

John 15:17-16:4

In preparing for this message I came across the comments of one writer who told a story of how he and his wife once went to stay for a week with another couple in a lake house, somewhere in Canada. It was apparently pretty late in the year when they went and the winter had not yet set in but was not far away. One day, while this man and his wife and friends were out walking around the nearly deserted lake, they came upon one of the only other people who happened to be around - a resident - who had been living there for a number of years.

At any rate, they struck up a conversation with this local resident and somewhere along the way this writer rather offhandedly remarked that he would love to come and spend the winter up there at the lake house. At that point the conversation went silent as the local resident just stared in disbelief at this young writer. After an awkward and uncomfortable silence the resident finally managed to say something. Looking straight at the wrong writer, the resident asked, "You've never been through a winter up here, have you?"

The writer admitted that he hadn't, and for the next 10 minutes the resident told him what a real winter beside a frozen lake in the heart of Canada was actually like. With each descriptive comment, any romantic notions the writer might have had about the whole thing disappeared. He very soon realized that his statement had been rather naive and he clearly had no idea what he was talking about!

After telling *that* story, the writer then used it to try and convey something of how he always felt when it came to dealing with the subject of persecution - something like the way he had felt many years before *after* the Canadian resident had given him a more realistic picture of what a long and cruel winter next to a wilderness lake would actually be like. In other words, when it came to the subject of persecution, he once again felt very much like a man who had no idea what he was talking about!

Well, as we turn this morning to John 15, verse 17 and following, I can say that I very much share that writer's sentiments! Apart from some time in Australia, 4/5 of my life has been spent here, in the American West, in a country with abundant blessings, a country with a stable government, a country that allows people great freedom to practice and pursue their faith, a country that knows *some* things about racial persecution, but very little about religious persecution.

Nevertheless, this is where we find ourselves this morning, dealing with the subject of persecution. By God's grace, and in spite of my own inexperience with the things this passage speaks of, we will and can, nevertheless, benefit greatly from the things that God has for us here....

Now, those of you who have been here for at least a little while will know that we have been working through John's Gospel for some time now. And as our study has developed we have proceeded with the understanding that this book was written to encourage people to come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Further, we have been working with the understanding that, structurally speaking, the book can be divided into about 3 distinctive parts - chapters 1-12, chapters 13-17, and chapters 18-21.

Currently we find ourselves in the middle section - chapters 13-17 - a section that John wrote, it seems, to give us an encouraging glimpse of some of Jesus' private teaching and ministry to his closest disciples. The picture painted here is an inviting one and would give any prospective convert a good look at what it means to follow Jesus, of how well he looks after his followers as well as the potential challenges and costs involved in committing one's life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week we saw how, after an extended time (in chapter 14) of comforting his disciples who were unsettled over the fact of Jesus' impending death and departure, he (Jesus) began, in Chapter 15, to move from comforting and encouraging his disciples to challenging and even commissioning his disciples - seeking to focus them again on the task that lay in front of them. In particular we saw how in the first 16 verses of chapter 15 Jesus made it very clear that the thing that he was looking for and expected of them was *fruitfulness* that came as a result of *abiding faithfulness in him*.

In the verses before us this morning, as Bruce Milne has so well summarized, Jesus will move from challenging them to a life of fruitfulness to talking to them about the *context* in which they will have to carry out this mission and the sorts of responses they can generally expect to find as they go forth as Christ's representatives in the world. With that as a brief introduction, let's pray and then we'll begin to look at the passage together,

Father in Heaven, please come and inhabit this time - on both sides of the equation. Would you move in hearts that you have already enlivened by your Spirit so that we are receptive? Would you bring cold dead hearts that have not yet been enlivened to life even today? And would you please work through the vehicle of an unworthy and thoroughly inadequate servant to apply your perfect and life changing truths, as only you can do?

Turning now to the text, the first thing we see here is Jesus letting his disciples know, in no uncertain terms, exactly what it is that they will be up against in the days and months ahead.....

(Read John 15:17-20)

As verse 17 shows, amongst themselves, God's people are to love one another as an expression of their abiding faithfulness in the Lord Jesus Christ. As such this verse is very much connected to what we saw in *last* week's study. But it is also connected to the verses before us this morning. Why? Because one of the many reasons their love for one another will prove to be so important for them is because what they will experience as they carry out Christ's mission to the *world* will often be the opposite of love. To be sure, there will be some who will respond to the Gospel. But if the pattern that held during Jesus' ministry held for them, those positive responses would be in the minority. The majority of what they would experience would be rejection, just as Jesus experienced rejection.

But Jesus does not only tell them *that* they will experience rejection and persecution, he also provides some indicators as to why this would be the case. For starters they would experience hatred and persecution because of who they were NOT. In verse 19 Jesus says to them that if they were of the world - i.e., if they thought and acted like the world, if they shared the same values of the people and society in which they found themselves, then they would be loved by those people and that society.

And there's no surprise there, is there? People tend to like and be attracted to people who are like them. There is something personally affirming and comforting about finding another person who thinks and acts like you, and shares your same values. And let's just face it: It's easier, isn't it? You don't have to work very hard in those sorts of relationships, or at least not as hard as you do in ones where there are a great number of differences. You don't have to learn to compromise, or give and take, or face the possibility of being confronted or even discovering that you may in fact be wrong about some things or even many things. The world did not love Jesus' disciples because they were not "of" the world - meaning, they were certainly IN the world (how could they not be) but they were not like the world in terms of their beliefs and practices and values. They moved within their respective environments and yet maintained a distinctive identity as believers in the midst of those environments.

Now, to be sure, some differences the world will tolerate for a time, and to a certain point. Some unique-nesses people will put up with, and even on certain occasions applaud. But then there are other kinds of differences that are not as happily accepted by the world.

We have a dear friend in Australia, who shall remain nameless, and who we will call "Alice". But "Alice" had an occasion to experience this sort of rejection first hand. Alice had gotten a job with a local bank, as a teller. After working at this bank for a few weeks, she discovered how "things were done" at her particular branch. The short version is this: At her bank the employees were rewarded based upon the number of people they saw and helped during the day. If you saw a lot of people and helped them - then you were eligible for certain bonuses and privileges.

Unfortunately for "Alice", what she discovered very quickly was that pretty much everyone in the bank had long been in the practice of "padding" their numbers in order to make themselves look better. When "Alice" asked a question about this she was informed that "everybody did it" and was expected to play along.

Well, of course, "Alice" decided that she couldn't just play along, but also did not want to be a "whistleblower" and so she just put her head down, worked hard, and was diligent to try and keep an honest record of persons she assisted through the day. Unfortunately for her, when the evaluations came along, she always did poorly as her numbers were significantly different from everyone else's. To make a long story short, she didn't last long at that job. She was made to feel very uncomfortable because she was too much of a liability to keep around. Her honesty could potentially ruin things for everyone.

For "Alice", living out her distinctive identity as a believer brought her into conflict with her colleagues. And it wasn't that she was *looking* for a fight. Nor was she looking to distinguish herself for the *sake* of distinguishing herself. She was just trying to be consistent with her profession - and was hated and persecuted and abused for it. It is that sort of thing that is in view when John says "because you are not of the world.... the world hates you..." One reason Jesus' followers were going to experience hatred and persecution was because of what they were NOT and/or because of what they refused to BECOME.

But the other reality we see here is that Jesus' disciples would also be hated and persecuted, not because of who they were NOT but because of WHO THEY WERE - which you can come at in at least two different ways.

For one thing, the disciples were known as those who were *with* Jesus. And so there was a kind of guilt by association, a hatred by association that they simply inherited by virtue of their connection and friendship with Jesus.

For another thing, they were not only *with* Jesus but they were also becoming *like* Jesus. He had chosen them from out of the world, i.e., from out of the mass of humanity. But he hadn't just chosen them, he also taught them, and mentored them - and very soon would be giving his Spirit to them - and the fruits of all that were beginning to manifest themselves in their lives. To put it another way, people were beginning to see, and would continue to see, in an increasing fashion, *Jesus*, in them.

And so, the result of all this was that, in addition to being rejected because of who they were NOT, they were also very much going to be rejected because of who they WERE, people who were both *with* Jesus and also becoming more and more *like* Jesus..

But there's more here than just that. The reasons for their being rejected were not only a function of who *they* were and/or who God was making them to be - as helpful as those explanations are. There was another reason why the disciples would be hated and persecuted. And we see it in verses 21-25.....

(Read John 15:21-25)

Now, before we talk about this other reason why the disciples would be hated and persecuted, let me make two minor caveats, or "side observations" as these verses will possibly raise some questions, for at least some of you who are perhaps more familiar with the Bible.

First of all, let me say that there is no conflict here with Romans 1. Romans 1 teaches that all people know God deep down, intrinsically because the evidence for him is clearly seen in the natural order and presses itself upon our conscience. Romans 1 also says that although this fact is inescapable, we still look for and find ways of suppressing this reality within ourselves. Jesus, in vs 21, talks about people NOT knowing God. However, when Jesus says this he is not denying the truth of Romans 1. He is not talking about knowing God in that sense. Rather, he is talking about knowing God *personally* and *relationally*. He is talking about knowing God in a *saving way*.

Secondly, there is also no conflict here with Romans 5. Romans 5, drawing upon the truths of Genesis 3 - the fall of man - teaches that all humanity sinned IN and THROUGH Adam, as their representative. His sin was our sin. His fall was our fall.

And so all people bear this reality within themselves, from birth. We are born with a sin nature, with hearts that are broken.

In the verses just read to you, Jesus talks about how certain people (“they”), apart from his coming, would NOT be guilty of sin. Now we’ll look at that word “they” in a moment. But for now please note that when Jesus talks about people not being guilty of sin apart from his coming he is not thinking or speaking of sin in general but of the particular sin of rejecting God’s revelation of himself in and through his Son - Jesus.

Notice the phrase at the end of verse 23: “Whoever hates me hates my Father also”. What is Jesus talking about here? What “hatred” is he talking about? He is talking about the hatred evidenced by those who rejected what he spoke about in verse 22 - the things that he said and revealed to them about who he was and about his unique relationship with the Father. We have seen examples of that sort of hatred and rejection throughout this Gospel, particularly after he has said something profound.

Look also at the end of verse 24: “now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.” Once again, what is the “hatred” referred to here? It is the hatred evidenced by those who rejected the things mentioned in the first part of verse 24 - the miraculous signs he performed that no one else had ever performed - the healing of the blind, the lame walking, the raising of people from the dead, etc. This too, we have seen examples of in this Gospel - people who rejected Jesus in spite of and even in the face and presence of these amazing signs and wonders that he performed.

And so, again, the particular sin in view - which they would not have been guilty of had Jesus not come - but the particular sin in view is the sin of rejecting God’s revelation of Himself through the things that Jesus said and did. This doesn’t mean that they were sinless and innocent until Jesus showed up, it just means that until he did, they were not guilty of rejecting God’s Son. But now they were. Now they were guilty of the granddaddy of all sins.

Having made those “side observations”, the main thing I want you to see in this section is the further explanation that Jesus gives for the hatred and rejection of both him, and those who are associated with him. Simply put the source of all this, says Jesus, is the fact that people do not “know” God. And again, by saying this he is not talking about people not having a theoretical concept of God in their brains or a kind of Romans 1 awareness of God. He is talking about people not knowing God really, personally, deeply, relationally.

Now, as it stands, that statement by itself is, I suppose, somewhat helpful and yet perhaps one that you might not find terribly informative. You might read these words and think to yourself, "Well, it's no great shock to discover that pagans do not know God in a real, relational way." That's the sort of thing you *expect* to be true for your average pagan, isn't it? And you might be left wondering why Jesus bothered to make this seemingly obvious point.

And I think the answer to that puzzle becomes clearer when we look a little more closely at the passage. Because when we do, we discover that Jesus seems to be referring here not just to pagans in general but to a different class of people altogether which - once we see this - I think it affects the way we perceive and understand the more pointed significance of what is being said in these verses.

Look back at verse 21: "...they do not know him who sent me..." Who is this "they" being spoken of here? Look at verse 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." Who is this "they"? Keep reading. Listen again to verse 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." Once again, who is this "they"? Look at verse 25. Here we have the first clue: "But the word that is written in *their* Law must be fulfilled." What Law is this? In context, it would almost certainly be the Mosaic Law. So who is the "they" in view here? - the Jewish people. The religious people. That's the persecution he has in view. Not a generalized persecution by rank pagans.

But that's not all he says. Keep reading. Look at 16:1-2: "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues" - (there's another clue) - "*the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God*" - Now that sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Flash forward with me to Acts 7-9, to the Jewish zealot Saul who, out of a desire to see God glorified, pursues Christians and sees them put to death. Flash forward in your mind to that scene where Saul is at Stephen's stoning, standing and watching this Christian brother die. And the text says that Saul was there, giving approval to the whole thing. And ask yourself again, "Why do "they" do these things?"

John 16:3, "And they will do these things because they have not known the Father or me"

Acts 9:4-5 *And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* ⁵ *And he said, "Who are you, Lord?"*

"...they will do these things because they have not known the Father..."

"...Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

Saul, knew *about* God. Didn't *know* God. Saul was a very religious man who was convinced he was doing God a great favor by hunting down Christians and imprisoning them.

Now, I walked you through all of that just so I could say this: It seems to me that the worldly persecution and hatred that Jesus has *primarily* in view here - and that doesn't mean *exclusively*, but simply *primarily* - but the worldly persecution that Jesus has *primarily* in view here is that which comes at the hands of the *religious* people. In the immediate situation facing his disciples, that would have been the Jewish people all around them.

With that in view, Jesus' statement that his persecutors did what they did because they "did not know God" takes on a slightly different significance. In that light, it seems that what Jesus is wanting to do for his disciples here is to prepare them for the *particular* challenge of being opposed and persecuted by the Jewish religious authorities - which is to say, by people that they had grown up with, and perhaps had looked up to at one point and respected and regarded as men who knew God. These are the people that will set themselves against them now, just as they did with Jesus. These are the people who will violently oppose them and will appear to be acting from pure motives, out of zeal and even love for the Lord.

And perhaps Jesus' followers will find themselves in these situations and begin to doubt themselves - and their mission. They might well have been quite shaken by these things if Jesus had not taken these steps to prepare them and to say to them that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary - these opponents who claim to know God so much better than them *do not know him at all*. Their great learning and pious devotion does not and has not rendered them any closer to a true knowledge of God. And Jesus' followers are not to be shaken by their opposition, they are not to lose heart, they are not to be fooled and led astray, they are not to doubt the rightness of their mission or the authority that Jesus had given them to carry it out.

And so, by way of summary, let me start wrapping this up. Jesus, after comforting his disciples about his impending departure, and then after challenging them to a life of fruitfulness that arises from their abiding faithfulness, here talks to them about the CONTEXT in which they are, and will be carrying out that mission.

He tells them that they will be carrying out their mission in an environment that will be, in the main, a hostile one as they are hated and persecuted partly because of who they aren't and partly because of who they are. Ultimately, however, the source of this hatred comes from the fact that their opponents do not know God, no matter how overtly religious they might appear to be. Their zeal and knowledge are not grounded in a true knowledge of God and so they will treat Jesus' followers no better than they treated Jesus himself.

And the reason Jesus tells them these things is so that, by letting them know in advance what to expect, they will not be caught off guard, will not have the wind knocked of them, they will not despair and be tempted to give up and walk away. Jesus tells them in advance so that they will not give in to self-doubt and second-guessing, so that they will not be fooled into believing - even in the face of persecution and death - that God is not in charge or that he is not still very much working in and through the very circumstances of their life - no matter how difficult those circumstances become.....

Well, as his present day followers and disciples there are any number of things we can take away from these verses, and hopefully you have already begun to do this., but in case you haven't, let me quickly give you two things , from among many, that you and I can focus on together.

Firstly, persecution ought to be perceived as a normal and even expected part of what God's people can and do experience in this life. You won't hear this being promoted much on television but the simple fact is that for most of the Christians in the world, especially those outside of the American West - persecution is not unusual or un-expected. And it continues to come because of who we are NOT, as well as because of who we ARE and who we are BECOMING.

Again, we don't experience much of this in America, for a number of reasons I am sure. Perhaps we have been blessed and protected as God has, for a season, used America to spark and advance global mission. Maybe that's part of the reason. Maybe it's also that we have a great abundance here and in the midst of that we as a church have sold out somewhat and have become immature and self-indulgent, as we have tried to juggle pursue God's kingdom with pursuing and living the American Dream. I'm sure that there are lot of reasons that can be posited to explain our current state of affairs.

However, the winds of culture are shifting and becoming less and less favorable for Christians in this country. Whether we want to or not, we're going to have to grow up and move out of our self-indulgence and we're going to have to become more and more courageous to live out our distinctive identities as Christians - and at a greater and greater cost. And as we do so, the opposition will increase, the hatred will grow, and the persecution will become much more than the raised eyebrow that so easily slays us now. And when it does come, we're going to have to remember this - that being hated and persecuted, for the follower of Jesus, is *par for the course*. It is neither strange, nor unusual, and certainly ought not be un-expected.

Secondly, not only should we expect persecution, in general, but we ought not be surprised to discover that the day may come when the fiercest persecution we know will be *religious persecution* - from faiths outside of our own, and even quite possibly from within the Christian "family" as the gap continues to widen between evangelical and so-called "liberal" forms of Christianity. As America becomes more and more religious plural and as the religion of secularism becomes more entrenched and more and more invisible, then we will experience an increasing degree of persecution and hatred. And when that happens, we ought not be surprised to discover that it is coming to us from the hand and in the guise of those who claim a knowledge of God, those who claim to be acting for God, and for his glory, those who claim to speak for God and who think that they are doing God a favor by shutting the mouths and hindering the practices of evangelical Christians. It happens all over the world, right now, every day, in all kinds of places. We are foolish to believe that it would not and could not happen here.

But if and when that day comes, and even as we see it coming, we are not to be thrown off course. We are not to believe, for a moment, that the rise of such things will signal any sort of failure of God's purpose. We are not to be led astray to question or to fall into doubts and crises of faith. Instead we are to remember Jesus' words here. We are to, as Paul often did, rejoice in the sufferings that come for Christ's sake and recognize the particular privilege of joining with him and bearing the marks of Jesus upon our very bodies as hatred directed toward him, lands squarely upon US.