

## A Rebel with a New Cause *Simon*

### **Introduction**

Richard Wurmbrand was an Evangelical Lutheran minister in communist controlled Romania last century. It was the height of the cold war, and churches were either strictly controlled by the government, or were forced underground. Richard Wurmbrand paid a very steep price for his ministry to Romania's underground church, and his belief that Christianity and communism were incompatible, a captivating story he tells in his book *Tortured for Christ*.

Wurmbrand spent fourteen years in various prisons for his beliefs. He was tortured repeatedly— including mutilation, burning, being locked in a frozen icebox, and being beaten until his bones were exposed. He bore the scars of these cruelties for the rest of his life.

Three of those years were spent in solitary confinement in a tiny cell 12 feet underground without any light or sound. The guards even wore felt on their shoes to deprive the inmates of any sound of human life. To keep his sanity, Richard would write a sermon in his mind every day and then tap out the messages to his fellow prisoners in Morse code.

Later, after he was freed, he was able to recall more than 350 of these sermons which he included in his book, *With God in Solitary Confinement*. Richard Wurmbrand later founded *Voice of the Martyrs*, an international ministry to the persecuted church.

In his writings, Wurmbrand tells of another Lutheran pastor in Romania named Fredrick Mueller. This pastor collaborated with the communists for 23 years and was even a member of the Communist Parliament. He was decorated by the communists for his service.

The whole time, though, he funneled information to the underground church and advised them on how to best proceed. It was his conviction that this was the best way he could serve the church

Which one was right, Richard or Fredrick? Is it best to collaborate with the enemy, or oppose him at every turn? Is one a hero and the other a villain, or did they each serve Jesus in their own way?

Undoubtedly, Richard Wurmbrand accomplished much in his bold stand against the atheistic communist regime. His work continues to bear fruit today, twenty years after his death. But how many lives did Fredrick Mueller save? How much did his clandestine help further the work of the kingdom? We may never know until the new heavens and the new earth.

This isn't just an academic question to satisfy idle curiosity. It is a question the disciples wrestled with on a very personal level. And brothers and sisters, given the direction our country is going, it is a question some of us may have to wrestle with in the future.

### **Simon the Zealot**

A couple of weeks ago we looked at Jesus' calling of Matthew, a man that most of his fellow Israelites saw as a traitor, and betrayer of his people.

Matthew was sort of the Fredrick Meuller of the disciples. He collaborated with Rome. He helped the enemy, and yet Jesus calls him, “*Come, follow me.*” You can be one of my disciples. You can be a part of this kingdom I’m building. Your fellow Jews might exclude you. They might say you don’t belong, but I say you have a place and a purpose here. And then, as an apostle, Matthew writes a gospel to reach the very people that earlier in his life he betrayed.

I’m sure it raised a few eyebrows when Jesus called Matthew, but I wonder what the reaction was when Jesus called Simon. No, not Simon Peter, but Simon the Zealot. We know very little about him. Simon itself was as common a name in 1st Century Israel as Michael or David is today. There are seven Simons just in the N.T. So his name doesn't tell us much.

The only times Simon is mentioned in the New Testament are the four lists of Jesus’ disciples he appears in. In fact, the only personal thing we know about him is this one word which is attached to him in every list. He is Simon the Zealot.

### **Who Were the Zealots**

Zealot is not his last name. It identifies him as a member of a group and an advocate of a cause. Think of it this way, and I use these examples simply as illustrations? Imagine these lists of disciples read Simon the communist, Simon the Earth Firster, Simon the QAnon follower, Simon the PETA activist, Simon the Proud Boy, Simon the...insert the name of whatever hardcore activist group you can think of. This might give you an idea of how emotionally and politically charged this label was.

We use the word zealot to refer to someone is very passionate about a cause, a hardcore believer, a my way or the highway kind of person. There’s a reason for this. The Zealots were the original zealots. The name comes from a Greek word *Zelotes* which means determined or passionate follower.

Zealots were a faction of Jewish men fanatically opposed to Roman rule. They started when Jesus was just a child under the leadership of a man called “Judah the Galilean.” He founded the Zealots with two guiding principles.

### **What Did the Zealots Believe?**

#### **No Taxes to Rome**

First, they refused to pay any taxes to Rome. They firmly believed that the land of Israel was a “holy land” promised to the Jews only, thus what they produced and the resources they accumulated from this land were never to be given to any foreign ruler, not even a portion of it. Their rallying cry was, “No Lord but Jehovah, no tax but the temple tax, no friend but the Zealot.”

#### **No Roman as Ruler**

The zealots’ second guiding principle was that they would never acknowledge the Roman emperor or any of his representatives as their ruler. The 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish historian

Josephus wrote about the zealots, and keep in mind that Josephus had been a zealot who fought Rome, but after he was defeated by them, he became a collaborator with them.

The Zealots have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is the only Ruler and Lord. They do not mind dying any kind of death, nor do they heed the torture of their kindred and their friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man lord.

To paraphrase Patrick Henry, the Zealot's philosophy was, "Give me liberty and the Lord or give me death." Simon probably saw himself as a freedom fighter. The Roman saw the Zealots as terrorists. They were heroes to some Jews, but not all, because they made life more difficult for everyone.

By the time of Jesus' ministry, the Zealots had evolved into an underground militia. There was even a group of them who carried hooked daggers concealed under their cloaks so that in a crowd they could quickly and quietly assassinate Roman officials and Jewish collaborators. Understand this— before Jesus, Simon's only interest in Matthew would be to run him through with a sword.

To give you some further historical and biblical context, thirty years after the earthly ministry of Jesus, in AD 66, the Zealots would lead an open revolt against Rome, they completely wiped out an entire Roman army, Roman officials were forced to flee the province, and the Zealots took control of Jerusalem.

Rome responded to this rebellion by sending their very best army under their very best general, Vespasian. In four years, in events perfectly predicted by Jesus in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, Jerusalem lay in ruins, its walls destroyed, the temple razed, and just as Jesus prophesied, not one stone was left on another. But before the Romans could get to them, the Zealots themselves had massacred thousands of residents within the city, for not completely supporting their cause.

Depending on your point of view, the Zealots were either valiant freedom fighters, or the Al Qaida of the 1st Century. The truth is they were a bit of both. While we may admire their patriotism and love of country, their extreme hatred for Rome and Gentiles spoiled these otherwise redeeming values.

Ultimately, they did not destroy Rome, but only their own country. They hated Rome with so much passion they became suspicious and judgmental of any Jew who did not hate Rome with the same fervor. They began to see every neighbor as an enemy.

They ended up massacring the very people they swore to defend and committing atrocities in the temple itself, to whose God they swore allegiance.

Let's bring this from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. How is all of this relevant to our lives today?

**When Jesus Redeems You, He Doesn't Reinvent You, He Refocuses You.**

This first thing is this. When Jesus redeems you, he doesn't reinvent you, he refocuses you.

God doesn't say, "Oops, you were a mistake. I messed up. Let's start over." When you follow Jesus and place your faith in him and you are saved, God doesn't completely rewire your basic personality and perspective. Some things are hardwired into us. God created you the way you are for a reason.

Sure, sin has twisted and turned that into something ugly. And God changes that. You become a new creation in Christ. But what makes you you, is still you. But now that essence of you has been rescued from sin, reclaimed by God, and refocused for a higher purpose.

The fact that we are told several times in the gospels that Simon was "Simon the Zealot," not "Simon the former Zealot," or "Simon, who used to be Zealot" indicates that he was still a part of this group when he began following Jesus.

We don't know any details of Simon, his life, or what he did as an apostle, but the fact that he was a Zealot tells us a great deal about his basic personality and philosophy of life. We also know from some of the other disciples that followed Jesus that they maintained their basic personality, but Jesus refocused it in a completely new direction. Peter remained bold and brash, but he became bold and brash for Jesus and his cause. Paul remained an ardent advocate for his beliefs, and he was still willing to go far and wide to spread them, but now it was belief in Jesus rather than persecuting the church.

God created you with the basic personality you have for a reason. He wants you that way. He wants to use you that way. Any type of personality is a good thing when Jesus gets a hold of it and uses it for his purpose. On the flipside, any type of personality, when we use it to serve only ourselves, takes on a very evil tinge.

Consider the following personality traits: ambitious, cunning, cautious, aggressive, quiet, loud, decisive, impulsive, a leader, a follower, people oriented, task oriented. These or any trait can be good or bad depending on how they are focused in your life. God doesn't want to destroy your personality but he does want to give it a new direction.

How has Jesus refocused you? How is he still refocusing you? Have you allowed Jesus to refocus who you are?

### **When You Follow Jesus, You have to Leave Some Things Behind.**

When you follow Jesus, what makes you you remains you, but when you follow Jesus, lesson number two is you have to leave some things behind. The other disciples had to leave some things behind. Big things. Important things. Peter, Andrew, James and John had to leave their fishing boats. Matthew, left his tax collectors booth.

Simon, likewise, would have to leave some of his Zealot ways and ways of thinking behind. How about his view on paying taxes to Rome when Jesus answered that very question with this, "*Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is Gods.*" That was probably very difficult for Simon.

Simon would also have to leave behind his seething hatred for the Romans, for Jesus said,

*“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* No more wishing them dead or worse. It’s interesting that when they came to arrest Jesus, it was Peter who drew his sword, not Simon.

In fact, Simon would become a leader in a church that would include Greeks, and Romans and even Roman soldiers. How do you think Simon felt when Peter came back and told all of them about how Cornelius had become a Christian and God had also poured out his Spirit on a Roman military commander?

Church tradition holds that Simon spread the gospel in Egypt and was martyred for his faith in Persia, in modern day Iran. If true, he died taking the news of God’s love to people he used to hate. Talk about leaving some things behind and refocusing a life.

### **Jesus Transcends Politics**

Another life lesson we can learn from Simon, and this might be a difficult one for us, but that makes it all the more important is this— Jesus transcends politics. He transcends all of our debates and division on policy and whatever the current hot button issues are. It’s not that Jesus has nothing to say or to add to politics. He has plenty to say. But sometimes it’s not what we would like him to say, and he almost always goes beyond, above, though, and around how we want to frame the argument.

Jesus was very clear that his kingdom was not of this world, and he’s not really interested in putting his stamp of approval and any earthly system whether it’s the Zealots or Jewish Collaborators in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century or our particular brand of politics today.

Jesus’ kingdom is about building something bigger and better and beyond anything we can put together on earth. Simon wanted to wrap his faith in palm fronds and the menorah of Israel, but Jesus was aiming for something bigger. We have to be careful not to wrap the cross in red, white and blue, because Jesus is aiming for something bigger.

Certainly, God honors any nation that honors him, and oppose those who oppose the truth. We are Americans, and we are proud to be Americans, and no we’re not going to burst into a Lee Greenwood song. I proudly stand up and put my hand over my heart for the National Anthem, but I also called some of my black friends this last summer and asked them, “Tell me what you think about all this.” And I just listened.

But we are more than Americans. We are more than Republicans. We are more than Democrats. We are sons and daughters of God. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. According to Revelation 7, we belong to a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, and we will stand before the throne as one, not under the banner of any nation, but under the glory and majesty and power of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is bigger than our political divides. Jesus called both Matthew and Simon the Zealot, a collaborator and an advocate of armed opposition. You can’t get further apart on the political spectrum than these two. I wonder if Simon ever wondered about Matthew, “He can’t be a follower of Jesus. He collaborated with idol worshipping, anti-God, pagan Rome.”

I wonder if Matthew ever wondered of Simon, “He can’t be a follower of Jesus. He’s a violent extremist.”

I don’t know if they ever thought that. I don’t know if they ever argued about that, but I do know this – Jesus called them both. They were both disciples. They both served him, side by side. And at least for several years in the early church in Jerusalem, they were leaders together in the same church.

Now, did they ever disagree? Did they have debates? I bet they did. I can imagine some heated discussions about taxes, about occupation, about going the extra mile if a Roman official demanded the required one mile. I can picture Matthew and Simon teasing each other. I mean, come on, they’re guys.

As far as we know, Jesus never endorsed one side or the other. He never said this side is right and this side is wrong. You want my best guess, and that is what it is– just an educated guess. I think both Matthew and Simon were wrong about some things. I think both of them had to leave some cherished ideas behind. Both of them had to be refocused in some major ways.

They were both probably right about some things as well, but they had to realize that Jesus is bigger than all that.

Jesus didn’t come as a Zealot. He didn’t come as a collaborator. Jesus is not a Democrat. He is not a Republican. He didn’t come to endorse one side and defeat the other. Again, this is just my opinion here, but I think he would have plenty of things to say to both sides, and he would tick them both off. Remember, Jesus was crucified through partnership between Jewish religious leaders and Roman political leaders, and those two sides never agreed on anything, but they both agreed they wanted Jesus dead.

Do you think it would be any different today? I think the senate would vote 98-2 to condemn Jesus. It would be a united, bipartisan vote.

Whether you’re Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or Libertarian or whatever, you need to make sure that Jesus comes first, before being Democrat, before being Republican, before being a Zealot.

I am first and foremost a follower of Jesus Christ. He comes number 1. Number 2, I am a husband deeply in love with my wonderful wife. Number 3 I am a father devoted to my girls. As you go further down the list, you will find things like I am a Nascar fan, I love to read books, I like music that most people find kind of weird, I’m a cyclist, I’m a computer nerd. You will also find down that list things like I am a conservative, I’m an American who loves this country, even though I can acknowledge her flaws. I believe in the constitution. I think it’s one of the wisest human documents ever written. I usually vote Republican, because that’s what, from my perspective usually best lines up with all those other things, but here’s the thing. Jesus always comes first, and he overrules anything else down that list. That’s what it means for him to be Lord.

That being said, we need to be a church where both Matthew's and Simons can work and worship side by side. And whether you are a Matthew or a Simon there are some things we're all going to have to leave behind. The church has to be bigger and better than our divided world.

Make sure your highest cause is his cause, and here's why this is important. We're trying to reach everyone. We're trying to reach people of every stripe and every background and every persuasion. We're trying to reach more Matthews and more Simons, so we need Matthews and Simons who have been refocused by Jesus to reach them.

Some people fear that faith will wipe out their individuality. Nothing could be further from the truth. Christians are not brain dead clones, nor are they mind-numbed drones. Christ saves us with all of our individuality, personality and quirkiness. Just look at some of the greatest heroes of the Bible. Abraham, Rahab, David, Daniel, Esther, John the Baptist, and the apostle Paul. You will never find a more wild cast of characters than you will on the pages of Scripture. People with bold personalities. People who lived daring lives on the edge.

God doesn't mellow intense personalities, He just redirects them. Sometimes the wildest sinners make the greatest Christians. Take someone who sins with all the passion and gusto they can muster. Once God gets a hold of their lives. they serve Him with all the passion and gusto they can muster. Those who sin half-heartedly, sometimes only serve God half-heartedly. Just look at the apostle Paul. He went from persecutor and murderer of Christians, to Christianity's greatest missionary, but he never lost his hard charging personality.

My father has been in the ministry for more than 35 years. He tells me that of the others he went to Bible college with, that most of the kids that were the Bible College's poster children, those that were considered the ideal students, are no longer in the ministry. Most of them that could not take it. Several suffered tragic moral failures.

However, of those that were a bit wild, that often got in trouble, that didn't to the linc, they have been the ones who've accomplished the most in ministry. Once God got a hold of their lives, and directed them toward his purposes, all of that fiery personality is used to serve God. This is the story of Simon the Zealot. Simon Who? net last name

The last stronghold of the Zealots was the imposing wilderness fortress of Masada. There the Zealots held out against the Roman army for more than three years. Eventually, the Romans built a giant causeway up the side of the mountain to the fortress. When they finally broke through the walls they found only a single old lady inside as all the Zealots had murdered their families and committed suicide.

Jesus also called Malthen