

Theme: We are not in it to Win a Popularity Contest.

Text: Jeremiah 20:7-13 (NKJV)

⁷ O LORD, You induced me, and I was persuaded; You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I am in derision daily; Everyone mocks me. ⁸ For when I spoke, I cried out; I shouted, "Violence and plunder!" Because the word of the LORD was made to me A reproach and a derision daily. ⁹ Then I said, "I will not make mention of Him, Nor speak anymore in His name." But His word was in my heart like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not. ¹⁰ For I heard many mocking: "Fear on every side!" "Report," they say, "and we will report it!" All my acquaintances watched for my stumbling, saying, "Perhaps he can be induced; Then we will prevail against him, And we will take our revenge on him." ¹¹ But the LORD is with me as a mighty, awesome One. Therefore my persecutors will stumble, and will not prevail. They will be greatly ashamed, for they will not prosper. Their everlasting confusion will never be forgotten. ¹² But, O LORD of hosts, You who test the righteous, And see the mind and heart, Let me see Your vengeance on them; For I have pleaded my cause before You. ¹³ Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD! For He has delivered the life of the poor From the hand of evildoers.

In the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, whom we confess unashamedly in the world, dear fellow redeemed;

"We are not in it to win a popularity contest." This expression came to mind when reading today's Gospel lesson where Jesus tells us what is involved in being a Christian who unashamedly confesses Him and His teachings in the world. Jesus, who is our master and teacher, tells us that since He was not popular with many among whom He carried out His ministry, but was persecuted, so also we, who are His disciples, can expect the same kind of mistreatment in the world. The saying "we are not in it to win a popularity contest" also occurred to me when considering today's sermon text about the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah. He was not a very popular prophet with the Jews of Judah and the city of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah's unpopularity was not due to any fault of his own. He was despised by the Jews, because of the message from God he proclaimed to them. Jeremiah was instructed by God to reprove the Jews for forsaking the true God by engaging in the idolatrous practice of worshiping false gods which included a ritual rite of sexual immorality and sacrificing their children to these idols. Since the children of Israel continued to reject this reproof from Jeremiah and other prophets before him, the prophet was also to warn them of a dreadful impending judgment. This divine judgment was the sending of the Babylonian nation to destroy many in Judah, level the city of Jerusalem, and carry off survivors into captivity. The Jews with hardness of hearts rejected this divine message from Jeremiah, because they didn't like what they were hearing and were greatly offended by it.

Over the course of my ministry there have been cases where souls entrusted to my care were not very receptive to being reproved for sins they had been guilty of or were living in nor were they very pleased to be warned of the spiritual and eternal jeopardy they were in. I can safely say I was not one of their favorite persons to come visit them. Thankfully, though, there have been many members in whose hearts the Spirit of God worked repentance, and they rejoiced in the knowledge of their salvation through our Savior Jesus Christ.

What about you in your personal faith life when in testifying of the Christian way you try to help a fellow Christian or someone outside of the faith by lovingly exposing a false belief or a sinful practice, how has your help been responded to? That, of course, depends on whether the Holy Spirit was successful in opening their minds and hearts to be receptive to it. Whenever or wherever your testimony is not well received, you are most likely not very popular with them. And they let you know it by the way they speak to you and treat you.

The mistreatment Jeremiah was subjected to by his unresponsive hearers was no picnic to say the least. In the opening verses of chapter 20 of this book, we read of the leading religious authority in Jerusalem physically beating Jeremiah and putting him in stocks at one of the gates of the temple. On another occasion Jeremiah was thrown into a deep, dark, and dank pit. His enemies went so far as plotting how to get rid of Jeremiah by killing him. Also, in the prophet's discourse found in our text, he tells of being daily subjected to mockery by everyone and being made the laughingstock of the city. His mockers were interested in getting a hold of any piece of slanderous lies they could spread around town in order to discredit him. Even Jeremiah's personal friends turned against him. In verse 10, Jeremiah writes of them, "All my acquaintances watched for my stumbling, saying, 'Perhaps he can be induced; then we will prevail against him, and we will take our revenge on him.'" His so called friends were carefully watching and listening to Jeremiah in the hopes of catching him trip up in his ministry so that they could use that against him. To be sure, Jeremiah was not winning any popularity contest when he faithfully went about his work of proclaiming God's message of repentance and salvation through the promised Savior.

As stated before, it is not very pleasant nor it is an easy thing to be subjected to such ill treatment simply for trying to help people with the Word of God. And it is in times such as these that our old sinful nature has a tendency of kicking in, causing us to have questions and doubts about testifying of God's Word in a hostile world.

Jeremiah had misgivings about his work among the Jews in Judah, as well as temptations to stop witnessing to these people. He remembered how the Lord had called and persuaded him to take up the calling to serve as a prophet in Judah. But his work had only resulted in being rejected and mocked. When he clearly sounded the word of warning on account of their sinfulness and their rejection of God's Word, the people simply laughed at him and made fun of him. Whether it was a matter of frustration or not wanting to be the butt of jokes or receive worse mistreatment, Jeremiah was struggling within himself about as to whether he should say anything more to the Jews. In other words, he was tempted to just stop testifying to them and remain silent about God's Word.

How many times haven't we been tempted to do the same thing? We may say to ourselves, why should I try to help others by testifying to the truths of God when they don't want to listen and they only get angry and upset with me, and they don't want to have anything more to do with me? We may also think to ourselves, I don't need this grief; if they want to treat me this way, they can keep on rebelling against God and suffer the consequence for it.

However, in the case of Jeremiah he did not give way to the temptation of stopping his testimony to the Jews. He couldn't do that. And why was this? How is it that Jeremiah couldn't stop bearing witness to God's Word? In verse 9, Jeremiah tells of his inner wrestling in which the will of God prevailed. He writes, "Then I said, 'I will not make mention of Him, Nor speak anymore in His name. But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not.'" Jeremiah tells of the Word of God causing him to have a burning fire and desire in his heart so that he could not remain silent, but was compelled to continue to proclaim the Word of God to an unreceptive and hostile audience.

What was the spiritual fuel in God's Word which ignited a fire in his heart which then spurred him on? Jeremiah doesn't specify what Word of the Lord it was. There is no question that he felt a sense of duty as a called prophet of God to faithfully carry out his work, just as it is the obligation of every Christian to serve as a Christian light in this sin darkened world. But what is even more compelling than this is what the apostle Paul says about what was the motivating force in his gospel ministry - a ministry that was not a very easy calling, but was quite difficult due to the many who opposed him and his testimony. He writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, "For the love of Christ compels us... He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again." (5:14,15) Both the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul were compelled by the redeeming love of the Savior Jesus Christ to

proclaim the message of salvation, preaching both the law of God which convicts us of our sin and the gospel of Christ which shows us our Savior. No matter what anyone would say or do to harm them this prophet and this apostle had to keep on testifying to God's Word so that lost and condemned sinners might have the opportunity to be led by the Spirit of God to repent of their sins and find pardon and peace in the Savior.

It was the Lord who was actively at work in the hearts and ministries of these servants of the Word. It was God who worked in them both to will and to do of His good pleasure, which in this case meant bearing witness to the truths of God for the spiritual and eternal welfare of their hearers. The prophet Jeremiah writes in verse 11, "the LORD is with me as a mighty, awesome One. Therefore my persecutors will stumble, and will not prevail. They will be greatly ashamed, for they will not prosper. Their everlasting confusion will never be forgotten." The mighty God was with Jeremiah. It was this powerful and awesome One who gave the prophet the necessary strength to carry on his work in the midst of a people who persecuted him. It was because of God that Jeremiah's enemies would not prevail against him. Instead of prevailing, quite sadly and very tragically they would come out on the short end of the stick. They would be the losers and be greatly put to shame. How is this? By hardening their hearts against the Word of God and not be willing to repent of their sins and return to God in faith for forgiveness they were not only faced with suffering a fearful judgment at the hands of their neighboring enemy who would defeat them, but worse still they were facing eternal condemnation.

Jeremiah didn't want this to be the fate for any of the Jews, neither do we want such a terrible end for anyone caught in sin and impenitence. That is why Jeremiah and confessing Christians continue to try to help others be rescued through the testimony of God's Word.

After hearing all that Jeremiah was subjected to by the Jews whom he tried to help, what kind of words would you expect to come out of the mouth of this prophet? Would it be words of complaint? Well, when we read the final words of our text, we hear words of praise coming from the lips of Jeremiah. He exclaimed, "Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD! For He has delivered the life of the poor from the hand of evildoers." The prophet Jeremiah was moved to sing and to speak words of praise to the LORD. He glorified the LORD being thankful to Him for blessing him, a poor sinful man, with deliverance from the hands of evildoers. First of all, the LORD had delivered Jeremiah from the hands of Satan by working in him repentance and faith in the Savior. And secondly, the LORD also made it possible for Jeremiah's enemies not to get the better of him by causing him to tuck his tail between his legs and run away. No. Rather, Jeremiah stood his ground, and continued to lovingly, fearlessly, and faithfully proclaim the Word of God to a hostile nation.

The message of this Scripture text was not only for the sake of Jeremiah or other called servants of the Word, it is also for all Christians in every generation of time. We are all called by God to confess Him and His Word in this sin darkened world. Like as with Jesus, we can expect not to win any popularity contest when we testify of Him. And like Jeremiah, we need to rely upon the Word of the LORD and the mighty God to give us the spiritual strength and courage to confess Him before the world. Why? Because God would have all people come to the knowledge of His salvation. God help us to be faithful Christian witnesses for the salvation of those whom God would still gather into His eternal kingdom. Amen.

- Pastor Mark Gullerud