme of worldliness and its different manifestations in three cities---Philippi, Thessalonica, and Athens.

Let's look back again at Acts 17:5-7. Remember what some Jewish enemies of the faith, who were furious at the inroads that Paul's preaching had made in Thessalonica, reported in public about Paul and Silas, servants of Jesus:

But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."

People who are resisting something about us very often see us clearly, perhaps even more clearly than our friends do. The first accusation against Paul and Silas is that they are upsetting everything everywhere they go. The Greek term used here, "all over the world," refers to the inhabited world, all known civilization, or the entire Roman world. They challenge every city they go to, every culture they speak to, every idea they encounter. They confront everything, they agree with no one. Everywhere they go they are counterculture; they have upset things and caused trouble.

The second accusation we can learn from is that at the heart of their message these men are claiming another king. They are saying that someone else is in charge. They speak of Jesus and name him Sovereign. These accusations contain wonderful insight that can challenge us.

An agreement to not admit the problem

The previous time we backed away from any specific text to look at the whole and discern a theme (Discovery Paper 4485), we talked about how remarkably diverse the Christian population was as encountered in the second missionary journey. All different kinds of people make up the community of faith. It's incumbent on us to learn to get along with people who are different from us, and to expect that God is going to win converts

from every stratum of society; from among those who were once enemies and those who were once friends; from those who were successful and those who were outcasts; from rich and poor, men and women, Jew and Gentile. And when they join us, the church is made up of all that beautiful diversity.

It is also true that every culture, philosophy, or way of living life that we encounter will be antagonistic to the faith. We will see converts from every place, but we will never find allies in the thinking of the world in any place. The Christian message is always counterculture, it always issues a challenge.

Let me take a moment to define what I mean by worldliness. The desperate problem of being human is that we're born with a spiritual disease. We're born rebels against God, worshipping ourselves, with an inclination toward unrighteousness. By the time we get old enough to make choices, we do so based on the rebellion that is at the heart of our nature. So not only do we have a problem that began at the earliest moments of our existence, but also over time we have acted on it and have done terrible, shameful things. If the hurtful deeds and thoughts and attitudes we are guilty of were to come to light, we would hide our eyes from them. We are lying and deserve to die.

That sort of analysis of what it's like to be human is a terrible problem. So what every society has done is agree to try to somehow cover it up or lie about it. It's too hard to admit. No one wants to see themselves clearly. This cultural cover-up is what the Bible calls worldliness. It is making an agreement together that we're not going to admit the problem. In different cultures it takes different forms. But every time the gospel enters a culture, it is always going to unmask the agreed upon self-deception.

I've spent forty-seven years building a covering for myself, a persona that I hope is well-regarded in the community, that has a certain amount of status, that is likable in various settings. Most of the time, rather than speak honestly about what is true on the inside and cling desperately to Christ for worth, I've joined a culture in which some amount of status, security, and good impressions can be managed. It's the management of sin, the covering of guilt, that makes up worldliness, and that's what the gospel always confronts.

We're going to go back to the stories told in the three cities and see how they are different in the forms that worldliness takes in them. Philippi is the secular city. Thessalonica is where the issues of confrontation are religious, especially because of the Jews and their influence there. Athens is a great intellectual center. Citizens of all three cities hate and reject what they hear. In each city, the preachers encounter a riot. (The riot in Athens is an intellectual's riot, which is dismissive as opposed to physical). Always the problem is that the preachers are claiming another King, unmasking the lies. So they must be done away with.

Power and money

Philippi, where the issue is a secular one, was a Roman colony, a mini-Rome, a place that loved everything Roman. Rome was very secular at its heart. What Rome reveled in was power---great armies, conquered people, raised taxes. The taxes made the rulers rich, and they oversaw the armies, which conquered more land, which raised more money, and so on. What is characteristic of the Roman era is an understanding of how to use power and a love of its use.

In the story of how the gospel penetrates Philippi, there is no reference to religion. Not a single Jew is mentioned. Presumably there is a handful of them there, but Judaism is not an issue. Nor are any idols mentioned in the story. What the gospel encounters in the city of Philippi are the issues of money and power. Men are making money using a demonized slave girl. Her freedom from demonization means that they no longer can make money, and they start a riot because of the loss of income. The Roman authorities don't like any threat to their power and the orderly running of things. They unjustly beat, jail, and shackle the missionaries. An agreement has been struck in Philippi that loving money is okay, an agreement made with demons and love of money and ruthlessly stamping out anything that challenges any of these issues. Courts, jails, the making of money, and the exercise of political power all conspire together.

But the missionaries come saying that there is another King, talking about freedom from the demons and the love of money, talking about Jesus. Jesus said that you can't love God and money, you can't put your trust in both. The form of worldliness encountered in Philippi is issued a direct challenge by the message of the

gospel.

We live in secular cities characterized by secular power struggles and the love of money. The issues are not unfamiliar to us. But Christians say there is another King. You can't serve God and money; it's not the power of secular authorities or the power of investments that should be worshipped. It's Jesus.

In Philippi we find Lydia set free marvelously. Lydia, a capable, fascinating person, opens her heart to Christ and says, "If you consider me worthy, let me serve." A slave girl is set free from the demonization that has ruined her life. And a jailer comes to love Jesus and show sensitivity to others. Transformation is taking place, and the secular worldliness is being challenged directly by this other King who plays by different rules.

Worldly religion

In the story of Thessalonica, what's characteristic is religious worldliness. The issue in Thessalonica is not money, order, courts, and power. The challenge in Thessalonica comes out of the synagogue. It's a worldly religion that hates the gospel. Remember, Paul goes into the synagogue in Thessalonica and begins to teach the Bible and explain Jesus as the Messiah. The text says that the Jews become jealous. Worldly religion is jealous of the freedom that comes when people know Christ. Jesus gives away gifts of life, welcomes everybody to himself, and grants hope, freedom, honesty, and standing with God for nothing. It's a terrible affront to people who have learned to be religious by keeping the rules and managing impressions, who for generations have spent their lifetime trying to live with a religious cover-up of the problem. Remember, worldliness is a form of agreement to lie. You can do that with religion very effectively. The Jews in Thessalonica are jealous because this King these travelers are talking about challenges everything about them. He shows them for what they are, and undermines the whole establishment of worldly religion.

So once again a riot takes place. They rush to find Paul and Silas, and failing to do so, they drag Jason and others before the authorities, who work them over a bit. And then in Berea the same thing happens again. Worldly religion finds itself challenged by real faith. Everywhere Jesus' servants go they upset things, disagree, cause trouble, stir things up, and make it hard for the members of the culture to keep the facade in place.

Worth because of intellect

The third city is Athens, and as I've said, another riot breaks out, except that it's an intellectual's riot. This riot does not get mobs from the marketplace, throw people in jail, beat them up and run them out of town. It's a dismissal, an arrogant put-down, a refusal to pay attention: "What will this idle babbler say? Who is this nobody, this contemptible talker of deities?"

Here is a form of intellectual worldliness that once again is familiar to us, isn't it? It is agreed that university degrees and promotions, offering opinions with grave-sounding words and large vocabularies make you important. Guilt is covered by use of one's intellect.

Once again, the gospel message says in effect, "The emperor has no clothes." The Christian faith declares that there is another king and that man-centered learning does not heal our spiritual disease.

God uses institutions, obviously. He used the Roman government, of which Paul was a citizen. He used the synagogues, where Paul preached. This is not to say that the Lord of all cannot use human organization, human culture, human governments, and so on. But the point is that every time the Scriptures are taught clearly and the gospel is stated honestly, it is always going to run into whatever the prevailing agreement is in any place, whether it's the community of intellectuals, the community of commerce, or the community of the religious.

We're giving life away

Let me offer one further observation we might use as application. It is a great foolishness, it seems to me, to challenge worldliness by offering an alternative worldliness. Too often our message is, "We don't want you to

be in charge, we want to be in charge. We don't want your people elected to office, we want our people elected to office, so that we can use the media to our ends." In effect, we try to Christianize worldliness, we try to fight on the same battlefield without the revolutionary message that says, "Life comes from a completely different place." Too often the reason the battle, even when it's won, ends up so unsatisfying is that all we're doing is giving another version---supposedly a Christian version---of cover-up. Managing death and covering guilt, even done with Christian language, is not the gospel.

Worldliness is inherently competitive. In order for you to have life, I must lose something. In order for you to be made secure, I must be made more insecure. In order for me to gain what I want, I must take from you. There isn't enough life, we're all dying.

The King to whom we are testifying is giving away life. My coming to know him doesn't reduce you. My joy in the Lord makes more possible your joy in the Lord. It isn't keeping anything from you, and that needs to be at the heart of our message. The saying Ron Ritchie uses often is that we're beggars telling other beggars where to find bread. We aren't competing with the world in order to take from it what it doesn't have anyway.

But inevitably the gospel is going to be telling the truth, and the truth is always going to lead to confrontation. The world is always going to fight back. We will never find an ally in any culture in the world.

Focused on the greatness of Christ

I've been studying with a group of men on Thursday mornings. Last week we were in Luke 7, where Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus to a dinner party. In the middle of dinner a woman comes in and starts crying and unbinding her hair. Tears fall on Jesus' feet, and she wets his feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair, making a commotion. She's a woman of the streets anyway. The whole thing is an immense embarrassment.

I couldn't help but being struck, as I tried to visualize this scene in my mind, by what would allow someone to do the kind of thing that she was doing. Everything she did was completely humiliating to her. It was humiliating to touch the dirty feet of another person. Those from the Near East even today consider feet unmentionable parts of the body. To let her hair down in public was an embarrassment. To be having this emotional display at a dinner party was an embarrassment. Everything she did ought to have heaped humiliation on her, but it didn't, because she was focused on Christ. She didn't notice that there was anyone else in the room, it didn't matter to her at all what they thought. What Jesus had done for her---setting her free from guilt and death and bondage, helping her to say who she was to herself and at some point to him, granting her forgiveness---had changed her so utterly that the only person she could see was him, and his feet had not been attended to. So she washed his feet in the most extraordinary way.

What these missionaries in Acts did wherever they went was to name Jesus King as they spoke of him, unmask the untruths, and give life away. As modern men and women we need to not give in to the kind of worldliness that comes easily to us, to not sell out to the secular, intellectual, or religious worldliness, to know it is attractive, to know that we feel its force, but to refuse to be influenced by it. And the way to refuse it is to be more and more certain of the greatness of Christ.

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