

## John 15:18-20

### Introduction

In John chapter fifteen, on the night of His betrayal, Jesus has been speaking to His disciples about bearing fruit. He is the “true vine” and we are the branches. Every branch in Him that does not bear fruit, the Father takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He cleans it so that it may bear more fruit.

Two weeks ago, we saw more specifically that Jesus has chosen these eleven disciples and appointed them to go and bear fruit by preaching in all the world what they had heard from Jesus. “All things that I have heard from My Father,” Jesus said to His disciples, “I have made known to you” (15:15b). The fullness of revelation that has come in Jesus and that Jesus has entrusted to these eleven disciples is, itself, the mandate for their mission in the world. The disciples have been given a stewardship and this stewardship involves not only preaching and teaching and making more disciples of Jesus, but also loving one another. The disciples are to live lives that are, themselves, the announcement and the proclamation of the redemptive-historical summing up of all things in Jesus. There can be no doubt about the fruit that these disciples will bear because it’s not they who chose Jesus, but rather Jesus who chose them and appointed them to go and bear fruit – and who also appointed them that they should receive from the Father whatever they ask in His name. There can be no doubt about the lasting and permanent nature of the fruit these disciples will bear because it’s not they who chose Jesus, but rather Jesus who chose them and appointed them, that their fruit would abide forever.

On the one hand, we’ve seen how these things apply exclusively to those eleven disciples who were with Jesus. On the other hand, there’s a broader sense in which these things apply to all of us. Even though we’re not Apostles, we’ve still been entrusted with the Apostolic message. We’ve still been entrusted with the “all things” that Jesus heard from His Father and that He made known to those first eleven disciples. And if we’ve been entrusted with this fullness of revelation, this must mean that we, too, have a stewardship – that we, too, have been appointed to “go” and bear much fruit wherever God has placed us—each of us according to the measure (kind) of faith and grace that God has assigned, and that our fruit should abide forever; indeed, that whatever we ask of the Father in Jesus’ name, He would give it to us.

But now this brings us to an important question, and in the end, to what can be for us a difficult tension. If Jesus has chosen and appointed these eleven disciples to go and bear “much” fruit in the world, does this mean that the disciples can look forward to being embraced and welcomed by the world? If there can be no doubt about the lasting and permanent fruit that these disciples will bear, does this mean that they can look forward to a life of constant “success”? Jesus answers this question in verse eighteen of chapter fifteen:

**I. John 15:18** — “If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me first [with respect to] you.”

When Jesus says “if,” He doesn’t mean that it’s possible the world won’t hate His disciples. If anything, the Greek construction (*ei* with indicative) actually means that this hatred is assumed and guaranteed. The reason Jesus says “if” is because He wants to emphasize the connection

with “[then].” In other words, “Yes, the world *will* hate you, but *if that* is so, then *know* that the world has hated Me first [with respect to] you.”

“Know” could be a simple statement of fact (“you know”; NASB) or it could be an imperative (*Know!* You must know! Make sure that you know!; cf. ESV) I believe this is an imperative, but even if it’s not, Jesus obviously believes it’s important that we *know* this – that if the world hates us, it has hated Him first with respect to us. Why is it important for us to know this? How does this help us when the world is hating us?

You’ll notice the unusual translation I’ve chosen: “the world has hated Me first with respect to you” — literally, “the world has hated Me first of you.” What does this mean? Is this “first” with respect to sequence and timing (it has hated me first, *before* you) or “first” with respect to ranking and emphasis (it has hated Me first, *more* than you; it has hated Me *first of all* [cf. Mat. 6:33; 19:30; 20:16, 27; Mk. 6:21; 12:28-29; Lk. 15:22; Acts 13:50; 16:12; 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Tim. 1:15-16; for Jn. 19:39 see Gr. and YLT/KJV]) — or both? All of our translations emphasize sequence and timing (it has hated me first, *before* you). But I don’t think this is Jesus’ main point. There are two other Greek words that mean “before” and that would have been the far more obvious choice if Jesus meant to say, “it hated Me first, *before* you (*pro*: Jn. 1:48; 5:7; 10:8; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1, 19; 17:5, 24; *prin*: Jn. 4:49; 8:58; 14:29). In the second place, even though the Greek word here (*protos*) does often indicate chronological order, the expression “first of you” (*proton hymon*; cf. “first of Me” [*protos mou*] in Jn. 1:15 and see the sermon on Jn. 1:15-18) is a most unusual and rather awkward way to say *merely* “before you.” In the third place, if the main point here was chronological order we might have expected an aorist verb (“know that the world *hated* Me first, before you”; cf. v. 25). Instead, we have a perfect tense verb (“know that the world *has hated* Me [a completed and settled/decided action] first with respect to you”). The implication of this perfect tense verb is that the world must *still* hate Jesus first with respect to us. Finally, the emphasis is on the contrast between “*Me*” and “*you*”: “If the world hates *you*, know that it has hated *Me* first with respect to *you*.”

I’m convinced, then, that what Jesus is saying is this: “Yes, the world will hate you, but *if that* is so, *then know* that the hatred of the world was given—and still is given, and will always be given—*first of all*—both chronologically and categorically—to Me. Jesus says to His disciples—and to us: It is not you that the world hates ultimately and finally, but Me.” And, of course, this is so because we are not ourselves the light that has come into the world (Jn. 3:19-20).

But why is it important for us to know this? How does this “help” us when the world is hating us? Think about it. If the world’s hatred was really directed ultimately and finally against you and against me in the same way that it is against Jesus (who is the light that has come into the world), this would be, as it were, an “honor” too great for us; it would be a cross and a burden too great for us to bear. We know this because we so often forget this. When we forget that the world has hated Jesus first of all with respect to us, we’ll always take the world’s hatred personally as an offense against our own pride and a trespassing of our own rights. And so we’ll always respond with agitation, and anger, and resentment. But as soon as we understand truly that the world hates Jesus “first with respect to us,” then we can be freed to rejoice when we are “considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name” (Acts 5:41). As soon as we understand truly that the world hates Jesus “first with respect to us,” then we can be freed to love our enemies and

pray for those who persecute us (Mat. 5:44) even as Jesus loved His enemies and prayed for those who persecuted Him (Lk. 23:34).

And now think about this, too. How easy is it for us to be overtaken with fear and hopelessness and even despair when the world hates and persecutes us? But as soon as we understand truly that the world always hates and persecutes Jesus “first with respect to us,” then we can be confident and full of hope because it’s this Jesus that the world hates “first of all” who has already been raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God. It was the already risen and ascended Jesus who said to Saul as he was traveling to Damascus breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *Me*?” (Acts 9:1-5) If the world hates us, we must remember that this hatred is given first of all not to us, but to Jesus – who is now our risen and triumphant Lord. Knowing this is essential to being able to survive the world’s hatred in the first place (not despairing) and to being able to respond to the world’s hatred rightly (not hating in return). This is why I believe Jesus is speaking in the imperative: “If the world hates you, *know* [you must know! Make sure that you know!] that it has hated *Me* first with respect to you.”

So far, we’ve been emphasizing the distinction between the world’s hatred for us and the world’s hatred for Jesus. The world does not hate us first of all with respect to Jesus, but Jesus first of all with respect to us. But this distinction assumes at the same time that there’s a connection. It’s the world’s hatred first of all for Jesus that guarantees the world’s derived and secondary hatred for us. So Jesus continues in verse nineteen:

**II. John 15:19** — “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, on account of this the world hates you.”

Notice the emphasis Jesus puts on *why* it is that the world hates us. *Because (hoti)* we are not of the world, but Jesus chose us out of the world, *on account of this (dia touto)* the world hates us. When the **world** *hates* us and *rejects* us, we must remember that this is **because Jesus** has *loved* us and *chosen* us. Therefore, we can rejoice in the hatred of the world insofar as this hatred is the sign that we have been loved and chosen by Jesus. Maybe we could say this: To resent the world’s hatred is ultimately to devalue the love of Jesus.

Jesus says not simply that He has chosen us, but that He has chosen us “out of” (*ek*) the world. The implication here is one of rescue and deliverance. When the world hates us and persecutes us, we must remember that it’s this very world that lies in the power of the evil one (1 Jn. 5:19) and is passing away (1 Jn. 2:17; cf. Jn. 12:31) and that it is from “*out of*” this world that Jesus has chosen us and rescued us. Therefore, we can rejoice in the hatred of the world insofar as this hatred is the sign of our salvation. Maybe we could say this: To resent the world’s hatred is ultimately to devalue our deliverance from this world – the salvation that has been given to us in Christ. When we know that the world has hated Jesus first with respect to us (v. 18), and when we know why it is that the world hates us (v. 19), then we will be enabled not simply to survive the world’s hatred, but even to rejoice when the world hates us (cf. Mat. 5:10-12) and to forgive and pray for the world that hates us.

Notice how Jesus says, now, very clearly: “On account of this the world hates you”—not, “the world will likely hate you,” or, “the world may possibly hate you,” but, “On account of this the world [as a matter of fact] hates you.” To be “of the world” means to think the way the world thinks, to share the world’s priorities, to value the things that the world values, to pursue the things that the world pursues, to worship the things that the world worships. But because Jesus has chosen us “out of” the world, therefore there is now a fundamental opposition between how we think and how the world thinks, between our priorities and the world’s priorities, between the things we value and the things the world values, between the things we pursue and the things the world pursues, between the God that we worship and the gods that the world worships. Are these things true of you? Are these things true of us? This isn’t just about loving differences of opinion, or even just agreeing to disagree about who’s right and who’s wrong. This is about a moral judgment of the world’s thinking, and priorities, and values, and pursuits, and gods. And so our very existence as people who’ve been chosen “out of” the world is a constant “threat” and warning and reminder of impending judgment to all those who remain in the world. How could it be any other way? Jesus has said in chapter three and then in chapter seven:

- John 3:19–20 — And this is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light lest his deeds be exposed.
- John 7:7 — “The world cannot hate you [Jesus’ unbelieving brothers], but it hates Me because I bear witness about it, that its deeds are evil.”

We are not, ourselves, the Light that has come into the world, but insofar as that light is shining in and through us (cf. Jn. 1:4-9 & 5:35; cf. Mat. 5:14; Phil. 2:14-15) we need to know that we will always be hated by the world. Therefore, we can rejoice in the hatred of the world insofar as this hatred is the sign of our deliverance from bondage and slavery to sin. Maybe we could say this: To resent the world’s hatred is ultimately to devalue that miracle of our freedom to live righteously — we who were formerly slaves to corruption (cf. Rom. 8:21).

Do these things mean that the true disciple of Jesus will always be suffering persecution or that our unbelieving neighbors will always hate us personally? Do these things mean that there’s no hope for bearing fruit in the world? If we ourselves were once “of the world” but now are no longer of the world because Jesus chose us out of the world, then we can know that there are still others that Jesus has chosen who are still waiting to be rescued from out of the world. And so there’s this tension, now, between the world that hates Jesus—and so also us—and the same world that’s still the arena for the display of God’s saving power and love (cf. Jn. 3:16-17). Insofar as the world is given over by God to *be* the world (cf. Rom. 1:18-32), then we who have been chosen from out of the world must always know the world’s hatred and suffer the world’s persecution. But insofar as God’s common grace has a restraining and salutary effect upon the world, then the people who belong to this world may still be won by the testimony of our lives. On the one hand, we could respond to the promise of fruit-bearing and answered prayer with a misguided optimism or triumphalism that leaves us surprised and overwhelmed when we find that we’re hated and persecuted by the world. On the other hand, we could respond to the world’s hatred and persecution with a misguided pessimism and defeatism that causes us to forget our appointment to go and bear much fruit in the world, fruit that abides forever. Fruit-

bearing and persecution, love and hatred, must always be held in tension *together* so we don't "grow weary and lose heart" (Heb. 12:3). Jesus continues, now, in verse twenty:

**III. John 15:20** — "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."

In chapter thirteen, Jesus used this saying ("a slave is not greater than his master") to help His disciples understand that they can never be "above" making themselves slaves to one another—because their own master made Himself as a slave to them (Jn. 13:12-17; cf. Phil. 2:3-8). Now Jesus uses this same principle to help His disciples understand that they can never be "above" suffering the hatred and persecution of the world because their own master has suffered this hatred and persecution supremely. In other words, to think that we could be exempt from receiving the same treatment that Jesus received is to forget what a slave is and to forget *whose* slave we are. To think that we could be exempt from receiving the same treatment that Jesus received is to exalt ourselves over Jesus. And so how we respond to the world's hatred and persecution will always be a measure of our humility as slaves of the one who suffered for us when we were still His enemies and hostile to Him (cf. Rom. 5:10; 8:7; Col. 1:21). A slave is not greater than his master. Therefore we must not be surprised when we're treated no better than our master was treated. We must not expect that "the world" will keep our word any more than "the world" kept Jesus' word (cf. 1:10-11; see Michaels).

Can we see, then, the freedom that comes when we embrace our status as slaves of Jesus – slaves that He has called His friends (15:15)? Then we'll never be surprised that the world hates and persecutes us. Then we won't feel like failures when the world rejects our testimony. And then we'll be compelled to put all our trust not in our own abilities, but only in the sovereign power of Jesus to choose people out of the world even as He has chosen us out of this world (cf. v. 5). In other words, rather than cause us to be pessimistic about the chances for bearing much fruit—fruit that abides forever—the apparent hopelessness of our situation should instead cause us to be confident and full of hope as we fix our eyes only on the power of God who gives us all that we ask for in Jesus' name. Jesus said in verse five that apart from Him we can do nothing. I'm reminded of these verses from chapter one:

- John 1:10–11 — "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to what was His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him."

It would seem from these verses alone that Jesus' ministry must have been a failure. And yet, miraculously, and from the human perspective, completely unexpectedly, the very next words are these:

- John 1:12–13 — "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

“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 [which they didn’t], they will keep yours also [and so they won’t].” Paradoxically, grasping this reality leads us not to pessimism but to the only true kind of optimism.

### Conclusion

Fruit-bearing and persecution, love and hatred, must always be held in tension *together*. I say “tension” because this is a reality associated with having been chosen *out of* the world and yet still living *in the midst of* this world. But see how Jesus uses this “tension” to actually encourage us and strengthen us in our mission of bearing much fruit. If the world hates us, we know that it has hated—and that it still hates—Jesus first of all with respect to us. And so we can love and forgive the world that hates and persecutes us even as Jesus loves and forgives. We can even rejoice in the hatred and rejection of the world insofar as this hatred is the sign that we have been loved and chosen by Jesus. We can rejoice in the hatred of the world insofar as this hatred is the sign of our salvation from the coming judgment and destruction. We can rejoice in the hatred of the world insofar as this hatred is the sign of our own deliverance from bondage and slavery to sin. *Therefore*, we can see in the world that hates us the arena of God’s saving power and love. *Therefore*, we can see in the world that hates us—we who were once part of that world—the arena for the bearing of much fruit – fruit that abides forever.

It’s in the context of our appointment to go and bear much fruit in the world that Jesus says to us, even as He said to His disciples:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated *Me first with respect to 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, *on account 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 [which they didn’t], they will keep *yours* also.”