

## Living Victoriously in a Crooked World

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The message for today... I want to tell you that this message has immediate relevance to every person, I guarantee it, in this room. Every single person. This is going to scratch where you have an itch. This is going to meet something that you struggle with. So, listen up. I promise you, this is equally relevant to every person in here. I want to start out with something Jesus said to His twelve disciples. It's one of those passages that maybe you wondered exactly what it meant. He's speaking to them just a short time before He's going to be taken from them and He's describing the world they're going to face right after He leaves. I believe His primary reference is to His generation and He's warning them. He says...

### **Matthew 24:12**

***Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold.***

So, He's saying that the generation they're a part of is a lawless generation and as a result, there's going to be pressure on people's love for God and each other to diminish. That generation was so lawless that they rejected the Messiah that Israel had been waiting for. If you study the teaching of Jesus, you'll know that He had decried their hypocrisy, and their materialism, and the pagan influences, and the divisions in their society (they were so divided), and the false leaders, and the religious legalism. Fast-forward just a few months and you come to the day of Pentecost, and Peter is preaching to the same generation. At the end of his sermon, there's a summary statement that summarizes what he's been preaching on and it's Acts 2:40. At the end of the sermon it summarizes this way and it says...

### **Acts 2:40**

***And with many other words*** (how many of you know he's a preacher—there's a lot of words), ***he solemnly testified and kept on*** (he said it more than once, he said it a lot) ***exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!"***

He was saying that they had to be saved from the generation, that they had to overcome the influences of that lawless generation if they were to be saved. Lawlessness has a corrosive effect on everybody that must be overcome if we're to be saved. A lawless society works to wear us down; to wear down our personal morality, to wear down our zeal for Jesus, our humility, our integrity, our compassion for others, our patience. While this is happening, most people seem unaware that it's happening. Do you know why? Because it's happening equally to everybody else. How many of you know the tendency is to measure ourselves by what everybody else is doing? We think, "Well, I'm not any worse than them." What happens is as lawlessness begins to cool everybody's love and everybody's faithfulness to Jesus, we hardly notice it because it's happening to everybody else. So, everybody's standards and everybody's behavior just begins to sink down to a new normal. We see it around here all the time in our culture and even in the church; less respect for authority, less humility, less personal morality, more fighting, more anger, more division, more bickering, more of a focus on what pleases us instead of what pleases God. Sunday—what used to be the Lord's day which was sacred and held for Him is now Sunday Funday. So, more and more, all of us together, everybody inside of the church and outside the church begins to focus more on pleasing ourselves rather than in our duty to love and honor God. That's what lawlessness brings about. Let's look at just for a moment and define what is lawlessness. What is that?

### **1 John 3:4a**

***Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness.***

Sin and lawlessness are different but it says that everyone who practices sin practices lawlessness. Sin, you might say, is a slip, if you will. It's when we fall short of what God wants. But when we practice it, that means we've made a decision that we're going to walk and continue in that sin and it doesn't matter what the Bible or anybody else says. And that, my friends, is lawlessness. Sin is the Greek word

“hamartia”. It comes from the world of archery. There’s a target and you fall short. Your arrow doesn’t reach the target or your arrow veers off the target. Literally it means to miss the mark, to miss the standard. Lawlessness is a completely different thing. That is the Greek word “anomia” which means ‘without law’. “Nomos” is law. Put an A in front of it, that means ‘no law’. So, lawlessness says: There is no law outside of myself. There is no standard that I have to aim for. So, sin is missing the mark but it’s not questioning that God has the right to set the mark, that God has the right to set the standard. So, when a person, like a Christian that’s not lawless, falls short of God’s mark, they feel guilt or they feel shame because they’ve missed the standard. But when a lawless person goes against God’s standard, they don’t feel shame, they don’t feel guilt because they deny that there is a standard. The great danger is that once you define away sin and you say, “There is no sin”, you say, “I’m going to write new standards” then you cannot be convicted by the Holy Spirit of sin; therefore, you cannot repent and therefore you are lost indeed. And of course, that’s what our society is struggling with. Thank God for the salt and light which you are. Jesus said that lawlessness in society will affect everyone including us believers, including us followers, and therefore we must be alert and vigilant and we must be actively standing against it. Second Peter 2:7-8 tells us something interesting about Lot in the Old Testament. It’s talking about God’s faithfulness.

### **2 Peter 2:7-8**

**... and if (God) rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (that means lawless, they were without principles, without law) (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds).**

He was tortured. He lived in that society and it was uncomfortable. Your level of discomfort living in a lawless society will reveal who has your heart. Because if you’re greatly pained by what’s going on around you, that means that God has your heart completely. But if you can fit in and laugh and participate and all that stuff without being discomfited then it means the world has your heart. Lot was greatly discomfited. But how many of you know that’s not enough? It’s not enough to feel uncomfortable with what’s going on because although Lot felt uncomfortable, he chose to stay in Sodom. He gradually adapted himself to Sodom. He even gave his daughters to be married to the people of that community. And what happened? He ended up losing everything even though he felt uncomfortable about what was going on.

Lawlessness in a society affects all of us. It’s like a constant pressure. It’s a constant downward weight. It’s playing in the back of our minds all the time, drawing us, influencing us. What does it mean for our love to grow cold? The Greek word in that passage where Jesus said, “Your love will grow cold” is the word “agape”. Now, I know some of you guys are Greek scholars and you know there’s a number of words in the Greek language that are translated as “love” in the New Testament but this word “agape” is reserved only for God’s love. The love of God that comes to us, the love of God that is within us, and that love which we are to share with each other. It’s not a human love. It’s God’s love in us. It’s that love. So, He’s not really talking about unbelievers because they don’t have agape love. He’s specifically saying, “The love of God’s people can grow cold.” What’s agape love? It’s covenant love. Jesus described it as: To love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your mind, all of your strength and then to love your neighbor (particularly your covenant neighbor) as much as you love yourself. That’s the standard and that’s what’s going to go cold. So, the example of others in society works to degrade, (as we watch them and are influenced by them) it works to degrade our faithfulness to God. It results in a growing compromise as we begin to take up the world’s standards and values and perspectives and practices and we begin, therefore, to move away from God’s values and ways of thinking and standards. Here’s the problem: compromise always leads to defeat. And increasing compromise always leads to a lessening of victory. There’ll be less and less victories the more that we compromise. God has so much more for us as individuals and as a church and as the church than we ever experience. In fact, the story of God’s people is a story of people falling short of the fullness of what God wants to do. And a great example of this we’re going to look at is in the time of the death of Joshua who was the great general who God used to bring Israel into the Promised Land. If you read the book of Joshua, you’ll read about incredible victories, miraculous events. The walls of Jericho come flying down. God used him to bring Canaan under Israelite control. Great victories. The generation of

Joshua that had come out of the wilderness was not yet populous or big enough to settle all of Canaan. It would have to be a multi-generational project. Joshua, and his generation, conquered all the major kingdoms. They took all the great cities. They were in effective control over Palestine, or Canaan, so that everybody was afraid to attack them. But they did not yet have control over all of the land because they weren't populous enough. That was to be left to the second generation. At the end of Joshua's life, he gathers together the second generation, all the leaders that would be emerging, and he gives them a charge to finish the job.

**Joshua 23:1-6**

**Now it came about after many days, when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side, (everyone was afraid to attack them) and Joshua was old, advanced in years, <sup>2</sup> that Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders and their heads and their judges and their officers, and said to them, "I am old, advanced in years. <sup>3</sup> And you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the Lord your God is He who has been fighting for you. <sup>4</sup> See, I have apportioned to you these nations which remain as an inheritance for your tribes, with all the nations which I have cut off (everything that I did and everything that you're going to do, God has apportioned that to you) from the Jordan even to the Great Sea (which is the Mediterranean) toward the setting of the sun. <sup>5</sup> The Lord your God, He will thrust them out from before you and drive them from before you; and you will possess their land, just as the Lord your God promised you. <sup>6</sup> Be very firm, then, to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left.**

Joshua reminds them of the wonderful things that God has done. He assures them of God's continuing promise to them, that God will continue to drive the enemy out and fight them. And then he charges them to stay in the ways of God, to be faithful to God. And then the book of Joshua ends with his death. The story picks up immediately in the Book of Judges. The first chapter of Judges is going to tell about the victories of the second generation, except, except, except... there's some very puzzling failures and defeats in that first chapter as well as some verses that'll make you scratch your head.

**Judges 1:19**

**Now the Lord was with Judah, and they took possession of the hill country; but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had iron chariots.**

Then let's look at Judges 1:8 and 21 and find out about another failure.

**Judges 18, 21**

**Then the sons of Judah fought against Jerusalem and captured it and struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire. <sup>21</sup> But the sons of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem...**

If God had promised them that they could have the land and if He was with them, if they were the people of God and they had the promises of God, then how could they be defeated by iron chariots and by higher walls? Is that too hard for God? Is anything too hard for God? How could God's people be defeated? They could do the easy thing. They could defeat the army without the chariots but not the hard thing. There was the upper Jerusalem and the lower Jerusalem. The lower Jerusalem they defeated, the lower part, it was easy. But the upper city had higher walls, it was better defended and that they couldn't do. It was too hard for them. Was it too hard for God? These are the same things we struggle with. Why don't we have more victories? Are the things that we battle too hard for God? And yet, we fail. The question is, how can iron chariots and high walls be something that's too hard for God? Here's the answer. The iron chariots and the high walls were the military reason why they failed. The iron chariots and the high walls were the human excuse that was given but it wasn't the real reason that they failed. There's always a human excuse. There's always a human reason why we don't get the fullness of the victory that God has promised us. We can say things like, "The enemy was just too strong. There were just too many people on the other side. We just didn't have enough money.

The media didn't tell the story truly. The schools aren't teaching God's Word. They're teaching falsehood." We can always find the human reason but to know the real reason why Israel failed, we have to go to the next chapter.

**Judges 2:1-4**

**Now the angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim, And he said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, <sup>2</sup> and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed Me; (He said, "I told you not to be influenced by them, not to take on their ways, not to worship their gods, but you have not listened to me"—this is the second generation) *what is this you have done?* <sup>3</sup> *Therefore I also said,* (in other words, I said before that I would go before you and I would drive out all of them before you, but look at what you've done, so I added this to it. Now I will say...) *"I will not drive them out before you; but they will become as thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."* <sup>4</sup> *And when the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept.***

You see, the angel explained to them why they couldn't fully overcome. It was because God was not fully with them anymore. They had drifted from full devotion to God and so they no longer had the full anointing of God. They no longer had the full blessing of God. It's one thing to be the people of God. It's one thing to be the heir of all His promises but it's another thing to have the full anointing of God, to have the full backing of God. They no longer had that because of compromise. I'll tell you, it's hard to fight, it's hard to labor when you only have a partial blessing and a partial anointing. You won't get all the victories then. You'll wonder, just like they did, why are we defeated just because they have iron chariots? God had promised them beginning when He spoke to Moses and Joshua, He said. "I will go before you. I will throw into confusion all those among whom you come. I will put terror upon them so they will turn their back on you. They will flee from you seven ways. I'll send the hornet before you. I'll give you the victory." And He did that for the first generation and the promise was for the second generation, too, but then they changed. I want you to remember Joshua's generation, the first generation. There was only one defeat they had in their campaign. After their great battle at Jericho when the walls came down, they went to fight a little city called Ai and it was so small they only sent part of the army and yet they were totally defeated. And then God explained to them the reason why they were defeated is during that first battle at Jericho, some of the army had taken forbidden things from the Canaanites which God said they were not to have. Therefore, they didn't have the full anointing and when they went to battle, they lost. Joshua and that generation learned that lesson. They never compromised again. They never had another defeat. But now things are different. What had been a one-time slip up in the first generation from which they learned from has now become the norm for the second generation. It's become their lifestyle. The lifestyle of compromise. The lifestyle of drifting with the culture that was around them. And so now they didn't have victory because, you see...

**Compromise always leads to defeat and increasing compromise always leads to fewer and fewer victories.**

Israel failed not because of iron chariots, not because of high walls, not because the enemy was greater or had more money. They failed because of a lack of consecration to God and a lack of faithfulness. I want to give you a definition of consecration which fits for us as Christians. This is a New Testament definition of consecration. It's a...

**Commitment to love and obey God with all your heart and to seek above all to grow into the image of Christ.**

We've talked about how lawlessness is like a drag on all of us. It's like constant background music. It's like a strong pull to pull us along with the culture. And we've talked about how that leads to compromise; how compromise leads to defeat. So, if we want to overcome the effects of living in a

lawless age, I want to give you five strategies that will help you do that. This is nothing brand new. There are no surprises here. I just want to stir us all up to these five strategies which can keep us faithful to the Lord, which can keep our love hot in a cold age.

**Strategies to overcome the effects of living in a lawless time:**

1) Pursue blessedness rather than seeking wealth, popularity, prestige or happiness.

**1 Peter 3:9**

***For you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.***

Our purpose is to walk in God's blessing. We're taught by our culture to be preoccupied with possessions, with honors, with acceptance (oh, how people need the acceptance of people), with the pursuit of happiness. But the Bible says that it's more important to be blessed, that blessedness is better because blessedness allows God to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. All these people are trying to find peace and love and happiness in their own pursuits and yet these are gifts God gives to the blessed person. And who is the blessed person? The blessed person is the person who makes the pursuit of God's favor the highest thing. To pursue God's favor, you do that by obeying and loving God above anything else. Now, here's the problem. The moment you stop seeking God's favor above every other thing is the moment you begin to drift with the culture, with its values, with its viewpoints. Why? Because once you stop seeking God's favor above anything else, once you believe what the culture says, that they can give you happiness, you'll begin to be affected by what affects them. The culture doesn't believe in God. Or it believes that if there is a God, He doesn't matter. It's constructed a whole world without the need for God. There's no time for God. If you're thinking like the culture, if you're doing what the culture says, if you're living like they are ("I gotta get a new car. I gotta get a bigger house. I gotta get my kids to do all this stuff"), then you'll have no place for God either. We've got to resist that.

2) Aspire to holiness above any other ambition.

**1 Peter 1:15-16**

***... but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; <sup>16</sup> because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."***

God defines Himself as holy and He wants us to be defined in that same way. God calls you to be holy because it's the only way to be compatible with Him. God says, "If you want to know Me and you want to walk with Me then you've got to get on my wavelength. If you want to walk with Me, then your ways have to be compatible with My ways." Holy is not a popular word today. Books with that word in the title don't sell well. You don't hear a lot of sermons in churches on holiness. Yet the Bible says in Hebrews 12 that without holiness no one shall see the Lord. Without holiness no one will perceive the Lord. Without holiness no one will recognize what God's doing in the world around them. Without holiness you can't commune with the Lord. Without holiness you won't see the Lord in heaven. It's a big deal. So, the second thing: aspire to holiness above any other ambition. The third strategy, if you will, flows out of the first two because without the third strategy, you wouldn't know how to pursue blessedness or attain to holiness.

3) Devote yourself to God's Word.

You cannot keep yourself from drifting along with the world, farther and farther away from God unless you devote yourself to God's Word. *How blessed is the man who...* I want to just stop there. Anytime you read the words "How blessed is the person who..." you should stop and pay attention because the next word is going to tell you how to live the blessed life. If you want to be blessed, pay attention.

**Psalm 1:1-2**

***How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord and in His law he meditates day and night.***

He delights in the wisdom of God, in the ways of God, in the thoughts of God. If you look carefully you'll see something here and that is that there are only two choices or outcomes that are listed here. One, either you will delight yourself in God's Word, you will make it one of the main works of your life, you'll keep it before your mind or else you will walk in the counsel, in the values, in the ideas of the wicked. You'll sit comfortably with them. You'll walk in their way and you'll fit in more and more.

I'm going to say something, you need to listen. Dave or I or the rest of the staff cannot effectively pastor you if you will not give yourself to the study and meditation of God's Word. No matter how hard our staff might work, no matter how skilled they are, they will fail. There has never been a religious leader, an apostle, a prophet, a pastor, a teacher, anyone that's ever been born that's been so anointed that they could guard and keep somebody from drifting away from God who would not feed themselves on the Word of God, who would not give themselves and critically think through life according to the Word of God. Unless you daily focus on God's Word, you will drift with the culture no matter what we do. If you go to this church, I preach on a variety of topics but somewhere in the sermon every time I'll say something about needing to honor this Book and be in this Book. I know for a lot of you, this is the "wah, wah, wah" part of the sermon, "Bible, Bible, Bible. God's Word. God's Word. Let me check my emails." So, I'm going to be really, really clear. Okay? I'm going to take the gloves off because I love you, because it's so serious. If you don't love and honor, and if you can't find time for the Bible, then you don't love God or honor Him because it's His Word. It's His communication to you. It's what He wants you to know. It's an expression of who His is to you. If you can't find time for the Bible and you don't love it, then you don't love Jesus because Jesus asked the question, "Who is the one who loves me?" And then He answered it, "The one who has My commandments and does them." If Jesus' words and teachings is not in the forefront of your mind (your meditating on it and thinking about it as you go through life), then how can you obey Him? If you can't find time for the Bible and you don't love it then you do not love yourself because you are imperiling your own eternal soul because it's the Word of God that's meant to keep us and help us and keep us from deception. And if you don't love it, then you don't love your children because you won't be able to give them what they need most of all; the truth and counsel. You won't be the person that they need you to be. And if you don't love the Bible and you can't find time for it then you don't care about your fellow human beings because you are refusing to become the very thing that they need; the light of the world in the image of Christ because the Bible says in Second Timothy 3:17 that the Word of God is given so that we might be adequate and equipped for every good work. And if we don't give ourselves to the Word, then we'll be inadequate and unequipped for what the world needs. We've just got to find the time in all the pressures of life and all the demands that the society puts on us to give ourselves to the Word of God.

#### **4) Prepare to accept mistreatment with joy and peace.**

##### ***1 Peter 4:12***

***Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you...***

We should never be surprised by persecution. We should never think of it as some unusual imposition on us. It is normal for the Christian life. They persecuted Jesus. Peter wrote this. They persecuted him. We have to be prepared. So many Christians are intimidated by being rejected, by being ostracized, by being cast out, by being misrepresented. If you're intimidated by those things then how can you ever stay faithful to God? Instead we're promised special fellowship with God during such times. Two verses later...

##### ***1 Peter 4:14***

***If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.***

So, we need to prepare ourselves to just be okay with being criticized and being wrongly accused of things, being persecuted.

5) **Seek to continually be filled with the Holy Spirit.**

True Christianity is a life lived in, by, with, and through the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is never meant to be something that you can successfully do. The Christian life is something you can only live when you are leaning upon and drawing from a wisdom greater than yours, a power greater than yours, a love greater than yours, a patience greater than yours, a compassion greater than yours. That's called walking in the Holy Spirit. Jesus called the Holy Spirit our helper. The word is "paraclete" in John. What that means is paraclete is the one that's called to be alongside of us. Jesus says, "I may be sending you out where you'll be criticized, where you'll be persecuted, but I want you to know I sent one to stand with you." Or how about this, "I sent one that's got your back." So, as you go through whatever you go through, whatever the challenges are, I want you to know you're not alone. Someone's got your back. Someone's strengthening you. Someone's comforting you. And someone's going to be rewarding and blessing you.

***Romans 14:17***

***... for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.***

Everybody wants righteousness, peace and joy. Everybody wants peace. Everybody wants joy. And everybody wants righteousness in the sense that everybody wants to be a better person. Everybody wants to be someone their kids respect. Everybody wants to be someone their wife or husband respects. Everybody wants to be good. That's righteousness. Everybody wants it and you'll never receive peace and joy and righteousness through simply pursuing the acceptance of the world. The world doesn't have it to give. Where is righteousness, peace and joy? In the Holy Spirit. Righteousness, peace and joy is in the Holy Spirit. The Bible says in Galatians 5 we need to learn to walk by the Spirit. A walk is a step by step thing. So, walking in the Spirit means that step by step as you go through every challenge and every difficulty and every hardship, that you do it relying on the Holy Spirit, drawing from the Holy Spirit, speaking to the Holy Spirit. Giving thanks and joy and just talking to Him. "Holy Spirit, help me as I go through this thing. Give me the wisdom. Thank you for that." It's just keeping the Holy Spirit at the forefront of your mind. Being aware of Him because He's there. Leaning upon Him because He'll help. Thanking Him because He's faithful. Staying in the Spirit.

Being surrounded, as I said, by lawlessness works to wear us down. As I was thinking about this, I thought about Moses. If you know the story of Moses, twice they were in the wilderness without water. Twice God brought forth water from a rock. The second time Moses went to that rock, and disobeying God, he struck it twice in anger and he spoke rashly to it. Why did he do that? He did it because the Israelites around him that he was leading were complaining so much, they were dishonoring God with their words, they were attacking Moses, they were talking about replacing him and going on and on and on, and he got so caught up by their lawlessness that he acted lawlessly. And guess what. It cost him, didn't it? He misrepresented God and he didn't get the fullness because he didn't get to go into the Promised Land. And the reason was because of the influence of people around us. Jesus said that the love of the many would grow cold. We have to fight against that. There is a great reward for those who stay faithful during dark days.

***Isaiah 60:1-2***

***Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. <sup>2</sup> For behold, darkness will cover the earth and deep darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you and His glory will appear upon you.***

You see, the darkness will cover the earth. The darkness will be on the people. The lawlessness will be around you. But if you'll just look up, if you'll look up from the headlines, if you'll just watch less bad news and just look up to God, God will arise upon us and we can live in His light.

I want to close with a couple of thoughts. Number one, this is important. Please, maybe write this down. The goal of this life is not pursuing pleasure, rather, it's pursuing obedience.

**The goal of this life is not seeking pleasure, it is pursuing obedience.**

If you seek pleasure in the things of this world, you will wind up disillusioned, disappointed, empty, bitter. But when you pursue obedience, you will enter into a joy and a fellowship that is supernatural. Can I give you one more important quote here? Jesus did not offer us a life of ease, He offered us a life of fellowship and of fruitfulness.

**Jesus didn't promise us a life of ease; He promised a life of fellowship and fruitfulness.**

There are so many Christians that go around with this idea, "Man, if God really loved me, how come I have to go through this?" "If God really loved me, why can't I have this?" or "Why can't that go better?" or "Why can't this be smoother?" He didn't offer us a life of ease. A life of fellowship with Him and a life of fruitfulness so we can go through life and through the difficulties and we can hear in the depths of our being, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." And you can have joy. Listen, I'm going to close out with this. Jesus said that because of lawlessness, the love of most people will grow cold. Most Christians. Most followers. What that means is that none of us are immune, nor are our kids. Our love for Christ will grow cold unless we learn to stand against it. We don't have to do everything that the world says. We need to stay focused on these five things.