

# Intolerance of God in the Public Space

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, a few years ago, I was working in a church at Takai, not far from here. And one lunchtime, I was walking through Blue Root Mall when I got accosted by a cosmetics vendor.

I don't know if you've ever walked through Blue Root Mall, you'll know the experience. You've probably been accosted by the exact same person. Now, this cosmetics vendor, he came and he shook my hand just out of the blue.

And he then didn't release it. He held me there and then began to examine my skin and comment on how dry and blotchy it is. And he went on his spiel.

And after repeated indications that I wasn't interested in whatever product he was trying to sell, he insisted, I don't know what I'm missing and how much I need it, et cetera, et cetera. Eventually, I had to physically pry his hand off mine and make my escape.

And from that day, whenever I walk past, I make sure I'm hiding behind another person who's walking past, so they'll be accosted first. That's actually a tip we picked up growing up in Fishwick. That's how you swim before the shark nets.

[ 1 : 01 ] You know, always make sure there's at least one other person between you and where the sharks come from. Anyway, I got thinking about this guy. And he believed genuinely that he had something that I needed, even though I didn't think so.

And the mall management gave him permission to operate there and to try his best to convince me that I needed it. And so I contacted Blue Root Management.

And I said, I would like to set up a similar kiosk with the same intention. I've got a product which I believe people really need that I would like to promote. And they got back to me and said, sure, that's possible. This is what we charge for you to advertise and to use the mall space.

And they said, just one thing. What is it that you'd like to promote? And I said, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And there was silence before they firmly told me, no, no, no, we don't allow any kind of religious promotion in our mall.

And very quickly ended the conversation. And that was that. I emailed back and I asked them to explain just what the difference was between what the cosmetics vendor was doing and what I was wanting to do.

[ 2 : 02 ] You know, him pushing his product on people and commenting on my poor skin tone was certainly no less offensive than me sharing the Christian message. And yet he was allowed to do that.

And I wasn't. Of course, I got no response to the email because there is no difference. They allowed him to promote his message, though, no matter who it offended.

And I wasn't allowed to promote mine. Why? Well, the reason is because we live in a secular culture. A culture which is intolerant of God being in the public space.

You can do anything. You can offend people. You can call them wrong. But you can't talk about God. And the world, you see, wants to keep the door on God firmly closed. And we see it all around us in our culture.

And it's bad news. Because the world is keeping the door closed on the one thing they need the most. And we know that. When we read the newspapers, when we look around, we know the world needs God. That's bad news.

[ 2 : 58 ] And yet, there's good news. The good news is that God has never stopped reaching people. And he's never been stopped by any amount of cultures trying to close the door on him.

That doesn't stop God. No amount of the world trying to shut him out has prevented him from working powerfully in people's lives all over the world in every culture, even the ones who are most close to him.

And that's exactly what we learn in this story in Acts. Because this story in Acts chapter 16 records the first time the message of Jesus Christ left a relatively religious culture and entered into a much more secular world.

Paul and his companions for the first time are leaving the Jewish world behind. They're crossing the border into Macedonia, which is modern-day northern Greece. And the culture they were entering into was much more like the culture we're used to today, much more secular.

Philippi, the city that they ended up in, was a Roman colony. It was quite commercialized. Lots of people in trading and business. It was on one of the major trade routes. And not many people in Philippi had much time for religion.

[ 4 : 06 ] But that's the city Paul and his companions ended up in with the gospel message. And what's really interesting about this story is that it wasn't even their idea to go there. God prompted them to go there.

He spoke to Paul in a dream and then through the promptings of the Holy Spirit, they probably by themselves wouldn't have wanted to go to such a secular setting. Maybe thinking, well, nobody's going to be interested in what we have to say.

And yet they were wrong, we see. Because God wanted to do business with people in Philippi in spite of the secular world they lived in. And he made that clear to Paul and his companions.

And so they listened, they obeyed, and they went. And the same is true today. See, as Christians, as a church, we might feel the world wants nothing to do with God.

People aren't interested in our message. And so let's just, you know, keep to ourselves and go to church and have bingo nights and wait for Jesus to come back. But if we think that, we're wrong.

[ 5 : 05 ] You see, God has business to do with people outside this church, in every culture, in every nation, even if we don't think that they're interested. And so let's join Paul and his companions as they discovered that truth for themselves.

From verse 11, we read, From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace. And the next day we went to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia.

And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the woman who had gathered there.

One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. Let's pause there for a second.

Okay, so Paul and his companions, they get to the city of Philippi. And now up until now, when Paul and Peter and the rest of them, when they entered a new city, first thing they would do is find the closest synagogue or place of worship and then start there to tell people the message of Jesus.

[ 6 : 12 ] And they would have an instant captive religious audience. But now in Greek Philippi, there was no synagogue. There was no place of worship, which is quite telling in and of itself. Because in the ancient world, all you needed to start a synagogue was 10 males, adult men.

But there weren't even that many people in this bustling city who were interested in God. They didn't even have a Jewish synagogue. And in fact, the apostles had to go outside the city gate just to find a place where they could talk to people about God.

Pretty much like Blue Root Mall, in fact. And pretty much like our world. You can't do it in the public square. You can't talk about God. But what's equally interesting is that even in the secular setting, they still happen across a group of people who are praying.

Some woman down by the river. And one of them is mentioned by name. A woman called Lydia. And we're told she was a dealer in purple cloth. Why?

Why are we told that detail? Why does Luke include the detail of what color cloth she sells? Have you ever wondered that? Well, purple cloth in the ancient world was a very rare and expensive commodity.

[ 7 : 24 ] Apparently, a purple dye of good quality could only be obtained by the secretions of a particular type of sea snail in the Mediterranean. And so to get the dye, you had to go and harvest these sea snails.

And they didn't have submarines and scuba equipment. So it was quite a schlep. And it was quite costly to go through the whole process of getting this dye. And so purple cloth was a valuable commodity which only really rich people or royalty could afford to wear.

And that's why purple is often associated with royalty. You learn something new, don't you? Well, Luke wants us to know that Lydia was a dealer in this expensive commodity. In other words, she was a high flyer. She didn't just own some budget clothes shop in Weinberg. No, Lydia rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous. She today would have been driving around in the latest Mercedes-Benz M class with her sample fabrics in the back, entertaining clients at the Mount Nelson and probably owning an upmarket house in Constantia. She was a career woman, driven. And yet, she still had time to stop and go and pray. We're told about her that she was a worshiper of God.

[ 8 : 39 ] She's still interested in God. She still considers God important. She recognizes, at least, that she was made by a creator and he therefore deserves her attention, despite the secular world she's surrounded by.

Which reminds us, doesn't it, that God is not absent from the secular world, even though we think he might be. He's not. And people, in even the most godless settings, are still aware of God. No matter how much the world tries to shut him out. And do you know why? Well, it's because God has made sure of that. God has put in the heart of each person an undeniable, unavoidable knowledge that he exists.

The Bible says God has made his invisible qualities plain to people from what is visible, so that every person, unless they deliberately don't want to believe it, every person on the planet knows deep down inside, purely from looking at creation, that a creator is out there.

And some people, like Lydia, actually actively seek after that. They want contact with this God somehow, and those are typically people who subscribe to some kind of religion today.

[ 9 : 57 ] While some people, on the other hand, want to run completely the opposite direction. They want to disprove this nagging sense of God that they have, or they just ignore it so that they can get on with their lives.

And yet everyone has it. That nagging knowledge of an invisible God behind it all. A sense that this world and what we see is not all there is.

Ecclesiastes is a book in the Old Testament. It's written by one of the wisest men to have lived. And he writes, after studying mankind, he writes this, God has set eternity in the human heart. You know, animals are quite happy to just get on with living, to catch their prey, to keep warm, to procreate.

You know, animals just live day by day for the here and now. But for a human, God has set eternity in our hearts, in your heart, in my heart.

And we're not satisfied just with the here and now. We're not happy just to live day by day and grow old and die. That's probably why we're here in church. You know, we know that there's something beyond this.

[ 11 : 06 ] We all know that. No matter how much we don't want to. We know that there's something beyond this life, beyond what we can see, that no one can ignore. Not even Lydia could ignore that.

A busy, successful career woman with everything going for her in this life. Not even she could ignore the reality of God. And she wanted to connect with Him. And yet we read she had to go outside the city.

She had to leave the public space. She had to go outside the city gate to do that. Her society, her culture wanted to shut God out. Now you would think, though, with all this sense that all people have, the sense of something more, you would think, with the creation around us declaring every day the reality of its creator, you'd think that seeking after God would be natural for people, that everybody would want to get to know this God and want to discover and explore Him.

You'd think that, you know, primetime TV would be religious TV shows with people of different religions discussing the finer points of theology. You'd think that students at university would be lining up for the theology courses over and above medicine or law or engineering.

And yet we don't see that. Why? You know, why, if God has set eternity in the human heart, why do so many people just ignore that? Well, because the Bible teaches us something else about the human heart.

[ 12 : 34 ] Not only has God set eternity in the human heart, that nagging sense of something more, but Jeremiah 17 verse 9 tells us, the human heart is the most deceitful of all things and desperately sick.

Deceitful and sick. That is how the Bible describes your heart. Not very nice, is it? And yet, it's something we need to know about ourselves.

Just like a doctor. When we go to the doctor, and he has to tell us that we've got this virus or sickness, we don't want to hear it. We don't want to hear it that we're sick, and yet we need to hear it so that we know how to treat it.

It's the same with our hearts. We need to hear it. We need to know that our hearts are deceitful and sick. I want to show you a picture that's going to come up on the screen.

You see those skew lines there? The horizontal lines? They're all actually perfectly straight and parallel. Next one.

[ 13 : 34 ] You see those squiggly circles there? They are, in fact, perfect circles, but they don't look like it, do they? What about the next one? You see those two tables?

There's one long and thin one to the left, and there's one kind of wider and short one, right? Wrong. Those two tables are exactly the same width and the same length, but they don't look it, do they? Oh, I hope they don't, because they don't to me. You see, those are just examples of how your eyes can deceive you. There are times that your eyes are deceitful about things you see, and the Bible says your heart is exactly the same.

It's able to deceive you about things that you believe, especially things about God. I read an article that once said, what humans believe, only a very small part of what humans believe is actually based on facts or evidence.

The research was done and surveys were done. Much more of what people believe today to be true about themselves or the world and eternity and things like that, much more of that is based on what we want to believe and what works for our lifestyles.

[ 14 : 47 ] And that's why beliefs vary so much in our world, because people believe what works for them in a particular culture or setting. You see, the human heart chooses to believe what it wants to believe, but not what is true.

And that's why the Bible says the human heart is the most deceitful of all things. Well, if that's the case, what hope is there for us? You know, if our hearts deceive us into believing what isn't necessarily true, how can we ever really find out what is true about the world and about God? Well, the only way is if God himself shows us, rather than our own hearts trying to work it out. Now notice, back to the story, notice how Lydia came to believe in the message of Jesus.

Did she work it out for herself? Did she decide that that's what she wants to believe? No, she didn't decide it. Look at the end of verse 14. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. And it can't be any other way. You see, Lydia, the same as anyone, has a heart that can deceive her. Even though she valued God, even though she wanted to know God, her heart was still incapable of making trustworthy decisions about him until God did something.

[ 16 : 17 ] By exposing Lydia to his word, brought by the apostles, the message of Jesus, the news that Jesus is God's son and came to earth to die for her sins and bring her to God, that news changes everything.

And that news has the power to change lives. Now you might be sitting here this morning and going, all this religious stuff, you know, I've been dragged here to watch a baptism. I'm not really interested.

You may not believe that Jesus is the son of God who you are going to stand before one day and answer for your life. You might not believe that, but don't trust your own heart. It is deceitful.

If you believe that, you don't have any basis for it. It's dangerous just to wash this off and not think about it. Don't trust it. You need to hear the word, but notice, just like Lydia needed to hear the word, just hearing it wasn't enough.

You know, there were many other God-fearing women who didn't believe Paul's message. No, Lydia also needed God to open her heart to respond to what she heard.

[ 17 : 25 ] And so do you, and so do I. It kind of undermines our sense of pride that we need God to open our eyes to understand the word. But that is true.

We do. We need him. Our hearts can't determine what is true. We need God to expose us to what is true. You can't trust your own heart to show you what is true.

But, he opens your heart when you are exposed to his word. You see, that's what happened for Lydia. And so there's two things that needed to happen for her, and there's two things that need to happen for you and me if this is all going to make sense.

And the first is, of course, to hear God's word. That's the foundation. If you, I don't know, maybe you haven't considered God's word much. Maybe you haven't really opened the Bible or heard what it has to say.

Maybe you're not really interested in what it has to say. Well, let me warn you again. You're shutting God out of working in your life. You're shutting out your creator, which is the most self-destructive thing you can do.

[ 18 : 27 ] And you're keeping yourself from coming to know what is really true about you and about the world and about the life to come. Do you think that's the wisest thing to do? I don't think so. And so if that's you, I want to give you a chance to read God's word for yourself.

Now, I know it's intimidating. It's a big book. And where do you start? And so, I want to allow you, I want to give you the tools and the opportunity to read it for yourself.

I don't want you to make the most important decision in your life, your attitude to God. I don't want you to make that decision if you haven't examined the evidence for yourself. That's just stupid.

Okay, so I want to give you the chance to examine the evidence.

I've got a booklet here. It's called The Essential Jesus. And this is a booklet that's designed for you to examine the evidence for yourself. But it's got, it's a little summary of the gospel, the message of Jesus in the front.

And then it's the gospel of Luke, Luke's account of the life and work of Jesus that you can read for yourself and you can make a decision when you read it. And so I want, I've got a couple of these that I want to give you.

[ 19 : 28 ] If you want to read this, then come to me after the service and I will give this to you, no questions asked, for free. But it's essential that you do it. It's the Essential Jesus and it's essential that you read God's word for yourself at least once in your life.

Open it up, see what it has to say. Don't come to the end of your life in your hospital bed wherever you are not having opened the door for God to speak to you. But even then, I want you to know that's not enough.

Just like with Lydia, you also, secondly, this is the second thing, you need God to open your heart to respond to what you read. And maybe you're here this morning and you do read your Bible.

Maybe you come to church every Sunday. But I want to ask you, has God opened your heart to respond to what you hear and what you read in his word?

That's a completely different question. You can read God's word, you can come and hear God's word, but has God opened your heart to respond actually to God's word? like he did for Lydia.

[ 20 : 36 ] Well, you know how you can know if he has? If you've truly responded to God's word? Have a look at how Lydia responded when God opened her heart from verse 15.

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. If you consider me a believer in the Lord, she said, come and stay at my house. And she persuaded us. So there we see two things that shows us that Lydia's belief was actually real.

One, she was baptized. Okay, which means like George and Eben this morning, she acknowledged that she believes what the Bible says. But, that wasn't all. The second thing she did was basically to throw her lot in with the apostles to get involved in what they were doing to take this message further out into the world.

Which is the mission that Jesus has given to all who follow him. Now, Lydia was no evangelist, but she still noticed, she still found a way to contribute to the mission through the use of her home and her gifts of hospitality to support the mission, which she did.

And that became the base of the gospel going out further into Macedonia. And you see, if God has truly opened your heart to believe the gospel, you'll respond in the same way.

[ 21 : 53 ] You won't just get baptized and call yourself a Christian. No, you'll get on board with the mission that God has given us. You'll throw your lot in. You'll contribute to the mission in the ways that God has given you, in the ways that God has gifted you, in the ways that God has resourced you to do so.

That is what it looks like to respond to the gospel message. Now, in closing, as we consider this great little account that Luke has recorded for us, that God has preserved for us over all these years and given us today to speak to us today, as we consider this, we also consider the society around us.

We live in a very secular society and we must come to terms with that. But, that doesn't mean God is not here and not working to reach people as he always has.

You see, secularism doesn't stop God and so it shouldn't stop us from taking his message into the world even if people don't seem interested in it. because God has business to do with people but perhaps first he has business to do with you today.

Maybe today he's opening your heart to actually respond to what you've heard and so if that's the case, don't delay. Come speak to me or if you were brought here by someone, a Christian, come go speak to them about it.

[ 23 : 17 ] Do that today though because tomorrow might just be too late. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word that, as we were reminded earlier, pierces the heart like a sword.

It really gets right to the bottom of things. Lord, we thank you for speaking to us this morning. I pray that if there's anyone here who doesn't know you, that you would open their hearts to know that you are real, that you would help them to stop ignoring you and that you would help them to know how to come to you through Jesus Christ.

And Heavenly Father, for those of us who read your word and who are Christians and who come to church, we do pray that you would help us to respond properly to the gospel message, that we wouldn't just go home and keep on living ordinary lives, but help us to know, like Lydia, how we can each get involved in the mission that you've left us on earth to do.

And so we pray that you would be with us, go with us as we leave this place. In Jesus' name. Amen.