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John 13-17 / #17
October 2, 2016

Sermon Summary #17

When those Loved by God are Hated by the World John 15:18-16:4

The author of the book of Hebrews said something in chapter five of his letter that is extraordinarily relevant to the lives of Christian men and women today. He said that ***“solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil”*** (Heb. 5:14). By “solid food” he means the deep things that God has revealed to us. A lot of Christians would prefer never to be challenged or stretched when it comes to biblical truth. They much prefer to be constantly fed with a liquid diet of revealed truth. They don’t want the meat of the word. Sometimes it’s hard to chew, and at other times even harder to swallow.

But the author of Hebrews says that solid food is for ***“the mature”*** believer, the Christian who through practice in distinguishing between good and evil has “their powers of discernment trained” for living a successful and influential Christian life. I hope and pray that all of you here at Bridgeway are hungry for the “solid food” of God’s Word. I trust that your desire is to be “mature” in the sense that you are on a pathway out of spiritual infancy and into spiritual adulthood.

I don’t mean by this that you have to become a professional theologian or that you must learn Greek and Hebrew or that you go to bed each night reading Wayne Grudem’s 1,264 page *Systematic Theology* (although it wouldn’t hurt if you did!). Spiritual maturity can be defined in countless ways and involves a variety of characteristics. So let me narrow it down to one characteristic of spiritual maturity that I see reflected here in our passage today.

What I have in mind when I speak of the spiritually mature Christian is the man or woman who understands that *being* a mature Christian does not guarantee that you will be spared suffering and heartache in life or that you will be guaranteed robust physical and financial health. In fact, the spiritually mature believer is the one who embraces reality and responds in a way that honors Christ. That particular expression of “reality” that I have in mind is described in our passage today. So let me come straight to the point.

Jesus has said some remarkable things to his disciples in John 13-15, and he will say some more in chapters 16-17. Back in John 13:1 we read that “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). He then proceeded to humble himself in their presence and serve them by washing their filthy feet (John 13:3-11). He refers to his followers as those whom he has “chosen” (John 13:18). He encourages them (and us) not to be discouraged but to remember that in departing this world he goes to “prepare a place” (John 14:2) for us. He promises to “come again” and “take” us to himself (John 14:4) to be with him forever.

When Philip asked him to show them the Father, Jesus responded by saying, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He told them (and us) that we would be empowered to do the same works that he did (John 14:12). He told them (and us) that he would answer our prayers so that the Father would be glorified in and through us (John 14:13-14).

And it doesn’t stop there. He knows that by leaving them they will be heartbroken, so he promises that he will ask the Father to send them the Holy Spirit who will be a “helper” to them in the same way that Jesus has been and that this Holy Spirit will never leave them (or us) and will live inside them (and us) (John 14:15-17).

And if he hasn’t already made clear how he feels about his followers, again in John 14 he promises them that because he will be raised from the dead so also will they be raised, to live forever. His love for his followers is yet again affirmed when he said: “he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him” (John 14:21).

Those who love Jesus are blessed with the promise that both the Father and the Son “will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). And he then promises to his followers, like you and me, his “peace” in the midst of trouble and turmoil. He doesn’t promise the shallow, temporary, fleeting, superficial peace of the world but the very peace that fills his own heart.

Just when you think it couldn’t get any better, Jesus declares that the reason he has said all these things is so that his “joy” might be in us and our “joy may be full” (John 15:11). And just to top it all off, we saw a couple of weeks ago in John 15:12-17 that Jesus regards us as his “friends” whom he has chosen out of the world and to whom he has revealed everything they need to know about God the Father. Wow!

One would think that with that sort of love and power and answered prayer and peace and joy showered down upon us that the followers of Jesus would surely be *insulated against pain and suffering*. Surely, if Jesus loves us *that* much, and does all that he has promised to do for our sakes, it would follow naturally, indeed, inevitably, that he would take steps to make certain that we would be loved by the world and treated kindly by the world and that we would never have to endure ridicule and rejection, much less that we would be persecuted and put to death.

Ah, but that is where the truth of Hebrews 5:14 comes into play. *Mature Christians, men and women who have been nourished with the “solid food” of God’s Word, know that their status as God’s children does not insulate them from the hostility of the world. They know that being a child of God does not mean our heavenly Father will always protect us from hatred and slander and ridicule. The mature believer is the one who embraces the reality of what it means to be a follower of Jesus in a world that hated and despised him. It simply means that we will be hated and despised as well.*

A lot of people in a lot of churches today don’t want to hear that. So they flock to preachers and teachers who are all too happy to promise them financial prosperity and perfect health. Their ears itch to be told that if they will only have enough faith their children will never die tragically at a young age. They want to be told that since God is both good and sovereign he will always guarantee that his people get the best jobs and drive the nicest cars and are loved and honored by all.

But it’s a lie. Listen to what Jesus says.

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18).

“I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19).

“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).

“They will put you out of the synagogues” and they will “kill you” and call it service to God (John 16:2).

I realize that some of you don’t want to hear that. You’d prefer that I skip that section in the Last Words of Jesus. But it is precisely because Jesus loved his disciples and loves you today that he said it. And it is precisely because I love you that I say it as well.

Did you see that statement in John 16:1? There Jesus says, *“I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.”* What does he mean by this? I think Jesus knows that the greatest threat to our belief in him and our confidence in the goodness and greatness of God is suffering. He knows that if anything might tempt us to quit our faith and walk away and join the world in its ways, it is the reality of pain and suffering and loss and mistreatment and heartache and financial stress and a host of other devastating and painful experiences that we incur in the world. He knows that if we are going to remain steadfast and faithful and committed we need to be informed and equipped about what happens to people who identify with Jesus.

Think of all the affirmations of love and joy and peace and power that Jesus has promised to them and to us. Jesus knows how easy it would be for such people to wrongly conclude that this means we’ve got it made in life and that only non-Christians and those who hate God will suffer. So Jesus lovingly and honestly informs us all of what awaits us in life. And what awaits us is hatred and persecution and in some cases death.

That, my friend, is what the author of Hebrews meant by “solid food”. And that is what I’m feeding you today from God’s Word.

Why Does the World Hate the Christian?

You may be wondering, “Why should the world hate Christians?” After all, look at all the good that followers of Jesus have brought to society: hospitals, homeless shelters, ministries to the poor, law-abiding lives, protection of the unborn in the womb, and the list could go on.

This question cannot be answered *sociologically*. It must be answered *theologically*. It ultimately doesn’t matter what you and I may do. It ultimately doesn’t matter how much we may give or how sacrificially we may serve or how compassionately we may love. The answer to the question, why does the world hate Christians, is found in vv. 21, 23-24. The bottom line is this: ***people hate God. They only hate you because you love the one whom they hate.***

This is nothing short of shocking! Don’t forget who the people are that Jesus has in mind. Look closely at v. 25. There he says that these people “have seen and hated both me and my Father.” He then says in v. 25 that this hatred is “written in *their Law*”! Whose “law”? ***The religious leaders of Israel!*** “Wait a minute, Sam. These religious leaders have memorized the Old Testament! They faithfully observe all the commandments given by Moses! They attend synagogue weekly, if not daily! And you’re telling me that they ‘hate’ God?”

No, I’m not telling you that. Jesus is. There are several levels of truth in this that we need to explore.

Let’s begin by defining the sense in which people are said to “hate” God. They don’t necessarily declare openly “I hate God.” But they resent his existence. They despise the fact that the God who exists is holy and will hold all mankind accountable for their moral rebellion and disobedience. They are infuriated that they are told this God has authority over their lives to tell them what is right and what is wrong. They don’t want to be told that sexual intercourse before and outside of marriage is sinful. They don’t want to be told drunkenness is forbidden. They don’t want to be told that they must have no other ‘gods’ before the God of the Bible. They don’t want to be told that to honor or worship or to serve another ‘god’ is idolatry and is worthy of eternal death. They don’t want to hear about hell. They cringe at the suggestion that they are not the final authority as to what they can or can’t do. They don’t want to be told they must repent. They get angry when they are informed that there is only one way to be reconciled to God and forgiven of their sins, and that it is through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

On the outside, they don’t act like they hate God. They may say nice things about him, such as: “Well, of course I believe in the existence of a Supreme Being. But the Supreme Being that I believe exists would never consign anyone to hell. The Supreme Being that I believe exists would never tell a man he can’t marry and have sex with another man, or tell a woman that she can’t marry or have sex with another woman. The Supreme Being that I believe exists will accept anyone so long as they are sincere in their beliefs.”

These people who “hate” God may live outwardly civil, law-abiding, even “religious” lives. But inwardly, in the depths of their hearts, they want nothing to do with the God of the Bible and his Son Jesus Christ whom he has sent.

As Jesus said in John 16:3, ***“they have not known the Father, nor me.”*** It’s the same thing he said in 15:21 – ***“they do not know him who sent me.”*** They believe that he exists, but they don’t “know” him.

There’s another reason why they “hate” my Father and me, says Jesus. My coming to this world has served to ***expose their sin***. My words have made them inescapably accountable to honor the Father and to honor me. As Jesus says in 15:23, ***“they have no excuse for their sin.”*** They can’t claim ignorance. They can’t say that the reason they sin is because no one ever told them what is right and what is wrong. They can’t say that they never heard or saw the reality of who God is and what he has required of us. No, says Jesus, they have been eye-witnesses of incredible miracles and they’ve heard me speak to them face-to-face. And they hate me and the one who sent me because I exposed their hypocrisy and their self-serving religiosity.

And once they recognize that you are in me and I am in you and that you love me and follow me and believe the same things I believe, they will hate you too.

Once they recognize that you don’t belong to them, that you are not “of the world” (John 15:19), you will find yourself the object of their disdain.

“Why won’t you go the strip club with us?”

“Why don’t you cheat on your tax returns like the rest of us do? After all, the government regularly steals and cheats you all the time.”

“Why don’t you join in when we get together to hear and spread the latest gossip?”

“Why don’t you cheat on your spouse? It’s fun. And no one will ever find out?”

“Why won’t you play golf on Sunday morning?”

“Why don’t you read ‘50 Shades of Gray’ and come with us to the movie version?”

There are countless other ways in which your refusal to be identified with the world and a party or participant in its behavior will provoke their contempt. But let’s now turn our attention to some important points in what Jesus says.

Four Crucial Truths concerning the World’s Hatred of the People of God

(1) Do you know what Jesus means when he says that you and I are **“not of the world”** (v. 19)? On the one hand, we are “in” the world. We live in it physically. We are located at a particular place in time and space. We are citizens of an earthly nation. Most of us will vote in a few weeks concerning who will provide leadership for our country. And it *is* “our” country. I assume all of us faithfully pay our taxes as required by law. Some of you have served in the military and sacrificed greatly for the welfare and freedom of the United States.

So, in all these ways and many more, we are “in” the world. But what Jesus means in saying we are not “of” the world is that we do not derive our basic identity from the world or from any human society. When the Apostle Peter wrote his first epistle, he referred to his Christian readers as “elect exiles” (1:1, 17) and as “sojourners and exiles” (2:11) on the earth. People who in one sense hold an earthly citizenship are in another and more important sense aliens and exiles in the earth. As Paul said it in Philippians 3:20, “our citizenship is in heaven.”

Thus to not be “of” the world means we don’t think of ourselves primarily as Americans or French or Russians or Indonesians or Gentiles or Jews or Australians. We think of ourselves as Christians. We belong first and fundamentally to Christ. Our true home is heaven, and one day the new heavens and new earth. We do not draw our moral values from popular opinion polls. We do not find energy from the approval of men but from the approval of God. We do not interpret history or the state of our society based on what any political party may say or what any sociological analysis may suggest but on what God in his Word has declared to be true.

Our power for living and choosing and loving is not the “spirit” of American society but the Spirit of God. Our value system is not dependent on Congress or the Supreme Court but on the revealed, moral will of God in Scripture. Our aim is not the fulfillment of the so-called “American dream” but the coming of God’s kingdom here on earth and the doing of his will even as it is done in heaven.

And let’s be clear on why we are not “of” the world. It isn’t ultimately because of who we are or what we have chosen to do. Jesus says it clearly: “you are not of the world, **but I chose you out of the world**” (v. 19). God’s sovereign choice is the ultimate reason we are not “of” the world. We’ve been made the objects of his loving election and selection. It isn’t because we were more godly than those who are still in the world. It isn’t because God was drawn to us for our good deeds or our faith. Jesus said it plainly in John 6,

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. (John 6:37-39)

(2) In v. 23 Jesus says that **“whoever hates me hates my Father also.”** This statement has immediate application to the question being asked today: “Does the Muslim worship the same God as the Christian?” Or again, “Is Allah the same ‘god’ as the God and Father of Jesus?”

To hate Jesus is to hate God. This is why Muslims do not worship the same God as we do. ***Muslims hate the God we worship because they “hate” Jesus.*** Some may respond by saying: “No, Sam. Muslims don’t hate Jesus. They speak of him in the Koran with reverence and respect. They honor him as a true prophet of God.”

That is true. But they deny that Jesus is more than a prophet. They deny that Jesus is the Son of the Father. They deny that Jesus is the incarnation of the second person of the Triune Godhead. They deny that Jesus died on a cross as the all-sufficient atonement for sin and was raised again bodily from the dead. They deny that Jesus and Jesus alone is worthy of worship and honor. They deny that faith in Jesus alone is the only path to forgiveness of sins. They deny that the Father even has a Son. And to deny all this regarding Jesus is to “hate” him.

(3) Jesus says repeatedly that the world will “hate” Christians and “persecute” Christians. Does this mean that the purpose of God in history can be thwarted or defeated by the world? Does the world’s hatred of us jeopardize or undermine and reverse the things that God is seeking to accomplish in the establishment of his kingdom?

No. In fact, *even their hatred serves to fulfill God’s plan, as it fulfills the Scriptures*. Look closely at what Jesus said in v. 25,

“But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause’” (John 15:25).

This is a citation of Psalm 69:4 where King David describes the hatred and opposition he experienced from his enemies. David was a type of Christ. David’s experience foreshadowed that of Jesus who is the antitype. Far from defeating God’s purposes, their hatred of Jesus served only to fulfill the prophetic word that God himself had ordained.

(4) Finally, what is the Christian’s response to hatred, persecution, opposition, and the world’s rejection of Jesus? In the first place, we shouldn’t be surprised by it. In fact, one reason Jesus says what he does in this passage is so that his followers won’t be caught off guard or surprised when the opposition to them erupts. He says in 16:4, “But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.” And John the Apostle, who recorded these words for us, said the same thing in his first epistle: **“Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you”** (1 John 3:13).

The followers of Jesus will have the same effect on the world of rebellious unbelievers as Jesus did. We will seem to be out of step with the trajectory of society. We will appear to be “on the wrong side of history.” We will refuse to embrace the changing ethics of our day. If believers are in union with Christ and devote all their allegiance to the one to whom all loyalty and worship are due, the world of rebels will not respond with kindness.

But we still need to know what we are to do when hatred and opposition appear. The answer is given in vv. 26-27. There we are told that Jesus will send to us from the Father the Holy Spirit, the “Helper” who will live in us and be with us forever. When the hatred of the world feels like it will overwhelm us, we draw on the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. When opposition to the gospel increases, we are assured that there is one with us now who will “help” us hold our ground and not compromise. When we wonder how we should respond to questions that are asked about Christianity we have the assurance of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit who will give us the words to speak.

When Jesus spoke these words in the upper room they had immediate practical application to his disciples in the first century. Notice that he tells them: “It isn’t just that the Holy Spirit, the Helper, will teach you about me and remind you of all that I’ve said. He will also empower you and encourage you to stand firmly and courageously in the face of opposition so that you can testify and bear witness to this world about who I am.”

Bearing Witness to Jesus in the Flames of Persecution

There is no better illustration of how this came true in subsequent centuries than what happened during the time of the Protestant Reformation in England.

In 1553, the daughter of Henry VIII, known to history as “Bloody Mary” (1553-1558) came to power in England. Mary was determined to bring England back into the Roman Catholic Church. She forced Parliament in 1553 to repeal everything her brother Edward had done and returned England to the religious conditions that prevailed under her father, Henry.

Persecution was intense and martyrdom frequent [Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* chronicles much of what occurred]. Among the more than 300 died for their Protestant faith were *Hugh Latimer (1485-1555)*, *Nicholas Ridley (1500-1555)*, and *Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556)*.

Latimer and Ridley were ordered to be executed outside the city gate of Oxford. As they were being led to the stake, they passed the prison in which Thomas Cranmer was jailed, hoping to catch a glimpse of him and shout a word of encouragement. Indeed, Cranmer was brought to the tower of the prison by the government to watch the proceedings. Their aim was to frighten him out of his defiance. Whereas Cranmer was overcome with anguish by what he saw, falling to his knees and bewailing the event, he remained steadfast.

Ridley's brother-in-law (George Shipton) attempted to hasten his death by heaping on the fire more wood, but inadvertently stemmed the progress of the flames and prolonged Ridley's death. Latimer, by contrast, died more quickly. With his last breath he uttered the famous words:

"Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."

Thomas Cranmer was Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII and is generally regarded as the founder of English Protestantism. Cranmer's doctrine of salvation was virtually identical with that of the great Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther, Huldreich Zwingli, and Calvin. He was imprisoned when Mary ascended the throne. He was brainwashed while in solitary confinement and was compelled to write a denial (recantation) of his Protestant faith.

Despite his recantation, the law required that he suffer death. He was led to a packed church on the day of his execution, at which time the government and RCC anticipated that he would publicly denounce the reformation and affirm the authority of the Pope. Much to everyone's surprise, Cranmer seized the opportunity to proclaim his faith in the doctrines of the reformation.

Shocked, the authorities rushed to pull Cranmer from the pulpit and led him immediately to the stake. As he stood before the flames, he fulfilled a promise which he had made in his last shouts in the church. He stretched forth into the fire the hand that earlier had signed the document of recantation, declaring aloud:

"Forasmuch as my hand offended, writing contrary to my heart, my hand shall first be punished for it."

He was then heard to repeat the words of Stephen, the first Christian martyr: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit . . . I see the heavens open and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." It was said that in the ashes of the fire his heart was found unburnt. The Catholic explanation was to suggest that it was due to his evil character or perhaps some form of heart disease.

How did such men endure the hatred and persecution of the world? There is only one answer: the indwelling presence and power of the very Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised to all his followers, who would equip and sustain them (and us) as we "bear witness" about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.