

Why Christians Are Persecuted --- John 15:18-25

October 4, 2020

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. 21But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. 22If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have [f]sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. 23He who hates Me hates My Father also. 24If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well. 25But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, "THEY HATED ME WITHOUT A CAUSE."

Introduction

There is an account in an English fictional story about a little girl named Pollyanna in which she recommends to the preacher at her church that he preach only on the "happy texts" of the Bible. In her evaluation, the preacher made the mistake of preaching about sin too much. She was looking for a more upbeat message that would have a positive reception among those who attend.

I was thinking this past week that it would be easy to just preach the "happy texts" of the Bible, however that would not be following the example of the Lord. He did not shy away from teaching discipleship came with hardship, difficulty, and persecution; along with blessing, joy, peace and eternal life.

The central truth of the Word of God is good news; nonetheless, both negative and positive elements are in the good news. It is man's rebellion that introduces the bad elements, while it is God's grace, compassion and amazing love that make up the good news. The good news is that Jesus has died as a substitute for ungodly man.

Man lives with a sentence of eternal judgment that could be acted upon at any moment. Mankind lives in denial of this sudden destruction and suffering which looms overhead every day. Each day could be the day that a person must stand before the Creator and receive this eternal sentence of judgment for rebellion. So, the good news of the Gospel has, as its back drop, the reality of man's eternal death sentence.

Even as believers, we do not escape negative and positive truths as we grow in sanctification. We have considered the negatives of putting to death the deeds of the flesh, of a war that is raging within our being, of undergoing persecution and suffering for the sake of Christ by the world.

But, we are also reminded of the positives of the Spirit of God who dwelling within us, bringing us along, and encouraging us. We have the Word of God that instructs us and teaches us about contentment, joy, peace and satisfaction found in a deep, satisfying, saving relationship with God. We have the family of the Church to strengthen and support us.

One of the greatest positives found in Scripture is that our lives are transformed because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are born again, and all things become new as a believer. Sound theology impacts the way we live our lives. We begin to be conformed to the image of Christ. In our study of Romans 12:9-21, we discover a list of some practical ways that our lives reflect the person of Jesus Christ.

Review

Last week as we worked our way through this list, we considered that we are to serve the Lord fervently. All believers are slaves of Christ, slaves to God, and thus slaves to righteousness. Our wills and our minds and our emotions have been transformed so that we desire to do the will of God from the heart.

We saw that all of mankind is enslaved to one of two masters: either to sin resulting in death or to Christ resulting in righteousness and eternal life. It is impossible to be slaves to both of these masters at the same time. Every person shows by his lifestyle which master he

serves. Both of these masters insist on a certain type of conduct. If you look at a person's habitual life style and what characterizes a person's behavior, then you can determine who is his master.

Romans 6:16 *Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey*

Furthermore, I introduced to you the subject of persecution. Romans 12:14 states, *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”*

I am thankful that, in God's providence, He has brought us to this subject. Whatever form of persecution awaits the Church here in America, it is vital that we understand—first: why we are persecuted; and second: what is to be our response.

I read for you John 15:18-25, and so I want to return to this passage this morning and complete our consideration of Christian persecution.

Why Christians Are Persecuted

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20Remember the word that I said to you, “A slave is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. 21But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. 22If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have [f]sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. 23He who hates Me hates My Father also. 24If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well. 25But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, “THEY HATED ME WITHOUT A CAUSE.”

Persecution for the Apostle John, who recorded these words, was no mere academic exercise. His brother had been killed by King Herod for nothing more than being a follower of Christ. He may have

secretly witnessed Stephen being stoned to death. He and his friend Peter along with the other apostles had been beaten for preaching the Gospel of Jesus. He had met Paul who himself had persecuted the Church; and then, after being converted, was persecuted.

By the time John wrote the Gospel of John, the Church was living under constant threat of persecution. Christianity was illegal. As John was recording Jesus' warning of persecution, he was living it. John himself would later be exiled to the island of Patmos because he was too dangerous to let roam the Roman Provinces.

One thing is certain—no Christian who suffered persecution could say that he had not been warned. Jesus was definitive. He told His followers beforehand what they should expect. When John wrote this gospel, hatred had already begun to build in the Roman Empire. Tacitus, a Roman historian, wrote of Christians saying, "They are hated for their crimes. They are a race of men who belong to a new and evil superstition."

The Roman government hated the Christians because the government regarded them as disloyal citizens. The Roman Empire was immense, and it included all kinds of peoples and all kinds of countries within it. Some unifying force had to be found to bring these diverse peoples into unity, and it was found in Caesar worship. Here was the unifying principle that was needed.

There came the day, when once a year, every inhabitant of the Roman Empire had to burn his pinch of incense to Caesar—the godhead of Rome. When he had done this, he received a certificate to confirm his allegiance. This custom made all men feel that they were a part of Rome and showed their loyalty to her.

Rome, in turn, was extremely tolerant. After a person had burned his incense and said, "Caesar is Lord," a man could go away and worship any god he liked (so long as the worship did not violate public order). But that is precisely what the Christians would not do. They could not call anyone "Lord" except Jesus the Messiah. They refused to conform, and so the Roman government regarded them as dangerous and disloyal.

The government persecuted the Christians because they insisted they had no king but Christ. Persecution came to Christians because they put Christ first. So here is a portion of the Gospel of John in which Jesus prophesies of coming persecution in which John, the author, was then living.

I could wish at times that we could only study the positive texts of Scripture; however, that is not reality. Jesus told us that we gain blessings 100 times over on this earth and in eternal life to come; yet, along with that, we gain persecutions. Jesus made clear that persecution awaits His disciples. He does not leave us confused concerning why we are persecuted nor how we are to respond to persecution.

Jesus gives clear directives concerning what our attitude is to be towards persecution. He said in Matthew 5:44, *“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* Jesus' words correspond to Paul's writing in Romans 12:14, *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”*

Jesus also spoke of the blessing as a result of persecution in Matthew 5:10-12, *“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

Our text this morning in John 15 is in the middle of Jesus' teaching that warns us of persecution and the hatred of the world because of His name's sake. But even persecution is turned to blessing. We saw last week that we are to rejoice in hope—in the hope of heaven. We can rejoice even in persecution because it carries with it great reward in our eternal home of heaven. In John 15:18-25, Jesus gives us Two Reasons Why Christians Are Persecuted—Reason #1: Conversion of Believers to Christ; and Reason #2: Exposure of Sin.

Make no mistake, the world hates God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Those who hate Jesus also hate Creator God. If people hate Jesus, they are not going to be too thrilled about the

Father either. So understand that man is not neutral about God. Man hates God. This is his nature.

We need to be reminded of that because it explains the world's reaction to Christians. It explains why people do not jump up and down when you speak the Gospel to them. It explains why the world hates Christians who stand for holiness and righteousness. They reject the Church when believers say that lying is wrong, disobedience to parents is sin; fornication, homosexuality, drunkenness, adultery and carousing are all offensive to God.

Unless God turns on the light in the heart of a person, they will remain in their hatred of God. When the light of the holiness of God shines on man, they go running. Man hates the light and will not come to the light. That is why the world hates those who represent the light. So I want to consider these Two Reasons Why the World Hates Christians.

Conversion of Believers to Christ

*If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.
If you were of the world, the world would love its own;
but because you are not of the world,
but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.*

John 15:18,19

The word "world" is used six times in these two verses. Jesus is using it not in the sense of the planet earth or even of the human race that populates the earth. He is using it of the world system. It is the world of men in rebellion against God. "World" refers to the values, pleasures and desires of those who reject God. This is the world that hates Christ's followers.

Jesus says that believers are no longer of the world and are chosen to be separate from the world. A believer was once part of the world but, at conversion, becomes separate from this world system. The reason the world hates believers is because they are traitors, in a very real sense, against the world. The world hates them for the conversion to the other side.

Barclay writes, “There is bound to be a separation between the man who regards God as the only reality in life and the man who regards God as totally irrelevant for life.”

There is an infinite gulf between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. Believers are deserters from darkness to light, and they are hated for that.

Now in verse 19, Jesus affirms that He initiates salvation by stating twice that believers are chosen. Earlier in verse 16, Jesus affirmed that the apostles did not choose Him but He chose them. Now He says that I chose you—out of the world—emphasizing a separation that exists between believers and the world.

Pay attention to this quick footnote. The believer is no longer a part of the world system. A good indication of whether you have a saving relationship through Jesus Christ and have been chosen by God out of the world is to ask the question: how much at home are you in the world?

Are you more like the world or more like Christ? Are you comfortable with the values of the world expressed in so-called entertainment that comes out of Hollywood? Do you ingest massive amounts of the world’s music, the world’s magazines, the world’s books, the world’s websites, and the world’s games and movies? (I am not saying that Christians should never be exposed to these things. But there is something wrong when we know more about the world’s activities than we do about God, the Bible, and the purpose of the Church.) Do you prefer to hang out with other believers or people in the world?

Believers are chosen to be separate from the world. We are different than those who are in the world’s system. It’s okay that you do not join the global party. Being chosen out of the world does not mean that you are superior to those in the world, your sin nature is no different than theirs, but you have been saved out of the system. You no longer fit and so they do not love you as they do each other.

I told you last week that there is a natural but sinful tendency in all of mankind to dislike those who are different from them. That would explain much of the racial hatred that we see today. It is man's

nature to like those who are similar to him but hate those who are different. Add into that mix, believers who are radically different than the world and you have a recipe for persecution.

I enjoy raising chickens. Chickens have loads of personality. However, there is a vicious side to chickens. If a hen with different markings is put among hens that are all alike, the others will peck her to death. The world is like a bunch of chickens. When believers do not fit into the world's system, the world responds with animosity.

One well-known pastor said, "I do not believe a Christian can be popular in the world. Beware of a compromising position in order to be popular. The world will not love a real child of God. The world will love you if you are of the world. This is difficult especially for young people who want so much to be popular. Let's tell our young people what the Lord says. They are not going to be popular with the world if they are children of God."

Those of you who were saved older in life know what it is like to get together with long-time, worldly friends or go to a family reunion where most family members are unbelievers. You feel a bit out of place. You can still be gracious; yet, no matter what, there is a disconnect. Why is that? Because God has graciously chosen you out of the world and made you different.

Believers are former rebels who by grace have been brought back to allegiance to the rightful King of Creation. They are not going to be popular with those who continue in rebellion. Even how believers live causes the world to hate them. A Christian striving to be pleasing to Christ is annoying to the world. The fact that you do not participate in their sin is reason enough to hate you.

1 Peter 4:3-5 For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. 4In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; 5but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

There is a radical difference caused by the transformation by the Spirit when a person is born again. Christians have become like Jesus. They are not like the world. They have other experiences, loyalties and goals. So the world hates them. Let's take that thought a step further. It is not just that Christians are now against the world's system. It is that they represent the person of Jesus Christ.

John 15:20,21 Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. 21But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me.

Simply put the world hates Christians because of their identification with Christ. This is the crux of the matter. Why does the world hate Christians? It hates them because it hates their Master. The world does not hate Christians because they have done evil. Hatred exists because the world hates Jesus and because Christians are identified with Him.

Jesus provides the root cause for this hatred and persecution. It is because those in the world do not have a saving relationship with the Father, "They do not know the One who sent Me." This is not to say that the world does not know that God exists. Romans 1 argues that every man will be judged because every man knows that God exists yet they suppress the truth.

Romans 1:18-22 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them . . . so that they are without excuse. 21For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22Professing to be wise, they became fools,

Man knows that God is there, but man does not know God. He chooses to suppress the truth about God and therefore hates anyone who stands for God. Jesus came to perfectly reveal God. When the world rejects Jesus, it rejects the Father who is made known in Jesus

Christ. And when the world rejects God, then it proceeds to reject and mistreat the followers of the one true God.

One theologian wrote this of believers, "The world does not hate the idea of God, as some vague Someone out yonder. It is the biblical Christ that they hate. You can say you believe in God and be popular in many circles. The real test is your relationship and attitude toward Jesus Christ. You cannot be popular and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, because He is the One who is hated."

I told you last week that one reason why Christians are persecuted is that Christians are identified with Christ. Since Jesus is God, and since unbelievers hate God, they would murder Him if they could get their hands on Him. Because of their hatred for God, whom they cannot reach, they vent against Christians whom they can reach.

To put it in other words, the world does not hate Christians because of what they are in themselves. In ourselves, we are nothing. The world hates Christians because it hates Christ and because we are followers of Christ and stand for His cause against the standards of the world. So it is not too much to say that when the world persecutes followers of Jesus, they are attempting to persecute Him. This is clearly seen in the account of Paul's conversion in Acts 9.

Acts 9:1-5 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; 4and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,"

Paul was persecuting believers, he was persecuting the Church, and therefore persecuting the Lord Himself. In Galatians 6:17, Paul writes, "From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus." Paul bore on his body scars that

told of blows that were meant for Jesus. He suffered for Jesus' name sake.

The world hates Christians because they are converted from the world's system and represent a whole different kingdom. Furthermore, the world hates believers because they have aligned themselves with the person of Christ.

This response raises the question, why do they hate Christ so much? That brings us to the second reason why the world hates believers: Exposure of Sin. We have already mentioned this in passing but Jesus gives more specifics in verses 22-25.

Exposure of Sin

*If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin,
but now they have no excuse for their sin.*

John 15:22

The world hates Jesus because of His words. The question naturally arises, why do they hate Jesus for His words? Some people are hated because their speech reflects arrogance, pride, hate or destruction. But Jesus spoke against such things. The reason why people hated Jesus is that His words and His life revealed sin in the world.

In this verse, Jesus is not saying that men were sinless before He arrived on the scene. He is saying that the world is guilty of the sin of rejecting revealed truth from God. On one hand, man is guilty of rejecting what is referred to as general revelation which is revealed in creation. All men are guilty of rejecting God because they can see creation and because God has put a conscience within them so they are without excuse.

On the other hand with the coming of Jesus, they further reject what is referred to as special revelation. Jesus came and revealed the person of God, so man has no excuse for not embracing that revelation. Men and women hated Jesus during His life, and they hate Him today. They even hate the Bible because God reveals man's true condition and man does not like the revelation.

The world hates Jesus because of His words but also the world hates Jesus because of His works. John 15:23,24 says, *“He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well.”*

Throughout the Gospel of John, the miracles of Jesus are proof positive that He is who He says He is—God Himself. For example, the resurrection of Lazarus is a perfect illustration of men who are without excuse for rejecting the person of Jesus. There were those who literally saw Lazarus rise from the dead after being in the tomb for four days, yet they still rejected Jesus.

So the world hates the followers of Christ because they hate Christ. They hate Christ because He revealed to mankind that they are in rebellion and must give an account for their sin.

Conclusion

What is our reaction to the warnings of Jesus that we will indeed be persecuted for the sake of Christ? Paul summarizes our response in our text in Romans 12:14, *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”*

It is great to think of following Jesus if it leads to heaven and blessings. What if following Christ leads to hatred and persecution? Many may be tempted to live a secret Christian life. You know . . . don't stir the pot too much. Don't take such a strong stand for Christ then the world will leave you alone. But that is not Jesus' way.

Persecution and hatred are not the end of the story. Jesus finishes these thoughts in John 15 by quoting a portion of Psalms from the Old Testament. Verse 25 says, *“But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, ‘THEY HATED ME WITHOUT A CAUSE.’ ”*

The quotation is either from Psalm 35:19 or 69:4. The significance about either one of these passages is that, in the context of these verses, God Himself expresses judgment upon the world's hatred of

the Messiah. God will enter into judgment with those who hate and persecute the Messiah without cause.

The world has no reason for responding to Jesus in this manner. Their hatred is without cause; their abhorrence is groundless and unfair. As a result, their persecution of the innocent deserves justice. God cannot and will not ignore the injustice of the world which has rejected His Son and His followers. He will move against those who hate His Son. He will judge them.

Furthermore, He will receive and honor those who have taken their place alongside of Jesus and who have quietly, and with determination, taken the world's persecution intended for Him.

Jesus came to die for sin at His first coming. That was the purpose of God. Jesus will come again to establish His kingdom. Guess what, there will be no suppressing Him at His Second Coming. Mankind had no excuse the first time because He revealed that He is God through supernatural power and resurrection.

Mankind will have no excuse the second time He comes, but they will not be able to kill Him this time. He will come in judgment and righteous justice and men must give an account for their rejection of God. This is why mankind hates God.

God Himself demonstrates love towards His enemies and provides for the just and the unjust. There will be a day of reckoning; nevertheless, for now we are called to proclaim the truth of God's grace in love—not hatred.

We need to make sure that we give no cause for hatred other than we stand for the person of Jesus. Let them do what they may for this earthly life is not the final court. God will be just in His dealing with the world. Only remember that you were once part of the world. Instead of calling down fire like James and John, have the heart of compassion of Jesus who said, *“How often I wanted to gather you to Myself, but you would not.”* (Matthew 23:37)

1 Peter 2:21-23 *For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow*

in His steps, ²²WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; ²³and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;

Romans 12:12,14 “. . . rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”