

Mark 13:5-11

⁵Jesus began by telling them, “Be careful that no one deceives you. ⁶Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.

⁷“Whenever you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled. Such things must happen, but the end is not yet. ⁸In fact, nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places. There will be famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. ⁹But be on your guard! People will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues. You will stand in the presence of rulers and kings for my sake as a witness to them. ¹⁰And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. ¹¹Whenever they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand what you should say. Say whatever is given to you in that hour, because you will not be the ones speaking; instead it will be the Holy Spirit.”

The Influencer

I.

He was an influencer, long before that term came to be commonly used. He set the world on fire with the words he spoke and wrote. There were no Instagram pictures or TicToc videos or even any selfies to post of the most famous influencer of his day. There were, however, some pictures—sketches made by a famous artist of the day.

And so it came to pass that an influencer more famous in his day than any Kardashian today was recognized as he journeyed along toward an epic showdown with the powers that be. In town after town, escorts were sent to accompany him in grand style. Well-wishers flooded the streets as if they were there to watch the parade of a championship team returning victoriously to its home city. People climbed the walls and onto rooftops to watch him pass and cheer. Poets wrote about him; artists sketched and painted pictures of him.

So impressive was this influencer that centuries later an African American pastor named Michael King Sr., having learned about the way the influencer had championed God for the common people, legally changed his name and that of his 5-year-old son. I guess it was a fitting name change. You might be much more familiar with his son, another extremely famous influencer named Martin Luther King Jr.

If you hadn’t already guessed it, the name of the influencer we are talking about this morning was Martin Luther. He was on his way to a town called Worms where a meeting of the parliament of the empire was scheduled to take place. Luther had been summoned to appear.

On a spring day exactly 441 years before I was born, April 17, 1521, Luther arrived triumphantly in Worms at 4 p.m. Martin Luther had been condemned as a heretic, but was promised that he would be given a fair trial at this event called the “Diet of Worms.” Instead, he was shown a pile of books and asked if he was the one who was the author of those books. He was asked if he would recant—in other words, retract—everything he had said in these books.

What would *you* do? Being called a heretic just means that you are teaching something that goes against the accepted beliefs. That doesn’t seem so bad, if you believe and are convinced that what you are teaching is actually true. No matter what the other side might call you, it’s brave to keep saying what you believe. The problem is, that wasn’t all there was to it. Being branded a heretic also meant that Luther was under a death sentence. His very life hung in the balance. How would he answer? Stick to what he believed in his conscience was right? Or save his life, living to fight another day?

II.

“Jesus began by telling them, ‘Be careful that no one deceives you. ⁶Many will come in my name, saying, “I am he,” and will deceive many” (Mark 13:5-6, EHV).

Many centuries before the influencer Martin Luther walked the streets of Germany, the most important man to ever live walked the highways and byways of a place called Judea. Jesus

was—and is—the most important influencer of all time.

Throughout the whole passage of time, people have tried to claim that truth is fluid—that it changes with the times or that it changes based on the situation one finds him- or her-self in at the moment. When Jesus was on trial, Pontius Pilate asked him: “What is truth?”

Truth is *not* fluid. Truth does not change. Truth does not depend on how you *feel* at the moment, or on what society accepts, or on what situation you find yourself in. There is something that is the solid, undeniable, unchangeable truth. It’s called the Bible; it is the very words of God himself, written down by human stenographers through a process called inspiration, in which God gave them the very thoughts and words they were to record in the books we call our Scriptures—the Old and New Testaments.

Jesus warned that even though God gave his Word, the forces of evil would try to deceive many.

Luther had become convinced that the church that controlled nearly every aspect of life in the world of his day had been deceiving many. The false doctrines being perpetrated on the people were not just minor infractions, they were causing people to trust in things other than Jesus for salvation. Perhaps even worse, these false doctrines caused far too many to fall into despair, thinking they were doomed to hell because they were incapable of doing the things their religious leaders told them were essential to gain eternal life.

“Be on your guard!” (Mark 13:9, EHV), said Jesus. The work Martin Luther began more than 500 years ago to reform and restore the solid teachings of the Bible did not stop the deceptions Jesus warned about. Within the Christian community there continue to be those who cloud the clarity of Scripture with words that sound good or logical, but twist the Word of God to serve their own purposes. There are religions that masquerade as Christian; they are not Christian denominations, but false religions that deny the fundamental teaching of the Triune God—they deny that Jesus is both truly God and truly human and that he, alone, is the way to salvation.

A group of Christians in a place called Berea gave an example for every generation of Christians to follow: “They received the word very eagerly and examined the Scriptures every day to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11, EHV). They didn’t take things for granted, even things the Apostle Paul told them. They tested his words. They cross-referenced with the Bible they already had to see if what Paul said was consistent with the rest of God’s Word.

III.

Jesus said: “The end is not yet... ¹⁰ the gospel must first be preached to all the nations” (Mark 13:7, 10, EHV). Gospel means “Good News.” The good news the word gospel refers to is the good news that Jesus completed the work of salvation.

Sin has been a plague far worse than any virus. Sin is far more destructive to real freedom than restrictions made by governments or health departments. Sin causes separation from God.

Jesus spoke about the signs that we are living in the last days. He said: “Whenever you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled. Such things must happen, but the end is not yet. ⁸In fact, nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places. There will be famines. These are the beginning of birth pains” (Mark 13:7-8, EHV).

The signs that we are living in the last days are simply symptoms. The real, underlying problem for everything is sin. It is sin that destroyed the perfect world God created for our first parents, Adam and Eve. After the two fell into sin, God told them about the consequences. You can read for yourself those consequences in Genesis 3.

Suffice it to say that every problem we deal with in a world tainted by sin is to remind us that we have a broken relationship with God that needs to be restored. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus completed that work of restoration. He lived absolutely perfectly, without any hint of sin in his life from conception to death. His execution on the cross was painful, to be sure, but the even more intense pain he faced as he hung there was that the Heavenly Father abandoned

him so that he would suffer alone the hell that every single sin ever committed by any human being deserved.

Even before he died, Jesus cried out “It is finished.” The hell we deserved was paid. Your relationship with God was mended. You have been set free from your sins.

That’s why the deceit of false doctrine is so devastating. Jesus won. Every man, woman, and child needs to know that. Payment has been made. There is no need to try to *do* something to earn your salvation. In fact, there is no way you *could* do anything. Everything *you* might do to try to get right with God would be tainted by sin. To try is really to deny—to deny that Jesus has already purchased and won your salvation.

IV.

Back to the influencer on trial in the city of Worms. He had come expecting a relatively civil debate with theologians who were on the side that branded him a heretic. He thought he would be able to show them the various passages of Scripture that had led him to write the various things they had claimed were false. He probably entered the chamber that April 17th very confidently, perhaps with a smile on his face. After all, he had the Word of God on his side.

Rather than having an opportunity for civil debate, Luther was given an ultimatum. Recant, or else. The “or else” was really a death sentence.

I can only imagine the look of shock that must have covered Luther’s face. Facing his accusers, Luther said: “To say too little or too much would be dangerous. I beg you, give me time to think it over.” He was given one day.

He spent that time preparing his answer. He prayed and meditated on the Word of God. Perhaps a passage from today’s Gospel Reading was one that came to his mind: “Whenever they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand what you should say. Say whatever is given to you in that hour, because you will not be the ones speaking; instead it will be the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:11, EHV).

At 6 p.m. on April 18, 1521, Luther appeared before the council again to give his answer. The council waited anxiously in the flickering torchlight, convinced that they finally could put this messy chapter of dissent behind them. Luther spoke for 10-15 minutes. After he finished he was challenged yet again. It was then that Luther spoke these famous words:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by clear reason (for I trust neither pope nor council alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have cited, for my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything since to act against one’s conscience is neither safe nor right. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand, may God help me. Amen.”

Luther did exactly what Jesus tells each one of us to do. We are to stand on the Word of God. While the whole world might deny the truth or try to change the truth or to say that truth is relative, take your stand on the truth of God’s Word. By doing so, you are and will continue to be an influencer. Perhaps you won’t get millions of followers on social media platforms. Perhaps what you say about the truth will be challenged and denied. Don’t stop. Continue to be an influencer in your little circle. After all, it isn’t really *you* speaking, but the Holy Spirit speaking through you as you proclaim God’s saving gospel to others.

“Here I stand, may God help me.” Amen.

Sources of historical information:

- Eric Metaxas: Martin Luther; See the sections called “The Bull Against Luther” and “The Diet of Worms.”
- Luther’s Works 51:60 ff (sermon at Erfurt on the way to Worms)
- The Complete Book of When and Where: In the Bible and throughout History (Michael and Sharon Rusten) section titled: “1521 Luther Defends Himself at the Diet of Worms.”