

## **The Rev. Charlie Holt:**

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we ask that You would fill us with Your Holy Spirit and illumine Your Word in our hearts and in our minds that we might not just be hearers of it, but also doers. And so, transfigure us from the inside out by the ministry of Your Word. May it be Your Word for Your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.

We're living in a season in our life of our country where people are becoming very disillusioned with institutions, not just the institutions of government, but institutions in general across the board. And I was reading some articles both by Pew as well as the Gallup Polls, and they've been studying this trend for about 50 years, and it's just a steadily decline of faith and trust in the institutions of our society. And one of the worst institutions or the place where people have the least confidence or faith is what, do you think? Any ideas?

The Congress.

That is the lowest, and in the poll that I saw it was 11% of the population has much faith in the Congress. And after the recent shutdown, that is a good example of why that might be the case.

The interesting thing where there was a top five of ones that people do have some level of more confidence in, at least better than 11%.

And the number one, and this was surprising to me, but it makes sense, is small business is an institution that people have a lot more confidence in the high 60s, and big business that's down at the bottom, as you might think. Presidency was a little higher from the bottom, and the Supreme Court was sort of in the middle in terms of our government. But the top five were small business, and then you had, oh my goodness, I've just gone blank in my brain. The military was the second highest, the police, and then you had medical system and then religious organizations, woohoo.

We made it into the top five, which was really good. That was somewhat encouraging until I saw the percentage was in the mid 30s in faith and

religious organizations, which, oh my goodness, we really are in a cynical time of disillusionment with organizations. I've heard people say this about organized religion, that they're spiritual and they believe in God, they just don't believe in organized religion.

And my retort is always; would you prefer disorganized religion? Because I sometimes can pull that off.

But one of the things is you're reading the gospel and you're hearing the words of Jesus.

Really, I think what He's saying is we need to be a little disillusioned with the institutions of our world and our society.

Here were the disciples, they were walking around and they were looking at the monumental stones and structures of the religious organization of that time, which was the temple complex in Jerusalem.

And some comments were being made about how magnificent it was. This is the way our gospel passage says, "When some of the, were speaking about the temple and how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, one could easily think that you would make those kind of observations about this beautiful space." You just kind of walk around, especially when you have the sunlight coming through the stained-glass windows and you say, "Wow, isn't this just a glorious place and all the dedicated gifts and offerings that have been given to make this structure such a beautiful place?" I visited the city of Jerusalem a couple of times and one of the places that you will want to go if you ever go to Jerusalem and Israel is to the Temple Mount.

And there you can see the foundation of the temple that is being described at this time.

There's one last section; it's called the Wailing Wall. Has anybody ever been there? If you've been to the Temple Mount, you've probably seen pictures of it, but you can go up and there, Jewish people still go, pilgrims will go and they'll place prayers in the mortar joints of the Wailing Wall and they'll pray

and offer their laments and their cries and their petitions to God. But as you're looking at the Wailing Wall and you get up close to it, you'll see the monumental stones are massive.

These hewn stone, the size of literally a bus that are just one after another and you marvel at how in the first century, they would have put this structure together.

Well Jesus goes on to say as they're reflecting on how magnificent and marvelous and how much dedication to God has gone into building up this institutional structure of the temple. And He says, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left on another. All will be thrown down."

That prophetic word of Jesus came to fulfillment some forty years after He spoke those words. When the Romans' empire came in and it literally sacked the city of Jerusalem and took and dismantled the temple and shoved its structures and stones into the Kidron Valley and into the city and just completely devastated the entire city of Jerusalem and burned everything that wasn't stone to the ground. The people fled to the hills and especially there was a group of people from Jerusalem that fled to the fortress of Masada.

When you go there, you can stand upon, this is a cliff fortress that Herod built and you can look down and see still to this day the Roman siege camps all around Masada where the Romans had starved out the last remnants of Jerusalem and they were building a siege ramp all the way up and instead of allowing the Romans to come in and kill them all or imprison them, this last holdout of Jerusalem residents committed suicide in the fortress of Masada. One of the great tragedies of history is the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and this is what Jesus is prophesying about. You may think that this is all glorious and wonderful, these grand institutions of faith to God, but they can be taken for granted and you can put your faith in things that will one day be thrown down and destroyed.

He would go on to say when they ask, "Teacher, when will this be and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

He says, "Beware that you're not led astray for many will come in my name and say, I am he and the time is near. Do not go after them." In times of great uncertainty and when there's a lot of political upheaval and brokenness in our institutions and in society, people will sometimes gravitate to charismatic personalities and Jesus warns against this. He says you need to be careful not to go after the people that say, "Hey, I'm the one. You know, follow me. I'll solve all your problems. I'll be the savior of whatever is needed in this moment. The time is now. I'm the guy or the girl." And we have some of that happening in our day even where charismatic leaders are stepping up to the plate and saying, "I'm the one that can solve the problem or fix the crises."

And in some cases, crises are beyond any leaders or talent. And so, Jesus warns us not to go after the gurus and the messiahs and the saviors of the day in times of turmoil and great crises.

And also, He challenges us not to lose heart in these moments.

When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.

There will be a lot of times and seasons in life where things seem to be falling apart.

You'll hear on the news there's a wars and there's insurrections and challenging things. He says those are not times that you might think, "Well, the end of the world has come." We don't know when that's going to happen, but it probably won't be just because there's wars and rumors of wars.

But what is the time when those seasons happen in life? Well, it's time to reach back out to the Lord. I love our canticle that was sung, "Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in Him and not be afraid."

The Lord is challenging us not to trust in the institutions as important as they are for our society, and I don't ever want to say, "Stop supporting organized religion. Get your pledge cards in if you haven't already," and so on. But our

faith and our hope is not in the buildings of St. Mark's or the institution of the church. Our faith is in the Lord of the church and the God, and even if the buildings fall apart and are completely leveled, our faith will not be destroyed with the rubble.

Why? Because our faith wasn't in the buildings or the structures or the institution or the whatever it is. Our faith is in the Lord. "Surely it is God who will save me. I will trust in Him and not be afraid." For the Lord is my stronghold. He's my institutional strength, and He's my sure defense, and He will be my Savior, not some charismatic guru.

And so, the Lord is challenging us in times of turmoil and political upheaval and monumental turmoil, to not be led astray into false worship, into false idols, but to trust in Him and to bear witness to Him in the midst of the difficulties.

He says, "Before all this occurs, they're going to arrest you and persecute you. They'll hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So, make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you the words and the wisdom so that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. The Lord will be your strength and your defense. He will give you the words that you need in the midst of the turmoil." We are as bad as our institutions are or disillusioning or disheartening, however you want to put it.

We still live in a really great place, don't we?

We're not going through the persecutions and the difficulties of not saying that they won't come one day. They could. We never should take what we have for granted or think that it couldn't change. It could. It can.

But we are living in a time where persecutions do happen in other parts of the world. In fact, this past century has been one of the most deadly for Christians out of all the centuries since the time of Jesus Christ combined, the last century was the worst. And more Christians were killed and tortured and persecuted for the faith than any other time.

Just in the news recently is the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, which is probably one of the most challenging and difficult places to be a Christian right now, as in the country of Nigeria.

One of the worst Christian persecutions happened in 1915 when the Armenians were killed. And this was an under-publicized persecution of Christians, but Armenia was a 90 percent Christian country and a very ancient and faithful people. And when the Ottoman Turk Empire took over Armenia, they would basically say to the people that, "Are you going to give up your Christian faith?" They would ask them a question related to their faith, and they would say, "No, they were strong in their faith," and they marched over a million people out into the Saharan desert and slaughtered them. It was a horrible persecution of the faith, and it happens in our lifetime and in our age.

I think for most of us, the level of persecution that we experience is maybe some uncomfortable conversations at Thanksgiving.

I mean, we have challenges on social media and things like that, and certainly those, I don't want to minimize those. Those are not, they're painful and they're hard when you have parents and friends and relatives that are not on the same page with you and your Christian beliefs and your values and your Christian faith. It can be very hurtful and painful, and yet the call of Jesus is when we're in times of political challenge and turmoil and difficulty, when the foundations of societal institutions are falling apart. That's time for Christians to actually stand up and bear witness to our belief in Jesus and to not be ashamed of His name or His gospel, but to be bold in our witness. And that doesn't mean we need to have an education and how to be an apologist for the Christian faith. What Jesus says is that He will give us the words.

We just have to have the willing heart to be the light and to let it shine and to allow His faith to shine forth through our faith. And His words to form on our lips, and that's a really incredible gift of the Holy Spirit of the living God.

The last thing I would say is that for many of us, we don't have institutions crumbling down around us. I mean, here in Little Ortega in the city of

Jacksonville, we've got it pretty good with a lot of wonderful things, and we need to be grateful for that and to protect it and to give thanks for it. But even in our lives as individuals and our families and maybe in our places of work, we can have upheavals and turmoils of things that are important structures in our life. We all crave certainty and predictability and patterns of life and health and stability.

And there are times where those things get stripped away from us, where our, whatever they are, our temple structures get torn down.

And those can be very tumultuous for a family or for us as individuals or for a company or whatever it is.

And I want to call us back again by way of just a reminder and a closer is to think about that song from Isaiah again, that in the moments of turmoil, and maybe some of you might be struggling with a moment of turmoil and disillusionment with structures of your life, surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in Him and not be afraid, for the Lord is my stronghold and my shared defense. And He will be my Savior.

I've spoken to people that even this week that have been fighting for their health and fighting for their life.

And one of the things that was said was, "In that moment, I'm reaching out to the Lord more than I ever have." It's a beautiful thing that happens when we go through times of stripping. We lose confidence in everything else, but it's hope in God that maybe the last straw that you have, but that was always the strength. That was the power. That was the fortress. The Lord is my stronghold and my shared defense. And He will be my Savior.