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John 15:18-16:4

Forty-seventh Message

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FACING THE OPPOSITION

When I became a Christian at the end of my college days, the change in my life was pretty dramatic. I had new meaning and purpose, a powerful sense of the Holy Spirit, and a drastic change in what I did and with whom I did it. But I quickly realized that there was an uncomfortable tension with people and how they interacted with me. I began to feel that I was from a different planet. That probably was much closer to the truth than I realized. I want to talk about this tension this morning.

On the eve of his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure. They are in a state of bewilderment and confusion. In John 15 Jesus is talking about his goal for them, which is to bear fruit for God by abiding in him and obeying his commandments. He has been referring to a new humanity and a new community in which people love one another sacrificially.

Suddenly the dialogue changes. Now Jesus wants the disciples to know that they will face intense opposition. His sobering words warn them about what lies ahead. Following Jesus will cost them their lives. Following Jesus will cost us, too. We need to hear these words in order to calibrate our expectations, based on the response of a hostile world. The truth is that the more fruitful you are for God, the more opposition you will experience.

John 15:18-24:

“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. 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. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. 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. (John 15:18-24 NASB)

Christians know that they are in a battle with the world, the flesh and the devil. The focus in this text is on the world. In John’s view, the world is not only the universe, the inhabited earth which is loved by God, but also the created moral order which is in active rebellion against God. According to Eugene Peterson, it is “society that does not regard God with either reverence or obedience.”¹ The world is the place where God is absent. Believers are chosen out of the world, taken from darkness into the light, the place where God is present. The community of believers stands over against the world and the world will persecute the community that identifies itself with Jesus.

There are four reasons why the world hates followers of Jesus.

1. Believers are hated because the world hates Jesus.

If you dislike or hate something, then the normal reaction is to dislike someone who is attached or identified with that thing. If the world hated Jesus, then it will hate those who follow him. We can expect to encounter hostility and persecution. Don’t take it personally. It isn’t about you; it’s about Jesus.

Many times when I am in conversation with non-believers and they discover that I am a Christian, they unleash all their anger, frustration and disappointment with the church and God and religion. Their speech turns nasty. They bring up the most offensive subjects just to see how I will react. Suddenly I find myself in a war not of my making. Sometimes they tell me that under no circumstances am I to talk to them about God. At other times I am simply ignored, which is another way of showing hatred towards Jesus.

2. Believers are hated because they do not belong to the world.

Believers are chosen out of the world. We are transferred from the kingdom of the world to the kingdom of God. These two kingdoms have no point of intersection. That is why we can often feel like an alien from another planet while we live in the world but are not of the world. The church is different and distinct from the world. It operates on a different basis and dimension. The world believes in asserting itself and seeking its own glory. The church seeks to humble itself and seek the glory of God. The world loves its own and can’t stand anything different.

Perhaps like me, you too encountered this tension when you became a believer. Maybe your friends criticized you, made fun of you or stopped associating with you. Maybe your family reacted harshly and tried to talk you out of it. That is because you no longer belong to this world. This tension can be very uncomfortable, because it makes us aware that we are different and don’t belong to the world.

Several years ago my wife and I were invited to sit in the press box for a Stanford-Washington football game. I was running late, so without thinking I grabbed some clothes and we took off for the stadium. When we entered the press box and saw everyone dressed in red and white shirts, I just about died. Without realizing it I had picked up a purple shirt, which is the color of the University of Washington. Sitting with the athletic director and his wife, it was the most uncomfortable three hours in my life. I would have been less uncomfortable if I had taken off my shirt and gone bare-chested. Our friends still don’t believe that it was an unintentional on my part.

While we are here gathered together, everyone is wearing purple and we feel comfortable. But when we go out there, we may be the only one wearing purple. Everyone else is wearing red. We don’t belong and we feel very strange.

3. Believers are hated because they are not greater than Jesus.

Jesus reminds the disciples that a servant is not greater than his master. He told them this principle earlier (13:16), with reference to

being humble and not worrying about places of honor. Here the principle is applied to persecution.

As believers we are servants of Christ. Even though we are friends of Jesus, God is no more going to deliver us from opposition than he did his own Son. God's victory and his purposes come through the suffering of his people, just like it did with Jesus. People in the world respond to us and our message exactly as they responded to Jesus and his message. Paul says, "We are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing" (2 Cor 2:15 NAS95S). Not only will there be those who reject it but also those who accept the message. The response is based on the name of Jesus. Again, we shouldn't take anything personally. Don't get too down if you are hated and rejected, and don't take any credit if you lead someone to Christ.

4. Believers are hated because the world does not really know God.

If the world had known God they would have recognized the revelation of God in Jesus. The Jews, God's people, claimed that they knew God, but Jesus proved them wrong.

What Jesus did was expose the most central sin: rejection of God's gracious revelation and the world's decisive preference for darkness rather than light. Jesus both spoke and did the words of the Father. In rejecting Jesus the world rejected the Father. No longer was there an "excuse" – a very strong term. The world became accountable. Its pretense about serving God was revealed in the rejection of Jesus: they didn't want God. To reject Jesus is to reject the Father. To accept Jesus is to accept the Father. The revelation of God in Jesus simultaneously exposes sin and provides its remedy. The world hates the exposure and thus denies any need for a remedy.

The world talks a lot about God. It's really fascinating when you think about it. God is mentioned on television, radio and in the supermarket. People want others to pray to him in difficult times. The world invokes his name in order to be blessed. The words, "God bless America," polish off most political speeches. The idea of a loving God gives us warm feelings. But when we become more specific and mention Jesus and our need for his saving work, the message suddenly becomes offensive. God is safe; Jesus isn't. We hear things like, "Religion is a personal matter. People shouldn't try push their opinions on others." What is exposed is that people really don't want God on his terms. Jesus makes it clear that you can't have the Father without accepting him.

The world hates Jesus. Is it any surprise then that it reacts with hatred towards those who follow him? We should not be surprised when the world wants to eliminate prayer in school, take the word "God" off of our money or prohibit nativity scenes at Christmas. We should not be surprised when we are ignored, sneered at or ridiculed for our beliefs. Jesus would say, "Get used to it. What happened to me will happen to you."

Why was the world so hostile to Jesus? What did he do? Jesus tells his disciples, "They hated Me without a cause."

"But they have done this to fulfill the word that is written in their Law, 'THEY HATED ME WITHOUT A CAUSE.' (15:25)

This hatred of Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures, and it was important that it did so. The quotation is from either Psalms 35:19 or 69:4, probably the latter since the psalm was widely regarded as messianic. A Davidic typology is presupposed. David was hated by Saul, by his son Absalom, by Shimei and others. Jesus is the greater son of David.

If David could be hated for no reason, how much more the Messiah who would spring from his loins?

Notice how Jesus refers to "their" Law. Not only did the Jews hate Jesus for no reason, but their own Bible condemned them while they unwittingly fulfilled their own Scriptures.

When I first became a pastor, I was involved in a singles ministry meeting at a restaurant. One of the first times I taught this group, a woman walked right in front of me and spat on me for no reason. I thought to myself, "Yes, I must be doing something right."

As we face the hatred of the world there are some real dangers we need to avoid. I will mention three. The first is compromise. We don't belong in the world and the world can't stand that. What the world tries to do is pressure followers of Jesus to conform to its belief system. The danger we face is to compromise, to give in to the pressures of the world because we want to belong. We want to be accepted. We don't want to be different. Sometimes we think we can win people to Christ if we just give in a little.

Compromise can happen in actions. Sexual immorality is a big temptation. So is partying for the younger people and materialism for the older folk. But it can also happen internally in attitudes and dependencies that take our devotion away from God. We can end up loving the world more than Jesus. The results can be devastating. Most of us know that. I certainly do.

This is what the book of Judges is all about. Israel wanted to be like all the other nations. They compromised their devotion to Yahweh and worshiped the Canaanite gods. We all face this tension. But compromise is probably the biggest tension or difficulty that young people face. At some point their friends become the most important people in their lives and the pressure to conform is enormous. Our high school students are studying the book of Judges this year. I encourage you to study this material with your children. As parents you can't protect them, live their life for them, or make all the decisions for them, but you can help them to see truth and reality.

The second danger is fear. Because of fear we remain silent. We don't want to rock the boat. We are seen but are not known or recognized as followers of Jesus. We go about our business and try to stay unstained by the world. We end up isolated and ineffective for God's kingdom. Remember that Jesus spent a lot of time with tax gatherers and sinners, eating meals and talking about eternal life. There is something very good that happens when we are known publicly as believers. Our name is attached to Jesus and we can't hide and do what we want. We don't need bumper stickers or signs on our backs or tracts to mark our identity. As we live incarnational lives, investing relationally in other people, the presence of Jesus makes itself known.

The third danger is to intentionally provoke the world's hostility, to antagonize, to pick a fight, to enjoy disturbing people, to fight fire with fire. Jesus was hated without a cause, and we should be too. Jesus did not shy away from a fight, but he didn't go around picking fights. As he spoke truth the fight just came to him.

The danger for the church is to adopt the tactics of the world and try to overpower it through numbers, campaigns and legislation. Some of these things are not necessarily wrong, but we are deceived if we think we can replace the kingdom of the world with the kingdom of God physically and politically. Being antagonistic and angry towards the world is not the way of God. God didn't save the world through power. God saves through weakness and love. The church is

to be distinct and above reproach so that when the world hates it, it does so for no reason.

How should we face the world? What are we supposed to do? This is what Jesus tells his disciples next:

“When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and you will testify also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.” (15:26-27)

How do we face the hatred of the world? Jesus sends the Helper, the Holy Spirit of truth. We are not alone or unaided in the world. Jesus said in gospel of Matthew, “But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matt 10:19-20).

We don't have to fabricate or manufacture a plan of action. We don't have to come up with award-winning slogans or depend on our own strength. We trust that the Spirit is with us and we allow the Spirit to speak. We look within to the presence of God. It is not the work of men but of God to bring people to the knowledge of Jesus as he truly is.

What should we do? The primary thing, the only thing required is to bear witness, to testify. Both the Spirit and the disciples bear witness. The Spirit is primary and the disciples are secondary. They have been with Jesus from the beginning of his earthly ministry, not from creation. The phrase “you testify also” can be a command: “you also must testify.” This makes a great deal of sense. This is the assignment that Jesus is giving to the disciples and to us.

The primary idea of “testify” is suffering and not proclamation. We get our word “martyr” from this word. Throughout history, men and women have suffered for their faith. Suffering and persecution are what has caused the gospel to spread around the world, not successful church planning. We are aware of the persecution in the early church and during the Reformation, but this has been true in every generation in different parts of the world.

Jean Vanier writes:

The message of Jesus has been passed on, generation to generation, thanks to people who gave their lives for the truth. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, speaking out against the power of the Nazi regime, refused the culture of death, the extermination camps, and the ‘final solution’ of the Jewish people. Oscar Romero said ‘no’ to a military dictatorship aligned with the wealthy that was crushing the poor and the landless. Sr. Luzia Kautidia was assassinated in Mongwa while helping to transport someone to the hospital. Pierre Claverie in Algeria continued to proclaim a vision of peace and dialogue between Christians and Muslims. There have been many others like them throughout history.²

Last week we gathered to remember Gus Marwich. One after another, people shared how Gus had affected their lives. Gus's passion for Jesus and his joy in the Lord were infectious. How did this come about? It was through his suffering in Liberia. As we live our life in Christ the fruit becomes visible as we love one another, speak truth and stand for justice. The gospel spreads through the lives of fruitful branches – and when necessary we use words. The world can't stand it and seeks to stamp out the name of Jesus. But this only fans the flame and the gospel coals grow hotter and brighter.

The words and works, and above all the sufferings of the community will be the means by which the witness is borne. Our respon-

sibility is to tell people what has happened to us, share our stories, and testify to the power and identity of Jesus. God will do the rest through the Spirit. And if we suffer, that will reveal that we have a treasure in earthen vessels and further the witness of Christ. This is why I became a Christian. I saw my best friend suffer and I could not deny the reality of Jesus I saw in him through his struggles.

Unfortunately the battle isn't only against the world. Sometimes we face it in the church as well.

“These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling. They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me. But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.” (16:1-4)

The phrase “these things I have spoken to you,” appears six times in the upper room discourse. Jesus hasn't told the disciples these things because he has been with them. But now that he is leaving he wants them to understand what lies ahead. Again, Jesus uses the “hour” language, which links us to the “hour” of the death of Jesus. The cross is the onset of the kingdom and subsequently, the onset of persecution.

The first opposition to the early church came from the Jews, the people who claimed to know God. The threat they employed was expulsion from the synagogue – the tactic we saw in chapter 9 applied to the parents of the blind man who was healed by Jesus. The Jews thought they were offering service to God. The ironic twist is that even though the Jews were deluded, the death of Christians is truly an offering to God.

At times the greatest danger to the gospel comes not from without but from within the church, where religious people believe they are serving God. This is particularly true when there is no outside persecution. The church becomes apathetic. Compromise with the world replaces life-giving, fruit-bearing, Spirit-empowered abiding, with a show of external religious practices. Most of you here have a story of what happens in a church when power, control and tradition replace authentic relationship with Jesus. Our greatest danger may not be what the world does, but what the church does.

In many parts of the world today people are persecuted, tortured and killed for their witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. What we know to be true is that the death of Jesus was God's greatest victory, and persecution of God's people continues to bring victory and growth. The world's hatred does not jeopardize God's plan.

But right now right here we do not face the kind of opposition that Jesus is talking about. We are free to meet and talk about Jesus. However, we are still called to be different and distinct from the world. This might be more difficult than if we were being actively persecuted. When the world accepts and likes the church, something is horribly wrong.

We have been talking about abiding in Jesus and being fruitful for the glory of God. We have talked about the fruit of “My peace, My love, and My joy” – the love, joy and peace that Jesus gives. We might also add a personal pronoun to “kingdom”: “My” kingdom, the kingdom where Jesus rules. We are part of that kingdom, not the kingdom of this world. We are not expected to live a comfortable life. We are not expected to find our home here. We are citizens

of another place. As such we are called to remain distinct but not separate from the world. I am not talking about doing something, I am talking about being something: a fruitful branch producing fruit that the world can't produce or deny.

In truth, we are called to suffer for the sake of Jesus. When people ask, we give an account of our faith in Jesus. When the world puts pressure on us to conform, we cling to Jesus. When the world makes us afraid, we trust in the power of the Spirit. When we are weak, we pray for one another and find strength in community. Where we see oppression, we speak for justice. When we are reviled, we do not revile in turn. We do not repay evil with evil, but like Jesus, we overcome evil with good. If we suffer for no reason this finds favor with God.

“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matt 5:11-12)

1 Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 134.

2 Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (Ottawa: Novalis Publishing, 2004), 281.

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