

Shrewd and Innocent

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 January 2022

Preacher: Shawn Woo

[0 : 00] Let me pray for the reading and teaching of God's Word. Heavenly Father, we ask that you will speak to us.

We are hungry for your righteousness. We humble ourselves before you to receive meekly the implanted Word, which is able to save ourselves.

Amen. We want to be faithful witnesses to Jesus.

So in this passage, speak to us. Teach us from Paul's example here of how to do that, even when our environment, people around us are hostile to faith.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Acts chapter 22, starting verse 22. Up to this word they listened to him.

[1 : 10] Then they raised their voices and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live. And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogged to find out why they were shouting against him like this.

But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?

When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.

So the tribune came and said to him, Tell me, are you a Roman citizen? And he said, Yes. The tribune answered, I bought this citizenship for a large sum.

Paul said, But I am a citizen by birth. So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

[2 : 20] But on the next day, he desired to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews. He unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet. And he brought Paul down and set him before them.

And looking intently at the council, Paul said, Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

Then Paul said to him, God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall. Are you sitting to judge me according to the law? And yet contrary to the law, you order me to be struck?

Those who stood by said, Would you be vile God's high priest? And Paul said, I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest. For it is written, You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.

Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.

[3 : 29] And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit.

But the Pharisees acknowledged them all. Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply. We find nothing wrong in this man.

What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him? And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

The following night, the Lord stood by him and said, Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about meeting Jews, so you must testify also again.

When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath, neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy.

[4 : 36] They went to the chief priests and elders and said, We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly.

And we are ready to kill him before he comes near. Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.

Paul called one of the centurions and said, Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him. So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you.

The tribune took him by the hand and going aside, asked him privately, What is it that you have to tell him? And he said, The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him.

But do not be persuaded by them. For more than 40 of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent.

[5 : 49] So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, Tell no one that you have informed me of these things. Then he called two of the centurions and said, Get ready 200 soldiers with 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night.

Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor. And he wrote a letter to this effect. Claudius Lysias, to His Excellency the Governor Felix, Greetings.

This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him. Having learned that he was a Roman citizen. And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council.

I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.

So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatrus. And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him.

[7 : 01] When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.

And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium. This is God's holy and authoritative word. Various religious groups face persecution for harassment for their faith throughout the world, according to the Pew Research Center.

But according to the research which started around 2007 and continues to today, Christians are harassed in more countries than any other religious group. Open Doors USA wrote in their 2021 World Watch List report that 340 million Christians live in places where they experience high levels of persecution.

It's one in eight believers worldwide. In other words, many fellow Christians live still, to this day, in an environment that is hostile to our faith, much like the believers in the book of Acts.

And our passage today teaches us some valuable lessons on how we ought to conduct ourselves in such an environment. So this will be a particularly relevant message for those of you who will become missionaries in places where Christians are persecuted.

[8 : 26] But most of you might be wondering, well then, what does this have to do with me? I'm not planning on becoming a foreign missionary. And there's no persecution here in the U.S. You're right that the U.S. has largely been spared of the persecution that Christians face much in the world.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a growing clash of worldviews and ethics in our cultural moment. And in some places of even this country, being a Bible-believing Christian is no longer something that confers social respectability.

Rather, it is a social liability. To give you one example, Carl Truman, a Presbyterian pastor and professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, widely respected, highly regarded, he recently wrote a book entitled *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, which is a thoughtful and theological and philosophical critique of the American cultural attitudes towards sex. There's no hate-mongering in that book at all. Both the ideas in the book and the tone of the book are eminently reasonable. But on August 7th of last year, he gave a series of talks on this topic to the Sacramento Gospel Conference, which was live-streamed through the YouTube channel of the Emmanuel Baptist Church.

And the Wall Street Journal notes that, quote, twice during the event, the live broadcast was booted off the air. Viewers were informed that the first interruption was due to a copyright violation, possibly the result of Christian music that the conference organizers played during the break.

[10:10] But in the second, more mysterious instance, Truman's presentation went dark because of a, quote, content violation. Neither Truman nor Emmanuel Baptist Church has been told whether that was intervention by a machine's algorithm or by a human being who was watching it, who had been flagging it.

What is clear is that Google, which now owns YouTube, determined that the Bible's teaching on sexual ethics, as communicated by Truman, was, quote, harmful content, or a form of hate and harassment.

Admittedly, this is still nothing like the censorship and persecution that believers in some other parts of the world face. Nevertheless, in a real way, some Christians' beliefs are marginalized and viewed as irrational and unacceptable.

And for that reason, even for us, this passage offers some very helpful insights on how we should navigate this complex world, how to conduct ourselves as witnesses for Jesus in such climate. In Matthew 10, 16-18, this is the New International Version, Jesus said to his disciples, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

[11:30] Be on your guard, you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account, you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.

What Jesus told his disciples is happening exactly in this passage. Paul's taken before kings and governors to bear witness to them about Jesus.

He's taken before the Gentiles and Paul must be shrewd as a snake and innocent as a dove. And that's the main lesson that Luke wants to convey to us here through Paul's example, that as sheep among wolves, we must be shrewd and innocent, trusting in God's presence and protection.

So let's first talk about Paul's shrewdness and then we'll talk about Paul's innocence and then about finally God's presence. So Paul is here in the middle of his defense before the Jewish mob.

He's sharing his testimony of his conversion, how the Lord Jesus, the reason Lord Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. And he's trying to explain to them that he's not someone who is against the Jews, hostile to the Jewish people and the law and the temple.

[12:40] But he's trying to tell them why he was sent by the Lord Jesus to go minister to the Gentiles. But as soon as Paul mentions going to the Gentiles to talk about Jesus, the Jewish mob is fed up with him and will hear him no longer.

It says in verse 22, up to this word they listened to him and then they raised their voices and said, away with such a thumb from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live.

They want to get rid of Paul for good. They want not just his censorship or imprisonment, but his execution. The mob starts getting out of control again and then they start in verse 23 shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, which are all gestures that Jews use to protest something or to express indignation.

And not wanting to lose control of the situation, the Roman Tribune orders Paul to be brought into the barracks saying that he should be examined by flogging to find out why they were shouting against him like this.

He knows something that Paul has said that has provoked the mob, but he didn't understand that because Paul was speaking to them in the Hebrew language and so he plans on interrogating him by flogging, basically torturing him to extract information from him.

[13:56] This was a really cruel method of torture. Some people died from the flogging that the Romans used. A lot of people were crippled for life. So Paul's facing grave danger at this point in

time.

And as Paul is being stretched out in preparation for the flogging for maximal damage, Paul says in verse 25 to the centurion who was standing by, is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?

This is a rhetorical question. Paul already knows that the answer is no. It is not lawful for the Roman citizen to be flogged without due process. But this is Paul's polite and indirect way of informing the centurion that he is, in fact, a Roman citizen with certain protections and legal rights.

Earlier in chapter 21, verse 38, the tribune had mistaken Paul for an Egyptian. But now he's mistaken him for an ordinary Jew, just a Jew, and not as a Roman citizen.

It would have been fine for him to do that to Jews, but it would have been illegal for him to do it to a Roman citizen. So this alarms him. The centurion is taken aback by Paul's declaration of citizenship.

[15:15] And so he goes to his superior and reports it back to him. And he expresses some cynicism because he had to pay a lot of money to become a Roman citizen. So he says, I bought this for a large sum. In order to become a naturalized Roman citizen, you have to be sponsored by someone prominent, usually a military general or even the emperor of the Roman Empire itself.

And so he must have been a pretty well-to-do, prominent person with social standing. He purchased the citizenship for a large amount of money. And so he's implicitly questioning Paul's claim. How can you, a poor Jew, afford something like that?

But Paul replies to him in verse 28, I am a citizen by birth. In order to be a Roman citizen by birth, both of your parents have to be Roman citizens.

And being a citizen by birth was considered at that time to be more prestigious than being a naturalized citizen. And so it says in verse 29, those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately.

And the tribune also was afraid, before he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen, that he had bound him. You can imagine the tribune's predicament. Even though Paul was guaranteed due process, before he was condemned by a fair trial, he had bound him and very nearly flogged him, even though he was not even allowed to find him.

[16:40] If Paul were to seek legal redress, he could be punished and possibly lose his post. He had to stop the record. That's why the tribune was afraid. Now, this episode is a very good demonstration of Paul's shrewks.

Paul knew his legal rights as a Roman citizen. And he used it to his advantage when the situation called for it. Likewise, we should know our legal rights.

Whether that's here in the United States or the foreign country you happen to be in, administering in, and we should appropriately invoke those rights because we can continue to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

However, there is an important caveat. The fact that some situations call for us to assert our legal rights does not mean that we should always do so. For example, as chapter 22, verse 29 tells us, the Roman tribune was not allowed even to bind Paul before he was condemned.

But earlier in chapter 21, verse 33, he bowed to him before a Jewish mob. When they came to arrest him, Paul could have asserted his Roman citizenship right then and there and said, I am a Roman citizen by birth.

[17:56] But this Jewish mob over here, they're abusing me without cause. Paul could have done that. He could have easily turned the table on them. And maybe the Roman tribune wouldn't have even arrested Paul, would have instead arrested some of the people who were trying to kill him.

But Paul didn't do that. It's impossible to say exactly why, what is going through Paul's mind because Luke doesn't tell us.

But remember that these Jews were accusing Paul of being against the Jewish people and the law and the temple. And Paul's assertion of Roman citizenship right before the Jews in order to preserve himself at their expense would have confirmed to them that Paul was in fact someone who had betrayed his Jewish sympathies long time ago.

So it's possible that Paul, even though it would have been expedient for him at that point to reveal his citizenship, that he didn't do so for the sake of his gospel witness to the Jews. For Paul, the ultimate goal was bearing witness to Jesus not self-preservation.

In fact, he already said in Acts 21, verse 13, I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. But when he is away from the Jews facing the Roman tribune, Paul surely invokes his Roman citizenship so that he might be scared of the plogging. [19 : 21] We see Paul sure this in other parts of this passage as well. Claudius Lysias, that's the name of the Roman tribune, having been unable to discern the real reason why Paul was being accused by the Jews, convenes the Jewish council again so that he could observe their formal examination of him.

But as the examination proceeds, Paul realized very quickly that the odds are stacked against him. This is not a fair trial. The Sanhedrin is already prejudiced against him and have predetermined his guilt.

So it says in chapter 23, verse 6, when Paul perceived that one part of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.

It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial. The Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, was at that time majority Sadducees, but they had a very strong and vocal Pharisee minority.

There were several theological differences between Sadducees and Pharisees. The Pharisees were reformers who supplemented, who added to the Mosaic law by counting the rabbinic traditions, the oral traditions handed from generation after generation as authoritative.

[20 : 41] The Sadducees, on the other hand, were traditionalists, and they rejected not only the oral tradition of the rabbis, but also the books of scriptures besides the Torah, the law, the first five books of the Bible.

They rejected the rest of the Old Testament. And the one effect of that was that Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead, which is really only explicitly tied in the later scriptural passages like Ezekiel 37 and Daniel 12.

So the Sadducees believed that both body and soul ceased to exist after death. They believed in the annihilation of the soul. And taught that there is no afterlife where the soul or the spirit is in an angelic state or as a spirit awaiting the future bodily resurrection.

Now these differences are summarized by Luke in chapter 23, verse 8. The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledged them all.

Paul, given his extensive training as a Pharisee under the esteemed Pharisee Gamaliel, is well aware that the resurrection of the dead is the hot button theological issue of the day.

[21 : 52] He knows that that doctrine is a central point of contention between Sadducees and Pharisees. And he is exploiting that to divide the opinions of the St.

Pedro concerning him and win over the favor of the Pharisees. And Paul is not, I want to add, being deceptive or manipulative here, he is a Pharisee.

He was descended from Pharisees. And the central theological issue at hand is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

And for Paul, Jesus' resurrection in particular was inextricably tied to the general resurrection of the dead. That's why when some believers in the city of Corinth argue that there is no resurrection of the dead, Paul wrote to them saying in 1 Corinthians 15, 16 and 17, if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Belief in the resurrection of the dead is at the very heart of the Christian faith because without it, there is no resurrection of Christ.

[23 : 06] So Paul is not distorting the truth when he says, it is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial. Even though Paul, of course, understands that the Pharisees didn't agree with him on every point, he recognizes that they are on the same page about this particular matter and so he uses that to his advantage.

And Paul's calculation proves accurately. He says in verse 7, when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the assembly was dividing.

The word translated dissension here is later translated 24-5 as riot. So the disagreement here is not a civil, cordial one. Verse 9 confirms this.

It says, then a clamor arose and some of the scribes and Pharisees and the Pharisees party stood up and contended sharply. We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to

him?

So imagine, people are rising up from their seats, they're raising their voices, they're flailing their arms, possibly even calling names. There is great clamor and sharp contention.

[24 : 15] And this verbal brawl soon erupts into an actual physical brawl because it says in verse 10, when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

Just as Paul surely addressed the tribune as a Roman citizen, he now surely addresses the Sanhedrin as a Pharisee, which helps him escape the kangaroo court that had already predetermined his guilt.

And like Paul, we also need to know our theology and we need to know the culture of the people with whom we are sharing the gospel. What are their belief systems?

How is their society run? What will be the stumbling blocks for them coming to faith in Jesus? So that we can navigate the complexities of that culture and the ministry effectively among them.

There's one more episode in this passage that showcases Paul's shrewdness as a missionary. In chapter 23, verses 12 to 15, this is more than 40 Jews bind themselves with an oath that's saying that they would neither drink nor eat until they've killed Paul.

[25 : 34] That means they are literally dead serious about killing Paul. They're willing to lose their lives trying to kill Paul. In God's providence, the son of Paul's sister, which we didn't even know he had, overhears this plot.

And then it says in verse 17, Paul called one of the centurions and said, take this young man to the tribune for he has something to tell them. So he hears from his nephew about this plot and then Paul sends the nephew to the tribune to report that to him.

And the centurion takes him over and then nephew gets to share this with the tribune. But notice a couple of things here. Notice that Paul refers to his nephew generically as a young man.

Doesn't call him his nephew. And the centurion also calls him a young man. And notice that Paul doesn't tell the centurion about the assassination plot. Instead, he wants his nephew to tell the tribune directly.

It's obvious that there is an interest in keeping this intelligence confidential. Because verse 19 says, the tribune took him by the hand and going aside, asked him privately, what is it that you have to tell him?

[26 : 51] And after hearing Paul's nephew's report, he says in verse 22, that the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, tell no one that you have informed me of these things. Why are they so hush-hush about him?

There's several reasons. Paul is protecting the whistleblower, his nephew, by referring to him generically as a young man. Because if word gets out that Paul's nephew leaked this valuable information, then him and his family might be endangered by the Jews that were trying to kill Paul. Possessing intelligence about an assassination plot was potentially a money-making opportunity. In the same way that people nowadays make money by divulging valuable intelligence to interested parties.

So if Paul entrusted this sensitive information to the centurion, or if the nephew told the centurion about the conspiracy, the centurion could have leaked it to other parties in order to gain the favor of the Jews, or maybe in hopes of some kind of payment.

And that would have prompted them to change their plans. So in a dangerous situation like this, communication had to be discreet and careful.

[28 : 07] Similarly, when there is intense persecution against Christians, we have to be judicious about how we speak and how we act. Avoiding inflammatory language and other potential triggers.

Being discreet about our ministries and meetings. In the book, *God's Smugglers*, Dutch missionary Andrew van der Beek, who is the founder of Open Doors, a missions organization that supports Christians who are persecuted around the world, recalls how in the latter half of the 1990s, in the communist countries behind the so-called Iron Curtain, Christians could not meet openly for worship.

So they had to keep their gatherings small, in secret. So instead of all the worshippers arriving around the same time like we do, their arrival would be staggered, timed, and spread out over several hours.

Only one person or two arriving at a time to avoid any suspicion. As sheep among wolves, we must be shrewd. But the fact that we are to be shrewd does not mean that we can sacrifice our integrity at the altar of pragmatism.

Jesus told us not only to be as shrewd as snakes but also to be as innocent as doves. Jesus taught us this for a reason.

[29 : 31] Luke points out how Paul is a model of this principle as well. There are several attestations in this passage alone of Paul's innocence. Several people, really all of the major characters in this passage attest to Paul's innocence.

First, it is from Paul's own mouth in chapter 22, verse 25. Just before he is to be flogged, Paul says, I am uncondemned. Is it lawful for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?

The Roman legal system, at least for citizens at the time, required, like our legal system, that the defendant be presumed innocent until proven guilty. And Paul's claiming, I am uncondemned.

I'm innocent. Is it lawful for you to treat me like a criminal? So Paul is innocent. Even some members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council itself, in chapter 23, verse 10, says this of Paul, we find nothing wrong in this man.

Again, Luke's reminding us Paul is innocent. And finally, the Roman tribune himself, Claudius Lysias, writes in his letter to Governor Felix in chapter 23, verse 29, I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.

[30 : 49] Three times, Luke's emphasizing Paul's innocence. Christians may indeed turn the world upside down by preaching Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, but they are not to be violent threats or mutinous outlaws.

They are to be aided to peace, not disorder in society. And Paul's innocence is contrasted from the miscarriage of justice by the authorities themselves.

In chapter 23, verse 1, when Paul's testifying before the Sanhedrin, Paul says, Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day. That's a bold thing to say.

Paul is saying, up to this very day, I have not been transgressing God's law. I have a clear conscience. There's nothing wrong that I have done that I have not taken before the Lord in confession.

There is no unconfessed sin in my life. I have a clear conscience. I've been keeping the law to the best of my ability. And then the high priest Ananias orders Paul to be struck in the mouth.

[31 : 54] That's because he's trying to show people that Paul's a liar. Strike him in the mouth so he can lie with his mouth again. But Paul is not a liar.

So he says in verse 3, God is going to strike you. You whitewashed wall. Are you sitting to judge me according to the law? And yet contrary to the law, you order me to be struck?

Leviticus 19.15, the law, the Old Testament law, forbids partiality in court. But Ananias was clearly partial, having already presumed Paul's guilt.

So in the same way that Jesus pronounced woe on the Pharisees and describes for their hypocrisy in Matthew 23.27, calling them whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

Paul pronounces God's judgment upon Ananias who calls him a whitewashed wall, a wall that is rotting and crumbling on the inside, but whitewashed to look sturdy and clean on the outside.

[32 : 58] Though he is supposed to be, Ananias, rendering judgment in accordance with the law, he is himself in violation of the law as the supposed judge himself.

And at this point, Ananias' associates scold Paul in verse 4, saying, Would you revile God's high priest? And Paul's response is to me surprising. He says, Humbly, I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.

I think if I were put in Paul's place, I would have responded a little bit differently. I think I would have been tempted to reply, I couldn't care any less that you're the high priest, Ananias.

You're all pretending to be dignified and presiding over this trial when this is all a farce. This is a mockery of justice and you deserve every word I said to you moments ago.

That's what Paul could have said. But he doesn't do that. Even while he's being subjected to a sham of a trial, even at the face of his own death, potentially, he wants to hold on to his integrity and do what is right by God's word.

[34 : 19] Because God's word says in Exodus 22, 28, You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people. Even when we are wronged, we must do no wrong in return.

Even when we are reviled and sinned against, we must not revile and sin in return. Peter Wenner, who is a conservative policy advisor and political speech writer, he was formerly working for George W. Bush, he wrote in an article recently in The Atlantic critiquing Donald Trump Jr.'s recent speech at Turning Point USA.

saying, this is what Trump Jr. said, quote, if we get together, they cannot cancel us all, okay? They won't. And this will be contrary to a lot of our beliefs because I'd love not to have to participate in cancel culture.

I'd love that it didn't exist, but as long as it does, folks, we better be playing the same game, okay? We've been playing T-ball for half a century while they're playing hardball and cheating, right? We've turned the other cheek, and I understand, sort of, the biblical reference, I understand the mentality, but it's gotten us nothing, okay?

[35 : 37] It's gotten us nothing while we're seated ground in every major institution in our country. First, Trump Jr.

is mistaken to conflate conservatives with Christians, even though there are a lot of conservative Christians. there are atheist conservatives and there are corrupt conservatives, just as there are atheist liberals and corrupt liberals.

Second, claiming that turning the other cheek has gotten us nothing exposes his naked pragmatism. For him, it's about what works, what gets us things, what gets us influence, what gets us clout, what gets us power in this country, what gets us the things that we want.

to be to be but that's not what following Jesus is about. I want the major institutions in our country to reflect Christian values and Christian priorities just as much as the next person, but not at the expense of our integrity, not by compromising our witness to the world, not by being disobedient to our Lord's commands.

Jesus did not say, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves that forget outfitted with body armors and guns, slander back when slander, revile back when revile.

[37 : 13] No, that's not what Jesus said. He said, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves and that means you're going to be torn apart.

That means we will suffer. That means we will be persecuted. And that means some Christians will even die for their faith. But that is the path of Christian obedience.

Why must we follow that path? 1 Peter chapter 2 19-25 says this, for this, I can have this to show you, for this is a gracious thing.

When mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if when you sin and are beaten for it you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

For two days you have been called because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

[38 : 30] When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sin in his body on the tree, that we might die sin and live to righteousness.

By his wounds you have been healed, for you are straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your soul. Because Jesus, the Lion of Judah, who had all the power in the world, died as the sacrificial lamb of God.

We are now to be his sheep, following in his footsteps. Living as sheep among wolves, so that we might bear witness to Jesus, even in a hostile lamb.

And because we are sheep among wolves, it is necessary that we be as true as snakes and innocent as doves. And as we're enduring suffering and persecution for Christ's sake, maintaining our innocence, God assures us that we will never suffer alone.

And that's my final point, and it's my shortest point, so don't worry. God's presence. Smackdown in the middle of this passage, chapter 23, verse 11, it says this, the following night, the Lord stood by him and said, take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

[40 : 07] Isn't that wonderful? what God said? The Lord himself, the Lord Jesus himself appears to Paul. He didn't send an angel here. He appears himself, and he says the Lord stood by Paul.

He stands by his people who bear faithful witness to him. He stands by his people who suffer for his name's sake. It reminds me of what Paul said at the end of his life.

In 2 Timothy chapter 4, verse 16, when he was being persecuted, he says, at my first defense, no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me may not be charged against them.

But he says this, but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me. In the face of the most intense persecution, even when your family members leave you, even when every single one of your brothers and sisters in church forsake you, even when no one else stands by you, the Lord will stand by you.

That's the promise of this passage. Right after Paul's traumatic trial before the Sanhedrin, and right before the Jews plot to assassinate him, he says the Lord stood by Paul, and he told him, take courage, assuring him that he will not die in Jerusalem.

[41 : 41] In fact, you're going to go all the way to Rome. You will bear witness to me even in the capital of this empire. You will bear witness to the name of the Lord Jesus before Caesar himself. You will not die here.

Take courage. Take heart. God had to say that to Paul because Paul was losing heart, because his courage was failing.

Even a weathered veteran like Paul grows weary, weak, and fearful at times, and our gracious Lord Jesus knows that. Our Lord is not callous.

He's not indifferent to our suffering. When we bear witness to Jesus, Jesus is with us to strengthen us.

He will never leave us alone. Some of you have testified to your Lord, our Lord Jesus, to your friends and family over the holidays, and maybe you're discouraged by their response.

[42 : 52] Perhaps some of you were mocked or ostracized recently for your faith in Jesus at school or by your family members or at work. And maybe you're not afraid to take a stand for Jesus again.

But the Lord Jesus says to you this morning, take heart, take courage. Those who acknowledge him before man will be acknowledged before God who is in heaven by the Lord Jesus himself. so let's bear witness to him as sheep among wolves, shrewd and innocent, trusting in God's presence and protection. Let's pray together.

God, we thank you that you are a gracious, gentle, and kind Lord and master.

We thank you that when we suffer for your name's sake, you do not leave us. You are not indifferent. You're not callous.

[44 : 05] You sympathize. you empathize. You are near.

You're not far off. God, we ask that that truth, that we would remember that truth and that we would be encouraged by that truth to bear faithful witness to Jesus here at home and to the end of the earth.

because your name is worthy of it all. Because there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

It's in that precious name we pray. Amen.