

## **Running With The Horses**

I want to talk to you from my heart this morning. Not that I don't try to do that every Sunday, but this morning I feel less like I have a sermon and more like I have a concern, a burden on my heart that I want to share with you. I want to sound an alarm I suppose.

I'm troubled about where we are as the church, as believers at this time in history. I'm troubled about where I am at this point in my history, in my journey. I think by this time I should be experiencing a deeper walk with God, I should have by this time developed a greater intimacy with the Lord. I shouldn't still be so easily tripped up by the little things, those besetting sins. I shouldn't still be so vulnerable to temptation, to the shallow enticements of our culture.

We spoke last Sunday about the importance of the foundation upon which we build our lives and the material we use in building. I chose to build my life upon Christ, the solid rock a long time ago. I've tried to build with good material, with those things that are consistent with the character and nature of Christ as revealed in God's word, but I still think I should be farther along. I should have more to show. I should have greater wisdom and deeper understanding of the things of God by now. I should have a greater intimacy with God.

And now, I look around and find myself weary and worried; wearied by the times, wearied by the insistent tug of my own flesh and its' weakness, worried about the lack of success as we try to present the gospel to a world that refuses to listen to or to even consider the truth, worried about the increasing tendency of the church in America to embrace a cheap grace and a no-cross-no sacrifice discipleship.

You remember the message I preached the last Sunday of 2008. We talked about how far we have moved from the biblical pattern for life. Remember the illustration, that we cut a 2X4 using a tape measure for our measurements, but then instead of using that tape measure for each board, we began using the next board we cut as the pattern. We cut 2,000 boards using the first board to measure the second, the second to measure the third, the third to measure the fourth and so on. I told you then, if we were only off less than the width of the saw blade, if we were off only 1/64th of an inch on each board, by the time we cut the last board, we would be off over 31

inches: over two and a half feet. Moving away from the standard is a costly mistake. It seems so tiny, so unimportant and insignificant. It's only the width of two sheets of paper. How can that effect us? But with each generation we move farther and farther away from the standard, the true measure. And in our life of obedience and faith, if we measure ourselves by our own standard rather than God's standard, before long we are living far short of his calling and purpose. We are living far less than the life he desires us to live.

Are we living by his standards? Are we holding fast to the pattern of Christ and his word or have our lives and our worldview been swept away in the strong current of a totally secular culture? Have we been swept away from a life of obedience to Christ? Pulled off task and away from our mission? Have we failed to notice the strength of the current that pulls us away from the shore line of God's truth and an eternal perspective of life? I wonder if we are adrift and don't even know it? We can't even recognize that we have drifted from the faith and from God's truth.

James White tells of a story written by Soren Kierkegaard. He "wrote of a fire that broke out backstage in a theater. The clown came out to inform the audience. They thought it was just part of the show – a joke– and applauded his announcement. He repeated his warning, but they shouted all the louder. Kierkegaard concludes, 'So I think the world will come to an end amid general applause from all the wits, who believe that it is a joke.'"

We are living in serious times, perhaps the closing days of time as marked by the Scripture, but the world thinks it is all a joke. And what about the church – what about us? Do we believe the warning signs or are we simply laughing with the crowd, believing it's all a joke? Or even worse, have we become a laughing stock to the world? Through compromise and spiritual lethargy has the church become a clown to the world with a message that is irrelevant at best and laughable at the worst?

There is a current that is running through our culture and our world attempting to pull us away from God, away from a life of obedience, away from a spiritual perspective and the eternal pull of heaven. I'm concerned that we have indeed been swept along by a current that was stronger than we expected. We realize we are further away from the shore than we thought we could be. Our children and the next generation are

perhaps even farther away. We are not just drifting along, rather we are being swept along by this current. It's not just a joke. It's serious and it's late in the day and the current is strong. What must we do?

Let's start by simply opening our eyes and acknowledging the seriousness of the problem. We are caught in the undertow of a current that wants to pull us along with the crowd and away from the foundation of our faith.

I've been reading a book by James Emery White called *Serious Times*. In the book he quotes from a sociologist named Peter Berger who wrote about three things that are having a dramatic effect upon our culture and upon the way we live our lives. He speaks of secularization, pluralization and privatization. My apologies to those of you who heard this on Wednesday night, but allow me to quickly explain what he is talking about.

**Secularization.** By secularization he is referring to the means or process by which everything in our culture has become (quoting from White) "divorced from religious or spiritual sensibility ...it enthrones that which is of this world." Religion and spiritual truth have been marginalized and pushed into the realm of fantasy and mythology. Either that or its been categorized as a form of fundamentalist extremism.

Through this process of secularization the church has lost its influence in the world. We are no longer the voice of right, reason and morality. **Instead of the church shaping the world and our culture, the world is shaping the church.** An entire generation is being shaped and influenced by a secular view of the world that is openly hostile to the gospel and unashamedly opposed to the truth of God's word. There are fewer voices to nurture and reinforce Christian belief and values in our society. The power and influence of this secularization process is increasing and as it does, we, the church, must recognize it and respond appropriately. We must become more intentional in discipling and equipping believers with the truth of God's word. We must not sit idly by and watch as the church and the next generation are swept away by the raging current of secularization. We must act purposefully and decisively and we must act now!

**Privatization.** The second influence mentioned is privatization. Here he is talking about a process that creates division between our public and private life with

regard to religion and faith. Privatization says while religion and faith might be alright for you in your private life, they have no place in public discourse or in influencing public policy.

In the past religion and faith was accepted by our culture and was viewed as a canopy that provided cover for both our private and public life but now it is seen as a million different little umbrellas, each covering a private expression of individual faith. Faith has become a private matter to the extent that we can create our own faith without the input of God, the bible or any other truth. The author mentioned a woman named Sheila who said she had faith and had her own religion. She called it Sheilaism and she listened to her own little voice giving her direction for her life. This idea of privatization explains why we hear so many people talk about being spiritual but not religious. They have created their own personal faith. It also explains why we are even hearing Christians talk about loving God but not wanting to associate with the church. Religion and faith and the church have succumbed to this idea of privatization.

**Pluralization.** The final process he talks about is that of pluralization. This refers to the fact that we are being presented with a million different philosophies, ideas, religions and faiths. It's not just Christianity or Judaism or Islam, it's a thousand different religions and all of them are presented as though one is just as good as another. All faiths – all ideas are morally equal. Christianity and Islam and Hinduism and paganism and Sheilaism are all equal. All roads lead to God, right?

This is the ideological current that is raging through our culture. This is the current that is pulling us and our children and our families away from the faith. We have to recognize and admit this is a serious problem and we can't ignore it. To ignore it or to minimize it is to be lost.

Understand, the walk of faith we began when we placed our trust in Christ as Savior and Lord is not a stroll in the park. Although we are blessed by his presence and set free by his grace, the truth is we are engaged in a spiritual battle. Rather than a stroll in the park it is more like a walk through a minefield in enemy territory. Most of the time you would have to say this world, this culture is hostile to the way of faith. The devil, the enemy of our soul is trying to destroy every one of us. It's a battlefield, not a ballpark. Don't be deceived. We've made God and our journey with him much to tame.

The life he calls us to, though full of healing, hope, laughter and peace, is also a call to obedience and sacrifice. It means wrestling against the forces of hell as we each take up our cross and follow Christ.

There is a passage of Scripture that has been running through my mind and spirit all week as I've thought about these ideas. It is found in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 12. As you are finding that chapter let me tell you something of Jeremiah's circumstances. God called Jeremiah to administer the last rites to the nation of Judah. He was called by God just as a brief time of spiritual revival swept through Judah under the reign of King Josiah. Unfortunately, the people quickly went back to their sin after Josiah died and Jeremiah was this lonely and very unpopular voice warning the people of the judgment and destruction that was coming at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. He told them to surrender, to abandon Jerusalem because their destruction was inevitable. Jeremiah never had good news and his warnings were never well received. In fact, God told him when he called him, in chapter 1, that he was about to summon all the nations of the north to come against Jerusalem and the towns of Judah and they would be overthrown. Then he told Jeremiah not to be terrified by the people but to say whatever God told him to say. **"Today I have made you ...a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord."** Jeremiah 1:18-19. So there's a good word for you to start out your ministry as a prophet. Everyone will fight against you. No one will be there for you except the Lord. You will need to be rescued. More than once. So...be careful and have a nice day.

It happened just as God had spoken to Jeremiah. It was a little overwhelming to him. In chapter 11 Jeremiah discovers a plot to kill him by the men of Anathoth. He is discouraged, tired of having to stand up and tell the people, including his friends and family, that God is going to destroy them all for their sins. Tired of the rejection, tired of the spiritual battle going on, tired of being in the middle. He is tired of seeing the wicked prospering while the righteous seem to be struggling. Jeremiah 12 he asks the Lord, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper. Why do all the faithless live at ease?" He says, "It looks like you've firmly planted them and they are growing fruit while people

like me are being threatened with death and are constantly in a spiritual and physical battle. Why Lord? The wicked think they will get by with their sin, that you won't even notice their wickedness. So why not drag them off like sheep and butcher them. Tear them apart, Lord."

And instead of answering his question, God challenges the way Jeremiah is feeling. Look at what God says to Jeremiah. **"If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" Jeremiah 12:5**

What is God saying to him? (And this is the verse that kept running through my mind). Basically God is saying, "If you are going to throw up your hands and quit the first time someone threatens you, what are you going to do when it really gets difficult and they do more than threaten? If you think it's difficult now, wait till the real trouble starts. If running with men on foot wears you out, how in the world are you going to keep up with chariots and horses when the real battle starts? If you are stumbling and having trouble obeying me now when the ground is level and safe, when things are easy and persecution is at a minimum, how are you going to manage it when you are having to run through the thicket – when you have to risk property and life and reputation to serve me?"

Perhaps God was concerned that Jeremiah wasn't really prepared for the trouble that was coming. God was reminding him he needed to train and prepare for more than a footrace. God was asking Jeremiah to recognize that a deeper commitment was being called for. Jeremiah had been called to stand up for God and for righteousness before a very hostile crowd and culture and it wasn't going to be easy. Jeremiah thought it was tough just delivering the warning. Wait until he had to witness the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. God was telling Jeremiah to cowboy up. To rise to the occasion and get prepared.

I believe God is reminding us that we need to train and prepare for more than a footrace as well. We too have been called to take a stand before a hostile crowd and culture and it won't be easy. The current is strong, but the Spirit of God within us and the word of God within us are stronger. That is, they are stronger if the Spirit and the

word are within us. Are we prepared?

God reminds Jeremiah that he told him at the beginning he would be opposed by almost everyone. You can't stop now. You can't give up when the going gets tough. Don't panic. Don't start looking at the odds against you. Jeremiah had to remember two things. He had to remember that God told him these folks would fight against him, that justice would be delayed, that it would appear he was ignoring the cries of the righteous and allowing wickedness to go on, unjudged. So don't be frightened or overwhelmed when you see the opposing forces coming at you in spiritual combat. It was to be expected. Instead, remember the second thing God had promised – twice in the opening chapter of Jeremiah, that **"...they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord."**

I wish I could tell you that this world and our culture is going to change for the better and it will embrace Christ and will submit to God's word. I wish I could tell you that wickedness is going to decrease and peace is coming to this earth, but that's not what the bible says is going to happen. Not yet, anyway. If we are going to stand for Christ, more and more we will be standing alone. Standing for God and the truth of his word, like Jeremiah, is not likely to win you too many friends. The spiritual battles will grow with intensity as we move closer to the coming of the Lord, but don't panic. The size and intensity of the spiritual forces against us doesn't change the power and presence of God at work in our lives. What he promised to Jeremiah I believe he promises to us. He will be with us and he will rescue us.

But hear me today. God called Jeremiah and he is calling us to be prepared for the battle. We are running with the foot-soldiers right now, but if Jesus tarries his coming, the day is approaching when we will be competing with the horses and chariots. We are running through open territory right now, but we will be climbing our way through the thicket. We don't need to be afraid, but we must get prepared. Recognize the level of commitment to which he is calling us. He is calling us to take a hard look at ourselves. Can we run with the horses? Are we spiritually disciplined enough? Have we equipped ourselves with the faith necessary? Have we studied and applied God's word to our lives? Are we prepared for spiritual battle?

Look at Jeremiah, faced with a decision. Do I quit or do I stay, regardless of

what comes in the future? Eugene Peterson who wrote *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible wrote a book of reflections on the life of Jeremiah about 25 years ago. He references this passage in Jeremiah 12 and writes, "Life is difficult, Jeremiah. Are you going to quit at the first wave of opposition? Are you going to retreat when you find that there is more to life than finding three meals a day and a dry place to sleep at night? Are you going to run home the minute you find that the mass of men and women are more interested in keeping their feet warm than in living at risk to the glory of God? Are you going to live cautiously or courageously? I called you to live at your best, to pursue righteousness, to sustain a drive toward excellence... It is easier to relax in the embracing arms of The Average. Easier, but not better. Easier, but not more significant. Easier, but not more fulfilling. I called you to a life of purpose far beyond what you think yourself capable of living and promised you adequate strength to fulfill your destiny. Now at the first sign of difficulty you are ready to quit. If you are fatigued by this run of the mill crowd of apathetic mediocrities, what will you do when the real race starts, the race with the swift and determined horses of excellence? What is it you really want, Jeremiah, do you want to shuffle along with this crowd, or run with the horses?"

"It is unlikely, I think, that Jeremiah was spontaneous or quick in his reply to God's question. The ecstatic ideals for a new life had been splattered with the world's cynicism. The euphoric impetus of youthful enthusiasm no longer carried him. He weighed the options. He counted the cost. He tossed and turned in hesitation. The response when it came was not verbal but biographical. His life became his answer, 'I'll run with the horses.'"

Like Jeremiah we must choose and I believe there is only one answer for us. We must choose to run with the horses. We will not quit nor give up when opposition comes, when the spiritual battles heat up. Instead, we will remain determined, steadfast in our commitment to Christ and his word. And if we are going to run with the horses, we had better get ourselves prepared.

What do you do to prepare for any competition? You train, you study, you build up endurance, you build up your strength, you build up your mental toughness and alertness, you train your reflexes to respond quickly, you work to be ready. You commit

yourself to the process, realizing it requires discipline, sacrifice, determination.

I believe we must take action and prepare. These are serious times and we must spiritually prepare ourselves to not only run with the foot soldiers, but to run with the horses and chariots as well. We must get ourselves ready for what God has for us in the future. Get ready to run with excellence, with determination, with skill. Get ready to run as overcomers, as conquerors, as spiritual victors through Christ. Get ready – whatever it takes - to run with the horses.

I hope we will do some serious thinking about where we are and how we are living. How committed are we to Christ? How disciplined are we in our spiritual life? Are we prepared to obey the Lord and commit everything to him? **Are you prepared to run with the horses?**