

Grace over Fear

Responding to Hostility with Meekness, Love, and Hope

When we hear the phrase “religious liberty,” many people think of court cases, governments, or international reports. But religious liberty is not just an abstract issue for experts. It touches real people around the world, like students who struggle to keep the Sabbath, employees facing pressure at work, families who worship in fear, or churches trying to be faithful in hostile environments.

So, on this Religious Liberty Sabbath, I don’t just want us to think about laws and policies. I want us to ask a personal question: **How does a follower of Jesus respond when faith is tested?** When we face misunderstanding, pressure, or even open hostility, what comes out of our hearts? Is it fear and anger? Or is it grace and trust?

Some years ago, a study in Europe on religious freedom, discrimination, and how believers react under pressure gave us a surprising window into that question.

Understanding the Meaning of Religion and Freedom

In 2011–2012, the PARL Department in Europe conducted a study on religious freedom and discrimination, and on how believers react in these environments. It offered some profound and surprising insights. The research explored how negative events related to human rights violations might have a positive impact on believers’ religious life.

Two distinct groups of people were interviewed about persecution and discrimination to better understand their feelings on the matter.

The first group included young Seventh-day Adventists between the ages of 17 and 25, active members of their local church. They lived in a political, social, and religious context that provided them with individual rights, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, the right to education, and the opportunity to practice their faith without restriction.

The second group consisted of people between the ages of 66 and 90. They, on the other hand, had experienced a period of intense persecution. Some of them faced imprisonment for months or years of their lives. In their generation, they had seen others around them die for their faith. In their youth, this group had limited access to education, few real opportunities to find work, and they lived with severe food restrictions. They did not enjoy freedom of travel or the right to express themselves. They were also restricted and persecuted. They were not given the right to choose their own religion.

The people in the first group shared how they felt about religious persecution by describing the feelings and reactions they imagined they’d potentially experience in that situation. However, it was not based on personal experience. They spoke about expectations and fears related to persecution or discrimination. Most of the participants associated persecution with fear, suffering, frustration, and

resentment. They worried about social exclusion, physical harm, imprisonment, and other emotional traumas.

The second group answered quite differently. Since these people had already lived through a period of discrimination and persecution, they answered with surprising maturity and spiritual depth. They shared the value of authentic faith in persecution, complete dependence on God, linking their lives to hope in God, exercising empathy with others going through similar situations, church unity, and steadfastness of faith.

Through this study, it was surprising to learn that the individuals' faith and lived experience do not just create spiritual maturity, it can also bring a person into a deep, authentic, and loving connection with God.

There are times in life when we may struggle with injustice and discrimination, but when we look back and see how God has guided us in the past, we can recognize His presence in every moment. The conviction that God is in control and that nothing happens outside of His knowledge should fill every believer with peace, calm, and patience.

Religious freedom affirms that people should have the freedom to choose their own religious path and to express their faith in public and private without coercion. Even though freedom of religion is widely recognized as a fundamental human right, its application is often conditioned by many factors, such as the legislation of a country and how fairly those laws are applied, the influence of majority religions, and the cultural and philosophical traditions of society.

At the heart of the Christian understanding of religious freedom is the belief that God created human beings with free will. This divine gift forms the foundation of any genuine relationship with Him. For faith to be authentic, it must be lived, chosen, and never imposed or forced.

Unfortunately, we live in a world that celebrates freedom in words but often limits it in practice. Today, millions of people are restricted in their right to worship according to their conscience. Many are discriminated against or even punished for expressing beliefs that may be at odds with political powers or religious majorities.

In this context, the believer is called to live his or her faith, sometimes in freedom, sometimes in times of injustice, sometimes in persecution. In all these situations, the genuineness of faith is reflected in a life that reflects the character of God.

Like Sheep Among Wolves

When we think about the different reactions to pressure experienced in the study previously mentioned, fear on one side, deep trust on the other, we are reminded of Jesus' own words to His disciples about living and witnessing in a hostile world.

In the Gospel of Luke 10:3, Jesus speaks simply but very profoundly: "Behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves."

These words may create many questions and challenges. Yet, Jesus urges his followers not to respond to persecution with hatred, fear, or violence. He describes every believer's life using the humble and pure image of a lamb.

The mission of believers was not to possess the merciless characteristics of a wolf, but to manifest the meekness of a lamb.

Jesus sent His disciples into the world, two by two, and entrusted them with the responsibility of spreading the gospel and representing Him before all people. Ellen White explains: *"As Christ's earthly ministry drew to a close, and He realized that He must soon leave His disciples to carry on the work without His personal supervision, He sought to encourage them and to prepare them for the future. He did not deceive them with false hopes. As an open book He read what was to be. He knew He was about to be separated from them, to leave them as **sheep among wolves**. He knew that they would suffer persecution, that they would be cast out of the synagogues, and would be thrown into prison. He knew that for witnessing to Him as the Messiah, some of them would suffer death. And something of this He told them. In speaking of their future, He was plain and definite, that in their coming trial they might remember His words and be strengthened to believe in Him as the Redeemer."* The Acts of the Apostles 21,1

A sheep is not characterized by power. It is an illustration of peace. It lives with vulnerability but not helplessness. A sheep may be in danger at times, yet it lives with the deep trust that it is protected by its Shepherd. It follows the Shepherd and listens to His voice. Wolves, on the other hand, are a picture of aggression and competition. Nevertheless, Christ sends us into the world to represent Him, not with the spirit of the wolf but with the spirit of the lamb. This is a spiritual strategy. The world conquers by power, but Christ conquers by love.

The main characteristics of a sheep, peacefulness, trust, obedience, are all expressions of meekness. Many people today consider these traits as signs of weakness. However, Scripture shares that they are the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in Galatians 5:22–23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law."

These qualities are indispensably linked to the deeply spiritual life of the believer. When we commit to responding with nonviolence, we will see that kindness disarms anger, gentleness overcomes hostility, and faith can withstand persecution. To maintain a deep spiritual influence and dignity, the believer must remain polite and respectful, even when wronged. When we defend religious freedom, we must do so with truth and love combined. The defense of truth must never use the weapon of hatred.

Throughout Scripture, the lamb is a symbol of purity, sacrifice, and patience. The sacrificial lamb pointed to the Messiah, who is the true fulfillment of the ceremonial system. Jesus is "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The Bible presents a wonderful perspective that will be fulfilled at the end of time. The meek Lamb representing Jesus Christ will return as the victorious King. Then there will be no more tears in the eyes of His believers, nor will there be any more pain in their lives (Revelation 21:4).

The Tension Between “Turn the Other Cheek” and “Why Do You Strike Me?”

In Scripture, Jesus Christ teaches a vital principle of nonviolence and challenges His followers to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39). This concept, which implies the absence of revenge and the refusal to return evil for evil, is difficult for many people. In another verse, Jesus is struck during His interrogation before the high priest. Jesus does not remain silent or passive, instead, He asks: “If I have told the truth, why do you strike me?” (John 18:23).

At first glance, these two teachings seem contradictory. One advocates silence and submission and the other shows Jesus confronting unjust behaviour. To “turn the other cheek” does not mean accepting abuse as if it were good, nor does it forbid us from seeking justice. It means refusing to join the cycle of violence and revenge. It is a conscious choice not to return insult for insult or blow for blow. The apostle Paul echoes this in Romans 12:21: “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”

“Turning the other cheek” is a way of living where a believer refuses to be part of violence or revenge. In other words, Christian meekness refuses both revenge and silence. We do not answer evil with evil, but neither do we close our mouths when injustice is done.

Every day of the Savior’s earthly life was a demonstration of God’s love for people, even for those who hated Him. Ellen White writes:

“The whole earthly life of Jesus was a manifestation of this principle. It was to bring the bread of life to His enemies that our Saviour left His home in heaven. Though calumny and persecution were heaped upon Him from the cradle to the grave, they called forth from Him only the expression of forgiving love. Through the prophet Isaiah He says, ‘I gave My back to the smiters, and My cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not My face from shame and spitting.’ ‘He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth: He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth.’ Isaiah 50:6; 53:7. And from the cross of Calvary there come down through the ages His prayer for His murderers and the message of hope to the dying thief.” Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing, 71,1.

Nowhere is this principle more profound than at the cross, where Jesus prays for His murderers and offers hope to the dying thief.

“Why Are You Hitting me?” -- The Voice of Love Speaking for Justice

When Jesus is hit by a temple guard during his trial, his response is not silence but a calm, dignified stand for justice. Jesus’ question is a profound and honest reaction to injustice: “If I have said something wrong, testify to the wrong. But if I have told the truth, why are you hitting me?” (John 18:23)

Jesus’ question exposes violence and demands accountability, moral responsibility, and justice. His response shows that love does not remain indifferent to injustice or unjust acts. Jesus stands courageously for the truth, but He does it with love.

The important lesson in this passage is that a believer's meekness should not be naivety, moral passivity, or timid silence. The believer is called to be nonviolent, but also to stand firmly for truth and to speak with love, even for his or her enemies.

Christian boldness is not violence, nor does it involve acts of aggression. It is determination without malice and the ability to speak truth in a way that does not insult or provoke. Jesus demonstrated this balance in His life. He exposed hypocrisy but did not resort to hatred. The love of Jesus was in the words He spoke, words meant not to destroy but to save.

Truth should always be spoken with courage, but never with hostility.

Prayers for Those in Authority

We live in a world marked by political, social, and even religious polarization. We see divisions between nations, communities, and sometimes even within churches.

1 Timothy 2:1-2 shares advice that is often overlooked: pray for those in authority. Apostle Paul says, "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

Many today might struggle with this command, especially when they see certain leaders as unethical, violent, or as violators of human rights and religious freedom. But we must remember the time in which Paul wrote these words. It was one of the most turbulent political periods in history, marked by unimaginable violence. Paul certainly did not agree with all the actions of those in authority.

Still, whether we live in times of peace or times of trial, we are reminded to pray for "kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." This is an expression of faith that God can influence the decisions of those in power so that believers can live their lives in freedom and mission.

While the world is preoccupied with hatred, revenge, and conflict, God has a mission for His people. We are called to present God's truth with love, to show the importance of forgiveness, and to be sources of peace and hope, even when the world pursues the opposite. This must be coupled with an unyielding persistence in our beliefs.

Standing Firm for Truth and Conscience

We are called as Moses was called before Pharaoh, and say "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness" (Exodus 5:1–2).

We are called to live our faith and stand firm like the Apostle Peter and the Apostle John did before the Sanhedrin: "You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:18–20).

We are called to risk our lives by standing up for truth as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood before Nebuchadnezzar: "We do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us... But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold that you have set up" (Daniel 3:16–18).

The "sheep" and "lambs" of whom the Savior speaks do not attack the wolves, but they stand firm in their moral integrity.

However, responding to hostility with gentleness, love, and hope is not possible through our own strength, but through a personal connection with our Lord. Ellen White so beautifully describes the power of those who suffered for Christ:

"What was the strength of those who in the past have suffered persecution for Christ's sake? It was union with God, union with the Holy Spirit, union with Christ. Reproach and persecution have separated many from earthly friends, but never from the love of Christ. Never is the tempest-tried soul more dearly loved by his Saviour than when he is suffering reproach for the truth's sake. "I will love him," Christ said, "and will manifest Myself to him." John 14:21. When for the truth's sake the believer stands at the bar of earthly tribunals, Christ stands by his side. When he is confined within prison walls, Christ manifests Himself to him and cheers his heart with His love. When he suffers death for Christ's sake, the Saviour says to him, They may kill the body, but they cannot hurt the soul. "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." "Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand." John 16:33; Isaiah 41:10.

The Acts of the Apostles 85, 1.

Freedom of Conscience: A Divine Gift

Despite the recognition of religious freedom and human rights in many of the world's constitutions, there is in many places an unjust hatred against religious groups that differ from the cultural or religious majority. Many countries are marked by persecution and discrimination. Groups of people are hated, discriminated against, and often persecuted for their faith.

It is alarming that in a world with the most developed communication infrastructure there can be severe restrictions on freedom of expression, that hate speech often replaces dialogue, and that dominant religious ideologies sometimes silence those who disagree.

We must understand that freedom of conscience is not a human gift, but a divine gift offered by the Creator of the universe. Human beings were created with the right to choose. Only when a person freely chooses to love God can that love be authentic.

As we think about religious freedom today, God invites us to three simple responses:

- **Pray** faithfully for those who are persecuted throughout the world and for those in authority who shape laws and policies.
- **Stand** with courage for truth and conscience in our workplaces, communities, and nations.

- **Reflect** the character of the Lamb in the way we speak, write, and advocate—firm in conviction, gentle in spirit.

We are living in the end of times and can expect religious freedom to be restricted, but God can create a context favorable to mission and protect His children wherever they are.

Let us not forget that although we live in a world full of hatred and violence, we are called to defend the truth in all situations and to share the love and goodness of God, following Jesus and letting Him be an inspiration to us every day.

May God bless you all with freedom, meekness, love, and hope so that the Gospel may soon reach the ends of the earth and Jesus' return may be soon, very soon.

Pastor Nelu Burcea,
Director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

We invite you to use, adapt, and share these resources to commemorate Religious Liberty Sabbath in local churches.