

Sermon Guide

The Cloud: William Wilberforce Esther 4:11-17



Exegesis

At some point, we'll have to preach through the book of Esther. Today I want to look at how she courageously leveraged her position to do justice against an oppressed people at the risk of her own life. By the providence of God, she found herself in a position of power to do something and she did.

Background: In Esther 1, King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) held a grand banquet and called for Queen Vashti to appear before him and his guests to display her beauty. Vashti refused, which angered the king. His advisors suggested that she be removed as queen to prevent other women in the kingdom from following her example of disobedience. After Vashti's removal, a search was conducted throughout the kingdom to find a new queen. Young women from all over the empire were brought to the king's harem in Susa, the capital, to undergo a year-long beauty treatment before appearing before the king (Esther 2:1-4). Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai, was among the young women taken to the palace. Although she was an outsider and did not reveal her Jewish identity, Esther found favor with the king's eunuch in charge of the harem, who provided her with the best beauty treatments and advice on how to please the king (Esther 2:8-9). When it was Esther's turn to meet the king, she pleased him more than any of the other women. As a result, King Ahasuerus placed the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti (Esther 2:16-17).

But a man named Haman who had the king's ear and an influential place in the king's court plotted to destroy them. He warned the king that they were insurrectionists and wouldn't obey his laws. The king approved. Great panic spread. Mordecai, Esther's cousin, warns her of the decree that went out and tells her she's got to approach the king. She risks great harm, even death by doing so. She's in a position of power, but not all powerful.

VS 11 -- *“All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for men, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.”*

Esther knows the potential cost of speaking to the king and questioning his decree.

VS 12-14 -- *And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”*

Mordecai responds to Esther with the infamous statement, "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" In other words, in God's providence, maybe you are not here simply for your own comfort and advantage, but to do His greater will. Maybe you are here to thwart this injustice. But it is going to take courage. There is risk.

VS 15-17 -- *Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.*

Esther resolves to go to the king, even if it means it costs her her life. She asks that people fast and pray for her as she prepares for the task. Spoiler alert: she goes and reveals the plot, reveals she is Jewish and the people the king has decreed to destroy are her people...and the king revoked the decree. The people were spared.

Esther finds herself in a place of power. She has to fight against injustice at the risk of her own life and position. She acts with courage and saves a people. And along the way she needed the encouragement and strength of others to carry the task through to the end.

This, friends, is a lesson everyone can take and apply today. This story is not only descriptive. In many ways it is prescriptive. And the life of William Wilberforce is an amazing parallel and application from it.

Biography

William Wilberforce was born in 1759 to a wealthy family of merchants. He went to a grammar school under the leadership of an Anglican minister. His father died when he was nine, and his mother sent him away to London to live with an aunt and uncle. This aunt and uncle were very devout Christians. It was living in their home that Wilberforce came into contact with people such as George Whitefield and John Newton. It is believed Wilberforce came to faith around 12 years old while with this family.

But as Wilberforce's mom and other close family friends saw young William's religious enthusiasm growing, they tried to deter it. His mother even moved him back home. By the time he went to St. John's College at Cambridge in 1776 (age 17), his religious fervor was gone. He was now as worldly as his friends. He was very popular, known for his wit, charm, and eloquence. Wilberforce had a natural charisma and knack for leadership that would serve well in his future role as a politician.

In 1779 (age 20), Wilberforce moved to London and became friends with William Pitt. Pitt would eventually become the Prime Minister of Great Britain. Both were motivated by politics at a young age. Wilberforce ran for Parliament in September 1780 at 21 years old, and won. He was the youngest age you could be and be elected. Pitt became Prime Minister at age 24, and because they were inseparable, Wilberforce's political career advanced quickly.

By 1784, Wilberforce was considered one of the Parliament's leading debaters and most respected members. He decided to go on a European tour and invited a friend of his to join him who, in God's providence, could not go. So he invited Isaac Milner (who happened to be the brother of his former Anglican schoolmaster). Isaac was also an Anglican clergyman, but he was known as a brilliant scientist and mathematician. Wilberforce knew of his brilliance as a scientist and mathematician, but what he did not know was how strong Milner's biblical convictions were. Isaac went on the European tour with him and Wilberforce was stunned to see someone that he respected intellectually so grounded in a Christian worldview. They read the Greek New Testament together. They read the popular book by Philip Doddridge *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. By the end of the two European trips (touring the vast British Empire), Wilberforce was convicted of his sin and stated, "a sense of my great sinfulness in having so long neglected the unspeakable mercies of my God and Savior." Wilberforce would go on to say about the importance of Christians walking daily with the Lord, "It makes no sense to take the name of Christian and not cling to Christ. Jesus is not some magic charm to wear like a piece of jewelry we think will give us good luck. He is the Lord. His name is to be written on our hearts

in such a powerful way that it creates within us a profound experience of His peace and a heart that is filled with His praise.”

After the European tours, Wilberforce sought out John Newton, the most well-known evangelical believer in London. By October of 1785, the transformation was sealed. For a period of time, Wilberforce thought about entering into pastoral ministry and retiring from politics. But Newton and Pitt urged him to stay in Parliament and serve Christ there. After a tiring period of wrestling with what to do, praying and seeking the Lord, Wilberforce reached the conclusion that "God had set before me two objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners [morality]." The English slave traders raided the African coast capturing 35,000-50,000 Africans per year, shipping them across the Atlantic Ocean and selling them into slavery. Even in the late 1700s, the economics of slavery were so entrenched in daily life that only a handful of people thought anything could be done to reverse dependence on it. Wilberforce was a part of that handful.

The combination of embracing a full-throttled Christian worldview and the influence of John Newton (a former slave trader) led Wilberforce to make it his mission to end slavery in Great Britain. But this wasn't a popular cause to champion. In fact, he was very much in the minority on this issue. He became the subject of tirades on the Parliamentary floor and assassination threats. One time a sea-captain of a slave boat saw Wilberforce and beat him on the street. People spread rumors about him. At a time when he wasn't even married, people said he was married to a black woman (meant to be a slur against him) and that he beat her.

Despite all these things, Wilberforce pressed forward in courage. As early as 1789, he introduced 12 resolutions on the slave trade, but he was outmaneuvered on fine legal points by other savvy politicians. Wilberforce said, “You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know.” People blocked efforts for different reasons and in different ways. Some had a vested interest in it continuing. Others were entrenched in racism. Some had international political interests tied to it. Some simply feared the political cost of supporting abolition. But Wilberforce introduced bills in 1791, 1792, 1793, 1797, 1798, 1799, 1804, and 1805. All were defeated. After the Bill in 1797 was rejected, Wilberforce considered retiring from public service. He had labored for nine (plus) years to abolish the slave trade and he still hadn't succeeded. When he spoke to John Newton about his feelings. Newton wrote back to him to stay in service, saying, “The example, and even the presence

of a consistent character may have a powerful, though unobserved, effect upon others." He went on to write: "You are not only a Representative for Yorkshire. You have the far greater honour of being a Representative for the Lord, in a place where many know him not, and an opportunity of showing them what are the genuine fruits of that religion which you are known to profess." Wilberforce remained.

During this time, Wilberforce was engaged in other issues as well. He was a member of 69 different philanthropic organizations (societies). He even began his own known as the Society for the Suppression of Vice (1787). It worked "for the encouragement of piety and virtue; and for the prevention of vice, profaneness, and immorality." He gave away around 25% of his annual income. He provided for the poor, single mothers, Sunday schools, orphanages, and juvenile delinquents. He was also supportive of missionary works and the foreign bible society. 1797 was a big year for him. He became a prominent member of the "Clapham Sect," a group of devout Christians of influence in government and business. He wrote a Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians. It was a scathing critique of comfortable Christianity and became a bestseller. And he was married. At 37 years old, after a short courting period, he married Barbara Ann Spooner. This began what he called, 'thirty-five years of undiluted happiness.' Over the next ten years, they had four sons and two daughters. Wilberforce viewed his role as a father as more important than his political office.

During this time, he suffered from poor health. He would often be bedridden for weeks at a time. He was given opium, a new drug at the time, the effects which were still unknown to doctors. He became addicted. The hallucinations it triggered terrified him. And the depressions it caused sometimes rendered him incapable of being productive.

For so many years, Wilberforce fought for the abolishment of slavery. He sought to influence other leaders and politicians. He worked on bills that were rejected, but he could see the sentiments toward the slave trade turning. On the evening of February 23rd, 1807, excitement grew in the House of Commons as Wilberforce's latest motion was debated. Speech after speech unfolded in favor of abolition. Many of his fellow members credited him and paid tribute to his efforts during their speeches. The climax came when Solicitor General Sir Samuel Romilly contrasted the reception that Napoleon and Wilberforce would receive at the end of a day's labors: Napoleon would come home in power and pomp, yet tormented by the bloodshed and oppression of war he had caused. But "Wilberforce would come home to 'the bosom of his happy and delighted family,' able to lie down in

peace because he had 'preserved so many millions of his fellow creatures." The House of Commons rose to its feet, turned to Wilberforce, and began to cheer. They gave three rousing hurrahs while Wilberforce sat with his head bowed and wept." With that, the House of Commons voted 283 to 16 to abolish the slave trade. The Prime Minister at the time called this passage of the bill, "a measure which will diffuse happiness among millions now in existence, and for which his memory [Wilberforce] will be blessed by millions yet unborn."

However, the passage of this bill to abolish the slave trade only meant that they would stop stealing and selling slaves. It did not end the existence of slavery throughout the British Empire. Wilberforce continued to labor on that front for the next 25 years. Not only did he continue working on that, but he began lobbying other nations and governments as well, including the United States (that would end fighting a war that killed 620,000 of its own citizens to end slavery). His poor health eventually made it impossible for him to lead the last charge.

On July 26th, 1833, William Wilberforce, 74 years old, laid on his deathbed. He received news that the emancipation bill to forever eradicate slavery was passed on its third reading in the House of Commons. Three days later, he died knowing that slavery throughout the British Empire was abolished. His work was done.

Application

1. Christians should engage in politics.

Christians should desire to influence the nation they live in. We do not attempt to govern the nation the way we do a church. We don't try to coerce people into the faith, but neither do we separate out our faith from public life. Christians are called to love our neighbor, that includes Christians and non-Christians. This plays out in company policies at a business, curriculum at schools, and in the voting booth. We want policies, curriculum, and laws that lead to the flourishing of our neighbor.

Wilberforce helped create a popular image capturing this idea of the African slaves being image-bearers and our neighbors. But we realize the church and state have different missions. The church's mission is to make disciples. It's to turn all its members into mature disciples of the Lord. The church is the bow, the members are the arrow, each shot out into society to do their different missions the Lord has given them, which can include politics. Build Up. Send Out. (sound familiar?) Not everyone is gifted

the same or called to the same duties. We've talked about this before, but we are not to create a hierarchy in the kingdom of those who serve God in vocational ministry versus those who don't. The Lord assigns gifts and stations in life. Each has a role in His work in the world.

Wilberforce said, "We have different forms assigned to us in the school of life, different gifts imparted. All is not attractive, that is good. Iron is useful, though it does not sparkle like the diamond. Gold has not the fragrance of a flower. So different persons have various modes of excellence, and we must have an eye to all."

The state's job is to protect the life and possessions of its citizens. They are to restrain and punish evil, administer justice. And the state should ensure its laws are honoring God and in alignment with the government's purposes. Why? Because the law is a teacher. Whatever gets codified as law instructs its citizens on what is good and what they ought to do or not do. This instructs citizens.

"I would suggest that faith is everyone's business. The advance or decline of faith is so intimately connected to the welfare of a society that it should be of particular interest to a politician."

2. Christians should stand with courage on issues even when we stand alone.

Wilberforce stood against slavery. He believed it a gross injustice BECAUSE of his Christian faith. It was codified law to allow slavery. It was accepted in the culture. But that didn't influence his thinking on the matter. As a Christian, he went to what God said in His Word.

Wilberforce said, "The distemper of which, as a community, we are sick, should be considered rather as a moral than a political malady." Notice his point. It's a moral issue at root. Most of the sickness in society is. There is a role for political solutions, but they are not necessarily political problems at root.

He believed this required Christians to learn how to speak to the issues of our day in a way that was cogent and could point out the flaws in our opponents. He said, "Christianity has been successfully attacked and marginalized... because those who professed belief were unable to defend the faith from attack, even though its attackers' arguments were deeply flawed."

3. Christians need encouragement from other Christians to stay the course.

Wilberforce would have never made it without Newton's encouragement. Newton encouraged to stay the course and see it through. This in turn led Wilberforce to stick it out through hard seasons and eventually led to the abolition of both the slave trade and slavery as a whole.

We all need this. We need people to encourage us in this world. As we raise children, fight for healthy marriages, stand for truth in the world, and more, we need encouragement. This is why we stress getting involved in community here and having other strong believers in your life. Don't live on an island. Walk with others.

William Wilberforce was an amazing picture of using your gifts courageously to the glory of God. He sought to ensure justice for others, not because it was politically expedient, but because they were made by God. He let his Christian convictions drive his life in everything he did. And like Queen Esther, he leveraged his life and influence to serve others at the risk of his own well-being. Why does this inspire us? Because it shadows the Main Story of the God Man, Jesus Christ, who leveraged His life and laid it down to save others. He willingly faced opposition and ridicule for the sake of saving others. Jesus laid down His life to free the spiritual slaves and abolished it forever with his death on the cross and resurrection.



- How was your week? What is one thing you're grateful for and one thing that challenged you?
- How did you grow in obedience to Christ over the last week?
- Where did you go to share the gospel or have a spiritual conversation with someone?



- **REVIEW**

- Read **Esther 4:11-17** and then have someone else in the group read it again, preferably from a different version.
- What big takeaways did you have from the teaching?
- Additional Scripture:
 - Galatians 1:10
 - Matthew 10:16-25
 - Joshua 1:1-9

■ Psalm 73

● **REFLECT**

- What encouragement do you draw from the life of Esther?
- Wilberforce's enthusiastic faith was discouraged by his family. Has there ever been a time when others tried to suppress your faith?
- What would you say to Christians who believe we shouldn't engage in politics, that we should only preach the gospel?
- When have you had to stand alone for the truth?

● **RESPOND**

- What can you learn from William Wilberforce's life?
- What is a practical step you can take as a result of this sermon?

● **MEDITATE**

- Matthew 6:30 – But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

● **MEMORIZE**

- Proverbs 3:5-6 – Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.



- **FOLLOW:** How will you follow Jesus this week and grow in your love and understanding of Him?

- **FISH:** Who in your sphere of influence needs to hear this story, your story or the gospel?

● **PRAYER**

- Pray over any request from your group members.
- **Staff** – Laura DiLionardi
 - **Ministry** – Women's Discipleship Director
- **Pray for our long-term units on the field:**
 - The Wilsons
 - The Grays
 - The Starks
- **Pray for our short-term teams**
 - Asian Pacific Rim Team #2 departing August 16
 - Central Asia Team #2 departing on September 27
- **Pray for the unreached.** Want to keep up with Unreached People Groups? Download the Unreached of the Day App <https://joshuaproject.net/pray/unreachedoftheday/app>