Independent’s Day

**Intro** – This Sunday is part of the weekend in which we celebrate our independence from England, a freedom which was won after 8 years of bloody revolution to cast off the yoke of a far-off country which taxed our colonies and gave no representation in the English parliament. Each of us could be considered an “independent,” so I named today’s message, a play on words, *Independent’s Day*. The Declaration of Independence, which occurred early in the war (July 4, 1776), got things started. Up to 70,000 American patriots died during this campaign, many from disease. Finally, in 1783, England ceased all offensive actions on the North American continent and recognized our sovereignty. We, today, have a hard time relating to the years of turmoil on our own soil that these patriots experienced to have that victory, which was a political-economic one. Although there were many spiritual miracles throughout, it was not a religious war. Since then, we have gotten accustomed to a long period of relative peace, having been isolated from all the world wars since the revolution by the oceans around our country. The church has been relatively unhindered in its development in our country. As a result, it has become the partner of society, a respected member of the community, able to make itself visible, glorious, and powerful with giant buildings and publicity. This, however, has not been good. It is shrinking, not growing, and has little to offer the current generation of young people. It has a very weak, consumer-oriented, inaccurate message of bliss. It works so hard to keep from offending anyone that no one even notices it is there. Pastors are taught to avoid controversial subjects like gay marriage, abortion, or racial tensions. The Holy Spirit has been quietly purged out of the church because spiritual phenomena like tongues and healing make people uncomfortable. The church doesn’t have many mission-related conflicts with anyone. We should seriously wonder if we are any threat to the devil’s kingdom at all. We have gotten so used to peace that we make it part of the highest goals of the Christian life: peace and prosperity. If we do encounter persecution, we think we are missing God’s will. We lose sight of the fact that for most of the church in the world, *persecution* is the norm, *peace* is the exception. We are called to a battle, not a picnic.

**2 Tim 3:10-12** *10 But you, Timothy, certainly know what I teach, and how I live, and what my purpose in life is. You know my faith, my patience, my love, and my endurance. 11 You know how much persecution and suffering I have endured. You know all about how I was persecuted in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra—but the Lord rescued me from all of it. 12 Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.* NLT

The purpose of the church is to be God’s instrument to overturn the kingdom of this world. This, by its very nature, spells out c-o-n-f-l-i-c-t. The war will be won by Jesus through violence (…the Kingdom of God suffers violence…) and spiritual force, not by diplomatic talks or negotiation. We, being the instrument of change, will experience conflicts from two sources: 1. External – from groups outside our church (government, other nations, other non-Christian groups, and individuals), and, 2. Internal – from people within the church who fight with each other over petty matters, disobey the word, and rebel against biblical discipline, or desire to control God’s work in the church for their own preeminence. If a Christian cannot even handle persecution from his brethren, he will certainly not be able to handle persecution from anything larger, like a government or a group of citizens.

**John 15:20-22** Do you remember what I told you? 'A slave is not greater than the master.' Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they would listen to you. 21 They will do all this to you because of me, for they have rejected the One who sent me. NLT

It is a sad situation when a Christian or his church experiences no persecution at all. It is an indicator that the church has blended its beliefs with the world’s or, if it does believe God’s Word, the church doesn’t preach it in any effective way. A church like this fulfills what Jesus referred to in Matthew 5: The church has become like salt which has lost its saltiness. It is only fit to be used for anti-skid material to be walked on. Much of the church reaches only a small group of aging, declining believers who conduct rituals within their own buildings. These rituals are so separated from the people of the world that they might as well be done on another planet. Many Christians are so blended into the people of their workplace or community that you can’t tell who is the Christian and who isn’t.

 We also need to be careful to not manufacture persecution as a result of foolishness or immaturity. This would involve practices which Jesus never commissioned, like screaming out in tongues in a busy marketplace, or fighting with one’s employer. Jesus encountered persecution in the form of oppositional questioning often as he would be teaching a group, never because He set up a pulpit on a corner and warned the marketplace of an apocalypse. Everyone at some time in his life will be under a person of authority who is unreasonable. Anyone can work for a reasonable, good boss. The unreasonable one is a test. Being treated unreasonably requires that we do not answer back, but quietly suffer. This is a form of persecution, when we do not retort, even though we could. God notes this and schedules a blessing. We were called to this. The same goes for relations within the church. When someone offends us, we are to overlook it. Only if it continues are we to approach that person and tell them the fault. Christians who expect to find a completely seamless, offense-free experience in the church forget that Jesus said that a person’s enemies would sometimes be someone as close as his own household members, which would mean that members of the church could offend also. This Christian overlooks that fat that Jesus said that if they persecuted Him they would persecute us also.

**Acts 1:8**

8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." NLT

The early church did just what the church in the Americas is doing today: “sitting on the premises, rather than standing on the promises.” When there is no persecution, we make God’s will what we want it to be. Usually we become occupied with our own possessions and problems. We make spiritual things what we want them to be, usually condensing them so they can be done quickly so that we have more time for ourselves. The shortened version of the Lord’s Supper which we all grew up with is a good example of this. This is religion at its purest: Making God into what WE want Him to be. Our lives must be just the opposite: God makes us and the church into what HE wants us to be.

**Acts 8:1-5** Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. 2 (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) 3 But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison. 4 But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. NLT

It wasn’t until this section of the book of Acts takes place that the church got going and spread out into the surrounding regions. This seems to be the case every time the church gets a breather from persecution. It sets up headquarters buildings, accumulates money, starts programs, and gets organized. We have to wonder if the church wasn’t supposed to be constantly moving, changing locations, expanding, doing its quick work of baptizing and teaching, constantly meeting in new locations as it filled up homes. We count success as large crowds, big buildings, media coverage, monetary gain, honor from men, and recognition from the world. Jesus had all the opposites of these. He did his job perfectly and in the end, was crucified.

**2 Cor 12:10**

*That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong*. NLT

**Concl** – As American Christians, we must realize that our spiritual life does not parallel the deliverance experienced by the “Independents” after the Revolutionary War. We are not in a time of peace. We are, right now, engaged in a war. If you’re not experiencing persecution of any kind, you’re out of God’s will! You can start getting persecuted by receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit. People will refer to you as ‘tongues talker” or “holy roller.” You can get the persecution started by attending church, especially a branch group. You’ll find a loving group, but occasionally someone will offend you. Don’t stay home! You’ll get persecution started by offering to pray for someone who is sick in your workplace, or by answering their questions as to why you are optimistic and happy. You’ll get persecution started by refusing to participate in the raw humor of the bar or shop. Get involved with the poor; you’ll experience persecution because they’ll ask you for money. Don’t try to duck persecution! Persecution is a pathway to real blessing:

**Matt 5:10-12** God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. 11 "God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. 12 Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way. NLT