

Luke 21:5-19 & 2 Timothy 3:1-5

Twenty-third Sunday Morning After Pentecost, November 7, 2004

Distressing times. Is that an accurate description of our day? Most of us think so. Yesterday I helped officiate the Georgia State High School Cross Country meet, which is held here in Carrollton. Part of my assignment was to keep the crowd at bay near the finish line. As runners came down the hill, entering the final yards to the finish, I instructed people to stay behind a white line to give the runners room. As I walked, asking folks to remain behind the line, I heard some respond, "I will if I want." At least that's better than a couple of years ago when someone told me to "make" him stay behind the white line. I told him to look at my size. I said, "My wife can whip me. So just stay behind the line, please."

I confessed at supper last night that it just amazes me how these times are, the manner in which people respond. My insightful 14-year-old son replied, "Dad, it's always been that way." Nicholas is right. "Distressing times" is a good description of every era since Jesus ascended into Heaven. Times have always been filled with stress and the text in 2 Timothy 3 bears this out. Note that the one Archie read from Luke 21 does too.

How does one testify in distressing times? I'm not sure I fully know the answer. I don't know if anybody really does. It's tough. Because it is a day of distress, I sometimes wonder if anybody is even listening. I come back to the reality that, "Yes, people are listening. They are hearing the witness. They are confronted with the testimony." At the very same time I also appreciate another reality: some of the people who are listening, who are hearing the witness, who are confronted with the testimony are sort of going through the motions of religion.

You and I are to be confronted with the testimony of Christ because we're so conditioned not to experience anything out of the ordinary and coming to church every Lord's Day is merely a habit, a going through the motions of it all. Obviously this is not the case with everybody, but it is with some.

I'm not sure what prompted Jesus' discourse on The End here in Luke 21. Inside me there is this acknowledgment that maybe He gave His talk about The End and the destruction of Herod's glorious Temple because He may have heard His followers make the kinds of references to the Temple every time they were in Jerusalem. So when it came to Temple, they were simply going through the motions of it.

Remember what they said? Archie read it. I'll paraphrase it. "How adorable this building is. Look at how magnificent it is. Why there's not another like it anywhere. We're kind of the envy of the world – even the Romans." Maybe Jesus tired of the talk about brick and mortar. Whatever the reason, He was moved to begin a discourse about distressing times and the first thing He recognized was, "Guys, this building is coming down. All these marvelous stones are going to be cast aside."

To their stunned disbelief that anybody, but especially God's Chosen and Anointed One, would dare say such a thing, they were further amazed that He had the audacity to continue by saying something like, "Fellows. This isn't the half of it. You're going to be persecuted. You're going to be handed over to religious authorities and government authorities. Family members are going to be disloyal to you. You're going to be misunderstood. You're even going to be hated because you take a stand on something. Namely you're going to be hated on account of Me." Talk about stress. No, talk about distress. Right in the middle of all this, however, He makes a daring declaration. It's almost "as a matter of fact." ***"This will give you an opportunity to testify" (v. 13).***

In the most distressing moments of life, the opportunity to testify is afforded us. I'll be the first to tell you that I've not always seized those moments whenever they've come to me. I've never had the kind of experience described here in Luke 21 where my life has really been threatened, where I've genuinely been persecuted, where the church has hauled me in to accuse me of heresy or some government authority has demanded I give an account of what I'm doing. It's difficult for me to relate to Luke 21. It may be for you.

It wasn't, though, for Henlee Barnette. He died a couple of weeks ago. He was 93. We helped pay his salary years ago. He taught ethics for many years, 1951-77, at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, my alma mater. He also taught Medical Ethics at the University of Louisville School of Medicine. I never had him for a class. He was already retired when I was there 25 years ago, but I did study with some of his disciples. He's sort of an ethics legend. Barnette grew up in abject poverty in North Carolina. Because of that poverty, he didn't graduate from high school until he was 25. He worked hard. He graduated from Wake Forest, Southern Seminary, and did further work at Harvard and Columbia. The painful division of the nation over Vietnam was played out in his own family. One of his sons was an Air Force pilot who served in Vietnam and another son fled to Sweden to avoid the draft. He supported each son's decision. Each brother, by the way, supported the other's decision.

Barnette always wanted to do the right and just thing. He fought for the poor. He fought for the rich too. He took a stand for Civil Rights. He invited Martin Luther King, Jr. to preach in a chapel service at Southern in 1961, which resulted in the loss of financial support for the seminary. What really got him in trouble was his visit with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and testifying to him about Jesus Christ. Henlee Barnette had the courage to tell Nikita Khrushchev about Jesus Christ!

There were some folks saying, "How can God save a godless communist?" The whole thing – visit and testimony – got the dander of government authorities up so much that the FBI established and maintained a file on him. Government authorities would even visit his classrooms – sometimes sitting outside the room to listen to his lectures. For several years he was chosen, randomly mind you (yeah, right), for IRS audits. In those distressing times, Barnette maintained faith in Christ and sought to use those opportunities to testify.

That kind of pressure has never befallen me. I've wondered what it would be like to have an FBI file. I don't think there's one on me. You never know! I've never had to worry about the government or family, for that fact of the matter, persecuting me. My mother is rather proud of me. I think Jackie, Emily, and Nicholas are. I know my dog, Kiwi, is. I've never been hauled before church officials and condemned for wanting to the right and just thing. That's not to say that I've always done the right and just thing. Do you see why I have difficulty relating to Luke 21? The distress through which Henlee Barnette went when compared with my little inconveniences is no comparison at all. Perhaps the same could be said for many of you.

Maybe that's why Paul's word to Timothy is a word to you and me. In the last days, there will be distressing times. It's hard for us to conceive of it, but our ancestor Timothy was living in the last days. He had to deal with the kinds of "people behavior" mentioned in the text. His were "*the last days.*" Paul said he was to "*avoid*" (v. 5) those kinds of people. It's a present tense imperative. "You avoid them now and keep on avoiding them," is what Paul was saying. We've been living in the last days ever since the Lord Jesus ascended into Heaven. Fortunately there have been faithful sisters and brothers, many of them nameless, who seized the opportunities and testified on behalf of the Lord. Their lives were filled with distress.

Consider our distressing times. There are plenty of reasons to worry, if one is so inclined, aren't there? "Dirty" bombs. Global warming. The emergence of a new virulent disease. Killer asteroids colliding with the earth. A super-virus unleashed deliberately or by human error. Weapons of Mass Destructions. Runaway chain reactions. Galaxy-gobbling black holes. Shifting magnetic poles. Mega-earthquakes. Ozone depletion. Population outgrowing food sources. On and on I could go. This is enough to cause stress that is distressing, don't you think?

Yet the distressing times to which Paul referred are characterized by the presence of evil. Sure some of the things I've mentioned here are evil. But Paul is a bit more precise about it. He lists 18 vices in this passage that suggest the times are distressing. What's amazing is that a careful review of history, especially the history of the church, reveals that these have been fleshed out in some form or another in very generation since Paul wrote to Timothy.

So how do you testify to people whose lives are plagued by such things? The list begins with the love of self and the love of things and ends with loving pleasure more than God. “I’m in love with me and I’m in love with things. And love for God takes a back seat.” People like that are naturally going to be all of those things in between.

Being in love with one’s self and things and pleasure are evidences of distressing times. They abound, don’t they? I know they do, because at times we, you and I, are in love with self, things, and pleasure. Remember the Tuesday night sit-com, “Happy Days?” Most of you do. Remember the character Fonzie, played by Henry Winkler? The opening presents each of the stars in different settings. The Fonz is standing in front of a mirror ready to comb his hair and just looks at himself. The way he does suggests he’s in love with himself. I’ve often wondered why so many folks like the Fonz. Could it be that he sort of validates, “Hey, it’s ok to be in love with me?” Now it’s important to have a healthy love of self. I am to love my neighbor as I love myself. Too often we tend to make love of self the priority.

There are times when I’m so in love with myself that I want more of me. There are times when I’m so in love with my things that I want more things. There are times when I love pleasure more than God. You’ve been there, haven’t you? All of us have. Some more than others. Think about all these vices. All of us have at times allowed these to take hold of our lives, even if but for a moment. Timothy was emphatically told in verse 5 to **“Avoid”** such people. Hard to do, isn’t it? So what to do when confronted with the likes of those who are lovers of self and things and so forth? See the confrontation as an opportunity to testify – testifying in distressing times.

Next year our emphasis is going to be on renewing passion for Jesus. Oh, dearly beloved, we aren’t passionate enough for Jesus. I’m not sure what the answer to the lack of passion is. I certainly know that it’s not found in these vices articulated by Paul. I certainly know that it’s not found in coming to the building every Sunday and every Wednesday and saying to ourselves and to each others, “Isn’t this a marvelous building?” No. Renewing passion for Jesus demands testimony.

Perhaps the greatest testimony you and I can offer in these distressing times is to declare with confidence and conviction that Christianity consists not in a show of our religiosity or our spirituality that suggests I or we are better than somebody else, but in the powerful proclamation of the Gospel everyday. This proclamation is complemented by a life of radical obedience that corresponds to the demands of that Gospel we proclaim. And if the church is to make a difference in distressing times with her testimony, then her behavior is to be controlled by the Gospel. To deny the power of the Gospel is to deny that it can change one and make a difference. That’s what Paul meant when he told Timothy that these people were **“holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power” (v. 5)**. It is distressing to deny the Power of the Gospel. Yet, we tend to deny the Power, don’t we?

Now with the election past, perhaps we can return to some sense of normalcy – maybe it won’t be so distressing. Both President Bush and Senator Kerry have said, “Let us return to civility.” Strange declaration. I wonder. Why did we have to leave civility in the first place? Just another evidence of the need for testifying because these times, well, they are distressing. As has been my practice since I’ve been pastoring, on the Sunday prior to the Inauguration of the President, we’ll spend time in prayer for him and his family, the nation, and the world. A couple of years ago, I began a new practice. Since it was my first gubernatorial election in Georgia, I decided to remember Governor Elect Sonny Perdue in prayer the Sunday prior to his inauguration. In fact, we held up all elected state government officials on that January Sunday morning in 2003.

For the past several months, I’ve been wanting to do something special as a means of testifying to elected officials in these distressing times. This was conceived several months ago and birthed late last evening and early this morning. We are going to have a Prayer and Worship Hour for all elected officials here in The Worship Center on Wednesday evening, January 5. All local elected officials in Carrollton and Carroll County are going to be invited. The Governor and the Lieutenant Governor, along with all the members of the Georgia Legislature, are going to be invited. I realize that everyone can’t come and some won’t come, even if they could. But they will be invited. Each of the church’s deacons will be

given a list of elected individuals to call as a follow up to the letter of invitation I'm going to send. It will be a grand time to affirm, bless, encourage, exhort, pray for, and worship with our elected officials, and thus testify to them of the Power of the Gospel in these distressing times as they seek to make decisions that will help all people who live in these distressing times.

Am I worried about what to say to these elected persons? No. I really believe Jesus when He said, "Don't worry about what you are going to say. If you are in a relationship with Me and you make the attempt to grow in that relationship everyday by remaining close to Me, then I'll give you the words with which to testify." Even when the distress is beyond distressing, Jesus speaks in the power of His Holy Presence. A Presence we call, the Holy Spirit.

Testifying in distressing times. Opportunities abound to sing the wondrous story of the Christ who died for you and me. Let us dare to seize those moments. We can't wait any longer. The distress of the times demands it.

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
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All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.