

John 15:21-16:4a

Introduction

We started last week with a question. Jesus has chosen and appointed the eleven disciples to go and bear “much” fruit in the world, fruit that abides forever (15:16). So does this mean that the disciples will be embraced and welcomed by the world? Jesus answers this question when He says to His disciples (and so also to us):

- John 16:18–19 — If the world hates you, know that it has hated *Me first of all 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.”

We probably think of the “world” as including all the following kinds of people: pagans, secularists, adherents of false religions or cults, atheists, agnostics, or just pleasure-seeking hedonists. But now Jesus narrows His focus to a part of “the world” we might not have expected.

In verses 18-19, Jesus uses verb forms that are better suited to universal and timeless principles (timeless present, perfect, imperfect) and He also refers more generally to “the world” no less than six times:

“If the world *hates* you [timeless present; ‘is hating you’], know that it *has hated* Me [perfect] first of all with respect to you. If you *were* [imperfect] of the world, the world *would love* [imperfect] its own; but because you *are* [timeless present] not of the world, but I chose you [aorist/past; emphasizes Jesus historical choice of the eleven disciples which is rooted in eternal election] out of the world, on account of this the world *hates* [is hating] you [timeless present].”

But then in verse 20, Jesus suddenly switches to verb forms that are better suited to emphasizing specific historical events and He also suddenly drops “the world” in favor of simple third person plural verbs:

- John 16:20 — “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they *persecuted* Me [aorist/past], they *will* also *persecute* you [future]; if they *kept* My word [aorist/past], they *will* *keep* yours also [future].”

Who are “they”? When did they persecute Jesus? And when will these disciples be persecuted by the ones who persecuted Jesus? Jesus continues in verse 21:

I. John 15:21 — “But all these things they *will do* to you [future] for My name’s sake, because they *do not know* [perfect] the One who sent Me [aorist/past].”

If the world truly “knew” God, then of course it could not fail to recognize and receive Jesus who was sent from God and is the revelation of God. But of course the world doesn’t know the one who sent Jesus because the world is the world!—Right? So why does Jesus go to the “effort” of explaining, “because they do not know the one who sent Me”? The reason is because “they”

claim the opposite. “They” claim to have an intimate and privileged knowledge of the one who sent Jesus, and this is why—they say—they know that Jesus is *not* from God and that God did not send Him.

So who is “the world” in these verses? It’s the Jews, the children of Abraham who were zealous for the Scriptures and zealous for God (but not according to knowledge; Rom. 10:2), and who were waiting for the promised Messiah (but who had twisted the Messiah to fit their own desires). Who is “the world” in these verses? It’s not the pagans, or the secularists, or the adherents of false religions or cults, or the atheists and agnostics, or even just your every-day, pleasure-seeking hedonists. It’s serious, professing “believers” who claim to know and serve the one who sent Jesus, but who will prove that they don’t not only by killing Jesus but also by hating and persecuting Jesus’ disciples for His name’s sake. Let’s jump ahead for a moment and listen to what Jesus says in chapter sixteen, verse two:

➤ John 16:2a — “They will put you out of the *synagogue*...”

We can tend to think of the synagogue as an Old Covenant institution that any enlightened Jewish Christian would have immediately abandoned. But Jesus assumes not that His disciples would leave the synagogue of their own accord (there was no theological reason for them to do that), but rather that they would be forcefully “put out.” The synagogue should naturally have *become* the church. It was only when the Jewish people as a whole continued in their unbelief and rejected the preaching of the Apostles that the synagogue came to be pitted against the church. So what happened at the beginning of the church is that the disciples were expelled from the one place they would have most longed to be and the one place they most had a right to be. The synagogue was the place where they had gathered all their lives to worship God, but now they would not be welcome at the synagogue precisely because of their love for God and their joy in the coming of His Messiah. Can we imagine how demoralizing and unsettling this could have been for the disciples – and would have been to us? And yet this isn’t the worst of it.

➤ John 16:2 — “They will put you out of the synagogue, but [indeed!] an hour is coming for everyone who *kills you* to think that he is offering *service to God*.”

The prime example of this would be the Apostle Paul before his conversion.

➤ Acts 26:9–11 — *I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.*

➤ Galatians 1:13–14 — You have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, *being more extremely zealous* for my ancestral traditions.

It was partly because of his own experience that Paul could write in his letter to the Romans:

- Romans 10:1–2 — Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them [for the Jews] is for their salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.

Even though Paul did come to salvation, we shouldn’t forget that many others didn’t and that before Paul was saved he had a hand in the suffering and death of many Christians. Paul says of himself that he was a “blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor,” motivated all the while by an “ignorant” zeal for God (1 Tim. 1:13). It’s one thing to be persecuted by those who admit their hatred for God or at least claim no love for God. It’s another thing to be persecuted and even put to death by those who “sincerely” claim to be serving and worshipping God. Can we imagine how demoralizing and unsettling this could have been for the disciples – and would have been to us? That the very people who claim to know God and to be waiting for His Messiah would hate and persecute us and even put us to death for proclaiming the good news that God’s Messiah has now come into the world—and to “sincerely” believe that in so doing that were offering service to God? In such circumstances, how are the disciples to be kept from stumbling and falling away? Jesus continues in verse 22:

II. John 15:22 — “If I *had not come* [aorist/past] and *spoken* [aorist past] to them [the Jews], they would not have sin, but now they *have no cover* [timeless present] for their sin.”

Jesus obviously isn’t saying that the Jews would have been sinless. What He’s saying is that if He *Himself* had not *come* and *spoken* to them, they couldn’t be held accountable for “personally” rejecting *Him*. They still would have been guilty sinners, but that ultimate guilt of rejecting the good news of God’s salvation in Jesus the Messiah, as it was proclaimed to them by Jesus Himself, could not have been imputed to them. But now, because Jesus *has* come and spoken to them, now they have no cover for their sin (now their cover has been blown).

All of our modern translations say, “now they have no *excuse* for their sin,” but that implies they might have had a legitimate excuse before. Everywhere else in the New Testament, the Greek word (*prophasis*) always has the meaning of doing something out of pretense or for mere show, as a cover for what’s really underneath (Lk. 20:46-47; Acts 27:30; Phil. 1:18; 1 Thess. 2:5). The KJV says, “but now they have no cloak for their sin.” Before, the Jews could effectively hide their sin under the cover of religious zeal and piety; but now that the Messiah Himself has come and spoken to them and now that they’ve rejected Jesus and His word, all their cover has been stripped away and they’ve been exposed for who they really are. Therefore, the disciples must not be surprised when they’re persecuted by the very people who claim to know and serve God because these claims were all along just the cloak for their sin.

This should be a sobering thought. Even for us, it’s possible to use our profession of Christianity as a pretext – so that we might outwardly appear good and upright (even to ourselves), and maybe even pious and holy (even to ourselves), but inwardly still be full of wickedness and uncleanness (cf. Mat. 23:27). And yet the cover, or the cloak, that we use to appear good and upright is the very thing that in the end exposes us and condemns us. So let us always test and

examine ourselves to see if we're really in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5); and then let us always rejoice that we are.

If this is sobering for our own self-examination, it's also sobering in terms of what it means for being hated and persecuted even by apparently sincere and zealous Christians. There are many people whose profession of Christianity is a pretext – so that outwardly they appear good and upright and pious and holy (even to themselves), but inwardly they're still full of sin. If we're hated and attacked by these “sincere” and zealous professors of Christianity, we shouldn't be surprised. We shouldn't doubt our own faith or suppose that the true Gospel is something other than what the Bible says it is. Instead, we must see that the “cloak” that's being used by our opponents is the very thing that exposes and accuses them – and will ultimately condemn them if they don't come to repentance. I think, in particular, of the woke “Christianity” that accuses us of being insensible and unenlightened; I think of the proponents of the “critical race” and social justice Gospel who accuse us of being unrepentant haters and oppressors (or at least complicit in this sin); I think of the ecumenical “Christianity” that accuses us of being arrogant and narrow-minded; I think of the “liberal” Christianity that accuses us of being obscurantist and stopping any further advancement in our understanding of the Bible. I think, in particular, of how social media is being used today by many sincere and zealous professors of Christianity.

We know that much of the professing church is largely aligned with the political left. What I mean by this is not just that much of the professing church leans politically left in terms of voting, but that its theology and even the Gospel itself has been and is still being re-shaped by the values of the political left so that now the political left may essentially be seen to be an evangelistic and “missional” arm of the church. It's this church, then, that will more and more be the persecutors of Jesus' true disciples because this church doesn't truly know the one who sent Jesus. For ourselves, even though we vote for the political “right,” we must never let the political right shape our theology or the Gospel that we preach. For example, “God, Guns, and Trump” signs are a desecration of God's name and contrary to the true and pure Gospel of Jesus Christ (and I don't mean that as a commentary on Trump or on gun-ownership). We must never see the political right as a “missional” arm of the church. More and more we're facing the reality that to be hated and persecuted by the political left will be to be hated and persecuted by the professing church – by those who claim to be the most zealous and earnest of Christians. Rather than be surprised—and so tempted to doubt our faith or suppose that the Gospel might be something other than what the Bible says it is—we must see that the cover being used by our opponents is the very thing that exposes and accuses them – and will ultimately condemn them apart from repentance. Therefore, it's not our job to accuse, but simply to proclaim and stand strong for the true Gospel. Therefore, even as we proclaim and stand strong for the true Gospel, we can love and forgive those who hate and persecute us.

I've been drawing an application from this passage for us, but of course, the situation in the days of those first disciples was unique to their generation. They were dealing with their fellow Jews who had been waiting with them for the promised Messiah, but who would now hate and persecute them precisely because of their proclamation of Jesus as the promised Messiah sent from God. So Jesus continues in no uncertain terms:

III. John 15:23 — “He who hates Me hates My Father also.”

It doesn't matter how much of the Scriptures the Jews have memorized, or how many hours they spend studying and teaching the Scriptures, or how much of their money they contribute to the temple treasury, or how much time they spend praying, the stubborn, inescapable fact of the matter is this: *If* they hate Jesus, then they *must also* hate and reject the God they claim to be loving and serving – the God who is Jesus' own Father.

But how can Jesus be so “absolute” about this? He answers in verses 23-24:

IV. John 15:24 — “If I had not *done* [aorist/past] among them [the Jews] the works which no one else did, they would not *have* sin [imperfect]; but now they *have* both *seen* and *hated* Me [perfects] and [therefore!] My Father as well.”

In verse 21 Jesus said, “If I had not come and *spoken* to them...” Now Jesus says, “If I had not done among them the *works* which no one else did...” In John's Gospel, “works” refers to the overall activity of a person's life.

- John 3:20–21 (cf. 8:39, 41) — Everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his works will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his works may be manifested as having been wrought in God.
- John 9:4 — “We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work.”

On the one hand, “works” refers to the overall activity of Jesus' life; on the other hand, “works” also refers more specifically to the miraculous signs that Jesus performed (cf. 7:3, 21). When the Jews were persecuting Jesus for miraculously healing a lame man on the Sabbath—and so, “working”—on the Sabbath, Jesus answered:

- John 5:17 (cf. 9:3) — “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.”

The miracles of Jesus were part and parcel of His whole life's work; and so the teaching of Jesus could be included with His miracles under the category of His “works.”

- John 14:10 — “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The **words** that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His **works**.”

In the end, the *words* and the *deeds* of Jesus—His *preaching* and His *miracles*—were all part of that one great “work” that the Father had sent Jesus to accomplish – the work of redemption. So the next and last time that the word for “work” will appear in John is in chapter seventeen:

- John 17:4 — “I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.”

What are the works that Jesus did among the Jews, and that no one else did? They're the sum total of all that Jesus said and did in revealing God to us and accomplishing our redemption. Therefore, insofar as these "works" refer especially to the signs and wonders that Jesus performed, they are—as one commentator says—"proofs not only because he has in them given evidence of his supernatural ability but above all because he has demonstrated in them the saving Word of God that has become incarnate in him" (Ridderbos). So Jesus can say over and over again:

- John 5:36 — "...the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me."
- John 10:25 — "...the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me."
- John 10:37–38 — "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."
- John 14:11 — "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves."

Can we see, now, how Jesus can say so absolutely, "He who hates Me hates My Father also"? The explanation is found in what Jesus says next: 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 [therefore!] My Father as well.*"

The disciples must not be surprised or confused when they're persecuted by those who claim to know and love God because their hatred and rejection of Jesus proves decisively that they, in fact, hate God – and always have. Jesus could say this of the Jews because He had actually done *among them* the works which no one else did. The accountability of that first century generation of Jews is greater than any other. But Jesus can also say this of everyone who has ever been confronted in the Scriptures with the works of Jesus—with His preaching, and His miracles, and His sufferings, and His death, burial and resurrection—and who still reject Him. To reject Jesus is to hate Him, and so also to reject and hate God — His Father. Today there are many who claim to love Jesus, and who "sincerely" believe that they do, but who only "love" the Jesus that they have created in their own minds based on a selective reading of Scripture or a culturally conditioned reading of Scripture (reading the Scriptures out of context) – which often assumes a rejection of the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture (verbal and plenary). There are many deeply religious people who claim "sincerely" to love Jesus, but who actually hate Him, and who therefore hate His Father, too.

As unexpected and unwelcome as these things might have been to the disciples, Jesus goes on to assure them:

V. John 15:25 — "But this happened to fulfill [to fill up] the word that is written in *their* [the Jews' own] Law, 'THEY HATED ME WITHOUT CAUSE.'"

This isn't a direct prophesy about Jesus. This was the lament of David in the Psalms and also of all the godly in Israel who suffered persecution from their own countrymen.

- Psalm 35:7, 19 — ...*without cause* they hid their net for me; *without cause* they dug a pit for my soul... Do not let those who are wrongfully my enemies rejoice over me; nor let *those who hate me without cause* wink maliciously.
- Psalm 109:3 — They have also surrounded me with words of hatred, and fought against me *without cause*.
- Psalm 119:161 — Princes persecute me *without cause*...
- Psalm 69:4 (cf. 59:3-4) — *Those who hate me without a cause* are more than the hairs of my head; those who would destroy me are powerful, being wrongfully my enemies; what I did not steal, I then have to restore.

When Jesus says that this prayer of David, and of all the godly throughout Israel's history, is "fulfilled" in the Jews' hatred of Him, He's helping His disciples to see that far from being a disaster or a sign of failure, the Jews' hatred of Him is only more proof of the truthfulness of His Word. The Jews' hatred of Him is only the eschatological culmination of their hatred of all the faithful in Israel who had come before Jesus (cf. Acts 7:8-10, 23-29, 35-43, 51-53; Mat. 23:34-39; Acts 28:24-28; see Ridderbos). And so the Jews' hatred of Jesus is only further proof that He is who He says He is.

When those who claim to love God—and even to love Jesus—"insult [us] and persecute [us], and falsely say all kinds of evil against [us] because of Jesus," we can "rejoice and be glad" because we know that "in the same way they persecuted the prophets [and the apostles] who were before [us] (Mat. 5:11-12) – and because we know that they've hated Jesus, our Savior, first of all.

But now Jesus returns again to the disciples' call to bear fruit in the world – even in the very world that hates and persecutes them.

VI. John 15:26–27 (cf. 14:16-17) — "When the Advocate 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, and you will bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning."

The disciples won't be alone in their witness. The witness of the Spirit, who advocates for them and who Jesus Himself sends to them from the Father, will accompany their witness. And so the disciples can leave the fruit of their witness in a hostile world to Him. And so can we.

Not only will the Spirit bear witness to the world (16:7-11), but He will also bear witness to the disciples who have been with Jesus from the beginning (16:12-15). And so the disciples can be absolutely certain of the truthfulness of their own testimony. And so can we, insofar as our witness is faithful to the testimony of the Apostles recorded for us in Scripture.

Having encouraged His disciples with this reminder of the promised Holy Spirit, Jesus comes back again to the reality of being persecuted by those who claim to know and love God.

VII. John 16:1-4a — “These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling [from falling away and abandoning the faith]. They will put you out of the synagogue, but [indeed!] 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* did not know 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.”

See how Jesus cared for His disciples, and so, too, how He cares for us. And see how we must always be devoting ourselves to Jesus’ words so that we, too, might be kept from stumbling and falling away.

Twelve times in John’s Gospel, we’ve seen the language of “hour” pointing us to the redemptive climax of history in the glorification of Jesus (2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:28; 7:30; 8:20; 12:27; 13:1; 16:25).

- John 5:25 — “...an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”
- John 12:23 — “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”
- John 17:1 — “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You...”

So far, in John, the language of a coming “hour” has been exclusively the language of victory and salvation that comes even *through* suffering and death. So when Jesus says now, “an *hour* is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God,” and, “these things I have spoken to you, so that when their *hour* comes, you may remember that I told you of them,” how can we not hear in these words the assurance of our own final victory and salvation that comes even *through* suffering and death (cf. Rev. 12:11)? John will write in Revelation of all the saints:

- Revelation 12:11 — And they *overcame* him [the devil] because of the *blood of the Lamb* and because of *the word of their testimony*, and they *did not love their life even when faced with death*.

May we be among those who do not love our lives even when faced with death for the sake of His name.