

Hated, Loved & Called to Witness

John 15:18-27

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.²³ Whoever hates me hates my Father also.²⁴ If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.²⁵ But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause.’

²⁶ “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. – John 15:18-27, ESV

Intro: Despised and Rejected by Men

We were watching a show on Netflix last week together as a family when the show’s villain, a truly despicable and conniving person, began to sing a song to herself as she was carrying out a nefarious plot. She sang very sweetly, “*This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.*” To this point in this show, no mention had been made of religion or anything religious, and yet when the evil woman starts singing, she just so happens to sing a sweetly innocent Christian song.

Jeremiah was confused, and I had to explain to him that movies and TV shows often like to make associations between evil characters and Christianity. This particular show is relatively mild in its portrayal. Nothing else this woman did or said to this point indicated she was a Christian, but just one little familiar tune was enough for my children to notice and wonder why this evil woman was singing a Christian song.

When Jesus is introduced to us in Isaiah 53, 700 years before His birth, we’re told He will be “*despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*” In the 2,000 years since Jesus walked this earth, His people have consistently walked in His footsteps as those who are despised and rejected by the world. Last year, Russell Vought, deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, came under fire by Senator Bernie Sanders at his confirmation hearing for holding to orthodox Christian beliefs regarding Islam. Likewise, just last month, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was grilled by Senator Cory Booker during his confirmation hearing for personally holding to an orthodox Christian position on marriage. At issue with these men were not matters of public policy but matters of personal conviction based on their faith in Jesus Christ, and these senators stated they believed these

men were disqualified from holding public office because of their beliefs, not their public policy positions. In other news, a recent New Yorker article said the opening of new Chick-fil-A locations in New York City was a “creepy infiltration” of the city by “pervasive Christian traditionalism.”

Of course, we have it pretty easy here in America. The latest issue of *Voice of the Martyrs* magazine spotlights Kurdish Christians in Northern Iraq and Northwestern Iran. Many of these brothers and sisters in Christ have been tortured, beaten, ostracized from their communities, threatened with death, and more.

In fact, the Center for Study on New Religions in Italy has published reports documenting Christianity as the most persecuted religion and Christians as the most persecuted minority in the world. I’m sure you saw their well-researched report all over the evening news, right? Well, according to this study, 90,000 Christians worldwide were killed for their faith in 2016 – 1/3 were killed by Islamic extremists (including ISIS), while others were killed by state-sponsored and non-state sponsored persecution, including by North Korea. Worldwide, approximately 600 million Christians in 151 countries are prevented from practicing their faith openly and legally.

None of this is new, of course, and while it is frustrating on a human level, it should not be surprising news for any Christian who reads the Bible. Jesus Himself was hated, rejected and persecuted to death for His claims, and He clearly told His followers to expect the same treatment from the world.

I. The World’s Hatred

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. – vv. 18-21

A. Hatred for Christ

Jesus tells His disciples to keep two things in mind when the world hates them:

1. The world hated Jesus before it hated His disciples.
2. The world hates the disciples of Jesus on account of His name. In other words, the world hates the followers of Jesus because it hates Jesus.

This is in keeping with what Jesus said to the Apostle Paul when he intervened in his life and saved him. Paul, then known as Saul of Tarsus, was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and bring them

back to Jerusalem for trial and condemnation. Jesus met Saul on that Damascus road and asked him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” By persecuting Christians, Saul was persecuting Jesus.

Now, very few people today would say they hate Jesus. Many would say, “I like Jesus. It’s His followers I can’t stand.” And I have to say, I am somewhat sympathetic to this position. The followers of Jesus are not Jesus, and very often we don’t do a very good job of representing Jesus to the world. We are often very selfish, very self-righteous, overly politicized, judgmental and far from Christ-like. So, on one level, I get it.

Yet many people say they like Jesus because they imagine a Jesus who is just like them, who approves of all the same things they approve of, who has no standards of righteousness, who makes no call and no demands of them or the world. Many people say they like Jesus, but they don’t actually know Jesus, and they imagine a Jesus who is a combination of Barney the Dinosaur and Mr. Rogers.

Jesus said the hatred of the world for His people comes because the world hates Him. The world resents Jesus’ righteousness, His holy standards, His exclusive claims. So, whether they pay lip-service to Him (as Muslims do, who say Jesus was a great prophet) or completely deny His existence (as a few atheists are starting to do more prominently), the world hates the followers of Jesus because it hates Jesus.

B. Hatred without Cause

The world not only hates Jesus, but it hates Him without cause.

22 If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. 23 Whoever hates me hates my Father also. 24 If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. 25 But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause.’ – vv. 22-25

Jesus came into the world and openly did works so great they were proof of His divine origin. He did the works of God. Thus, the world’s hatred of Jesus was both without excuse and without cause.

This is one key way we can know whether suffering Christians face is truly suffering for the cause of Christ: Is it without cause?

Peter writes this in I Peter 4:12-16: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.”

Much of the time, Christians suffer because they are themselves doing wrong. “Meddler” seems to be the most applicable term here. Pompous, self-righteous meddling can often make people dislike you and not want you around. This is not Christian persecution. This is just being an obnoxious person.

Persecution without true cause is the mark of Christian persecution, when we are persecuted not because we have wronged others but simply because we belong to Jesus Christ. This kind of persecution is real. Yet even in these completely undeserved cases, Peter tells us to rejoice and not be ashamed by to glorify God that we bear the name of Christian.

C. Then, Why?

So, if Christian persecution is persecution without cause, except for the name of Christ, then why does the world persecute Christians? Well, in this passage, Jesus says the world hates Christians because it hates Him, and people hate Him because they do not know the One who sent Him but instead they hate the Father.

If make the connections between what Jesus is saying, ultimately we reach this conclusion: People hate and persecute Christians because they hate God. The fallen world is in active rebellion against God. Although they know He is God and they have His law written on their consciences and revealed in nature, they suppress the truth in unrighteousness and they deny God, refusing to honor Him as God.

This is exactly what Romans 1 tells us is wrong with the world –

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” – Romans 1:18-21, ESV

In many ways, the more faithful and obedient Christians are, the more likely they are to be the objects of persecution, because they remind unbelievers of the truth they are suppressing and of the God they are refusing to worship.

The world knows God is real, eternal, powerful and holy. The world also knows they have rebelled against God, stand in violation of His law, and will face His holy judgment. As we will see next week as we begin John 16, the world knows these things in part because of the witnessing ministry of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would “*convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.*” (John 16:8, ESV)

Yet knowing the truth and embracing the truth are two very different things. And so the world actively suppresses the truth in resentment of God and His Lordship over them. Christians, when we live faithfully before a watching world, are a reminder of the very things the world has rejected, deeply resents and actively suppresses.

So, what are we to do? How should Christians respond to the hatred of the world? In our human nature, we have tended to respond with the fight-or-flight response:

1. Sometimes we fight for our rights and lobby as activists for our cause. We use the political machinery and try to manipulate things to our advantage.
2. Sometimes we fight by getting angry and lashing out on social media or even in personal confrontations with others.
3. At other times, we tire of fighting and we decide the best strategy is retreat from the world. We hide and huddle.

Our tendency to fight-or-flight is a natural and sinful one, because we are not listening to King Jesus nor are we following in His footsteps as His ambassadors. Imagine if the US sent ambassadors to nations and they disregarded diplomatic protocol and US policy and instead wither acted belligerently toward their host nations or retreated behind the walls of their embassy compounds and refused to engage with anyone from the outside culture. Such ambassadors would be quickly rebuked and then removed from office.

When we engage with the world in a fight response, we mis-represent the Lord by valuing political power over spiritual power and by mixing our political preferences and allegiances with our spiritual convictions and concerns for the cause of Christ. Thus, many non-believers see evangelical Christianity as a political movement, a wing of the Republican party.

On the other hand, when we flee from the world, we are being equally unfaithful, for Jesus calls us to be salt and light, to penetrate the darkness and preserve the rotting flesh around us. We cannot hide the light. We cannot stay in the saltshaker.

So, what do we do?

II. Christ's Love

We begin by remembering that, while we are hated by the world, we are deeply and personally loved by Christ.

A. Chosen by Christ

Jesus tells His disciples twice in just a few verses that he has chosen them:

- *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide – v. 16*
- *If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. – v. 19*

Knowing how much we are loved by Christ is rooted in knowing we were personally chosen by Christ. If you believe in Jesus, you did not come to faith in Christ by accident. Just as Jesus chose the twelve and personally called them to follow Him, so Christ has personally chosen you and called you, by His Holy Spirit, to follow Him.

Knowing Christ has chosen you can give you great confidence in the face of the world's hatred. The world may reject you, but Jesus has already accepted you. The world may marginalize and minimize you, but Jesus has chosen you and put you into His service for His glory. The world may have no use for you, but Jesus has chosen to use You for His purposes, according to His sovereign plan. Just as Jesus used others to be the instruments of His sovereign choice and calling in your life, so He will use you to be His instruments of sovereign choice and calling in the lives of others.

B. Blessed to Follow & Imitate Christ

Not only are we chosen by Christ in love, but we are also given the immense privilege of following and imitating Him. Jesus says: *“Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.”* (v. 20)

If we are ever truly suffering Christian persecution, hatred or resentment from the world simply because of our faith in Christ, then we really do have cause to rejoice, because we are following Jesus and we are being given the incredible privilege of imitating our Lord and Master.

Notice Jesus addresses both kinds of reactions to our witness in His name: *“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.”*

Just as surely as we have the privilege of being rejected by the world for the sake of Christ and even being persecuted in various ways for His sake, so also do we have the honor of being heard and

accepted as the ambassadors of Christ by those whom the Lord is seeking and saving. Just as many people responded positively to Jesus' word and were saved, while many others responded negatively and rejected Him, so we are blessed to experience the same responses. Some accept, many reject, we are blessed – to God be the glory!

III. The Call to Witness

So, just as we remember we are loved by Jesus – chosen by Him and blessed to be able to follow Him and imitate Him – so this should encourage and embolden our witness for Him to the world.

A. The Spirit's Witness

As we consider our call to be witnesses, Jesus first grounds our witness in the Spirit's witness:

But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.

Just as we suffer and are rejected because Jesus suffered and was rejected, so also we witness because the Spirit has been sent and is witnessing. Our witness is only made effective by the Spirit's witness, and we should always remember to submit to and follow in the lead of the Spirit's witness.

What does this mean? Well, one thing it means is that you may be used as an instrument of the Holy Spirit or even as the voice of the Holy Spirit in someone's life, but you will never be the Holy Spirit in someone's life. The Spirit may use you as a key instrument to change someone's heart and mind, but you yourself will never change anyone's heart or mind. This is far more than a subtle distinction; it makes all the difference in how we approach others.

If I think I am the Holy Spirit to someone else, I will do anything I can think to do to change their mind: Reason and persuade, use human logic or self-serving arguments, beg and plead, emotionally manipulate, whatever it takes. However, if I realize that it is the Spirit's witness that really makes the difference, I will pray more, use more Scripture (as it is the Spirit-inspired word of God), depend less on my own gifts and more on the Spirit's power, take rejection less personally, and witness with more integrity.

B. The Believer's Witness

But how do we witness? Jesus said, *“And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”* His disciples were to tell others what they had heard and seen of Jesus, for they had been with Him throughout His earthly ministry.

Now, you and I have not been eye-witnesses of the earthly ministry of Jesus. But we have witnessed the Lord's work in our lives. We don't need to overblow, embellish, gloss or anything. We're not bearing witness to what great and faithful Christians we are but to what a powerful Savior Jesus is. The focus of the disciples' witness and ours needs to be the same" Focus on Jesus, who He and what He has done.

Since we do have the eye-witness testimony of the apostles in written form in the Gospels, we can and should use these in our witness. Ideally, if we can build a relationship with someone and then offer to walk with them through one of the Gospels, or challenge them to read a Gospel and ask us questions about it, this can give us opportunity to engage in witness that is Christ-centered, Bible-based and personal, as we tell them what Jesus has done for us.

Conclusion: Speak the Truth in Love

In the end, suffering persecution and bearing witness are both a matter of speaking the truth in love. We don't need to get angry, defensive, political or take rejection personally. We need to speak the truth in love. We don't need to run away in fear, hide our light under a bushel and only speak of Jesus to other Christians. We need to speak the truth in love. We don't need to worry about whether or not we have just the right words, spoken in just the right way, but we need to focus on speaking the truth in love.

In the end, Jesus is pleased to choose us and use us, the Spirit is pleased to bear witness through us, and the Father is pleased to be glorified in us and through us. In the end, those are some great reasons to rejoice, be encouraged, endure hardship and continue to bear witness.