The Gospel of John: *If the World Hates You*  
John 15:18-21

As we return to the Gospel of John, we are once again walking with Jesus in the 15th chapter as He leads His disciples to the Mount of Olives. It is the last night of our Lord’s earthly life, so Jesus is preparing His disciples for His departure. Thus far in John 15 Jesus has used the metaphor of the vine to illustrate His relationship with the Father, His relationship with the disciples, and last week He summed up how the disciples are to relate to each other when He commanded them to love one another as He first loved them.

In our text this morning Jesus now turns His attention to how the disciples are to relate with the unbelieving world. His teaching on this subject will extend from 15:18-16:4, though we will only cover vss. 18-21 this morning. We will tackle the rest next Sunday. So, with no further ado, please stand and let us read John 15:18-21:

18 “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. 21 But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

My message this morning is entitled *If the World Hates You* and it will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Not-So-New World Order; 2) Inevitable Opposition; and 3) Cheap Grace.

**I. The Not-So-New World Order**

Having spent time commanding His followers to love one another with a Christ-like love, Jesus now prepares His students for the tension that will inevitably exist between their Jesus-centered community and the world. Jesus begins in vs. 18 stating, “If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you.”

Jesus makes it clear that if the disciples should find themselves under fire by the world…if they should face fierce opposition from the world in their life together as Jesus followers, it should come as no surprise! They must always keep in mind that long before the world opposed Christians, the world opposed Christ.

Now…before we go any further, we would do well to identify who Jesus is talking about when He refers to “the world.” “The world” in the Greek is simply two words: *o cosmos*. “The world” is referenced 57 times in John’s Gospel, and another 23 times in John’s other letters…so this is an important subject for us to consider.

Based on a simple reading of the text, “the world” has various meanings in John’s Gospel. I will touch on a few verses to illustrate my point, and then we’ll look to understand who Jesus is referring to here in John 15 when He speaks of “the world.”

If we look back to John 1, we’ll find a fascinating passage that illustrates the various nuances of “the world.” Look at John 1:9-10: The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into
the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.” First of all, notice that “the world” is that dark place which Jesus, the “true Light,” entered into. So, whatever “the world” is, Jesus is not of it or from it. It is important to note that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit exist wholly independent of “the world.” This theological truth sets Christianity apart from all pantheistic religions. We do not find God in the trees or the ocean or in other human beings. The Trinity is transcendent of all creation and all created things.

Notice also that “the world” was made through Jesus. In this sense, John uses the phrase “the world” to denote planet earth and all of creation. Jesus is understood as the means by which all things were created.

Next, we note that Jesus was in the world. The idea is that Jesus took on flesh and dwelt among those who roam the earth.

But then notice that “the world did not know Him.” Now we understand “the world” as people, and the sense here is that these are blind, sinful people who did not recognize their Creator, even when He came and walked among them and showed them many signs and wonders. This is a morally accountable “world” that should have known better, right? These are those Jesus came to save, as Jesus states in John 3:16-17, 16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Now we are getting closer to “the world” that Jesus is referring to in John 15, but we’re still not there yet. There is yet another nuance to “the world” that we need to consider. Let us go back to the end of John 14 and look at what Jesus said in vss. 30-31: “…the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.”

First note that, according to Jesus, there is a “ruler of this world.” Jesus is clearly speaking of Satan, who has been given some degree of dominion over “the world order” due to the curse of sin. This is the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. As a consequence of the Fall, “the world” is now a system or an order that is under the influence of the Enemy. It is an “anti-God” or “anti-Christ” system.

We’ve all heard conspiracy theories about “The New World Order.” Listen: there is nothing “new” about an anti-God, anti-Jesus world order. The world order has been fundamentally opposed to God’s law and God’s Messiah since the Fall in Genesis 3. And please notice that Jesus never predicted that it would ever be any other way in this age. Jesus never promised that if we were a faithful church…if we truly repented and prayed hard enough and petitioned our congressmen and got out there and voted that the world order would eventually become Jesus-friendly. I don't actually find that anywhere in the Bible. Instead, Jesus speaks of the opposition that His Church can anticipate, and He prepares His Church to suffer well. I’ll come back to that point in a minute, but first…

Note that even though the “world order” is evil in nature, we must remember that this world order is inhabited by “the world”…human beings who bear God’s image—those whom God “so loved” in John 3:16 --those whom Jesus came to save (John 3:17). Do you feel the tension there?
The tension of “the world” is that the world is both a God-opposing system and at the same time “the world” is comprised of people whom Jesus came to save. Now let us return to John 15:18 and we’ll see that tension in living color.

Jesus states, “If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you.” In this instance, Jesus refers to “the world” as an “it.” Jesus is referring to the world order…the systems, the values, the sinful priorities, the God-resistant, rebellious “spirit of the age” that is under the constant influence of “the ruler of this world.” The world order is fundamentally opposed to Jesus; and as such, the world order will be fundamentally opposed to those who follow Jesus. Jesus goes on to say in vs. 19, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

Church, if you have been born again through the blood of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, you know Jesus is speaking the truth. Those who belong to Jesus are no longer “of this world.” We are strangers in a strange land…we are far from home…and we can sense the hatred of “the world” against our Lord who lives is us.

Think about the basic messaging of this world that we encounter every day and how it runs completely opposed to Jesus. “The world” values autonomy; Jesus calls us to servanthood. “The world” values indulgent pleasure; Jesus calls us to deny ourselves. “The world” values general, godless religions; Jesus says, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.’ “The world” values sexual liberty; Jesus commands sexual fidelity. “The world” values retribution and revenge; Jesus calls us to turn the other cheek and love our enemies.

I could go on an on, but you get the point. As Jesus followers, we represent a worldview and an ethic that stands in direct opposition to “the world order;” which is why the world will hate our Lord’s Church…but Jesus wants us to find comfort and courage in this: they hated Jesus first!

Let us now turn to my second subheading:

II. Inevitable Opposition

Now, in case you think that you can be a Christian and escape the reality of opposition and suffering, Jesus puts that thought to rest in vs. 20 when He states, “Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” Notice that Jesus now refers to the opposition as people, not just the system. The world system will hate Christians; the people of the world will persecute the Christians who are not of the world. And that persecution…that opposition…is inevitable, according to Jesus.

If you have read the Bible, you know that this prediction of opposition and persecution is found throughout the four Gospels and many other letters in the NT. Here are just a few examples:

Matthew 24:9: Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.
Matthew 5:10-12: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

2 Timothy 3:12
Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

1 Peter 4:12-14
Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Philippians 1:29
For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake…

Now, it goes without saying that Jesus was speaking to His eleven Apostles just hours before His arrest and crucifixion. We may reasonably assume that the suffering and persecution Jesus predicted here in John 15 and in other Gospel accounts was specifically addressing the intense trials and even the martyrdom that awaited the Eleven. We know that Jesus, along with ten of His disciples, were all martyred. Only the Apostle John managed to live to an old age, but that was after enduring many years in exile on the island of Patmos. So…given that the predictions of persecution came to pass in the lives of the Eleven Apostles, might we assume that all this talk about suffering and persecution really doesn’t apply to modern-day Christians? I think not.

Listen again to what Jesus just said: “No servant is greater than his master.” In Luke 6:40 Jesus states, “No student is above his teacher.” The teaching for the Eleven remains consistent and predictable for modern day students of Jesus: if the Teacher suffered, so will the students. If the Master suffered, so will the servants. If we are not of the world, the world will hate us. And why does the world hate us the most? Jesus states it clearly in vs. 21, “21 But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.” Nothing will get you in trouble with the world like the name of Jesus. I dare you to try it! Just bring up His name in some worldly setting and see what happens. The name of Jesus sheds light on the world’s darkness. Jesus reveals the one, true God in living flesh and blood, so that all people are without excuse. Consequently, Jesus is profoundly opposed by those who do not know the Father, as are those who bear Jesus’ name. Opposition is inevitable for our Lord’s Church.

This opposition and persecution was particularly evident for the first three hundred years following the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thousands upon thousands of Christians were arrested, beaten, and martyred by both the Jews and the Romans. But did you know that more Christians were martyred in the 20th century than at any other time in history? Some 20 million Christians were martyred in Communist countries like China, the Soviet Union, Romania, and Cambodia as well as in Muslim/Hindu countries such as India, Ethiopia, Iraq, and Iran. Even to this day Christians are fiercely persecuted by Islamic extremists throughout the world, and that is particularly true in Afghanistan even as we speak.
Now, to be fair, there have been chapters in history when those who claimed to be Christians persecuted their enemies with a vengeance and performed similar atrocities as those that had been leveled against them. The crusades in the 12th and 13th centuries were anything but Christian, for though we were called to suffer at the hands of “the world” for His name, our Lord never called His Church to inflict suffering and death upon “the world” in retribution or for evil gain.

Again, we must acknowledge that though the Church once suffered at the hands of the Jews, a western nation thought to be thoroughly “Christian” ruthlessly exterminated millions of Jews in the 20th century.

Church: Jesus called us to willingly suffer for His name, but Jesus did not call us to inflict suffering in His name. That does not mean that as a nation we are called to be passivists; it does mean that as the Church we do not wreak violence upon people in the name of Jesus. May our Lord’s Church repent for all the times in history when we got this wrong and corrupted the witness of the Gospel.

Let us now turn to my third and final subheading:

III. Cheap Grace

If opposition and suffering is inevitable for the Jesus-follower as the scripture states, then we should all be able to point to the opposition and suffering we have endured because of the name of Jesus, right? So, if I were to ask you, “Have you endured opposition or suffered persecution because of the name of Jesus?” what would you say?

I suspect that many of us could quickly point to the costliness of following Jesus. This is particularly true if you became a Christian out of a non-believing family. I have many friends in that scenario, and they regularly suffer scorn and mockery from their own family members. Remember that Jesus literally predicted that our greatest challenge would often come from own family members. In Luke 12 Jesus states: 51 Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. 52 For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

Some of us have traveled to do ministry in the name of Jesus in countries where doing anything in His name is illegal. You can feel the oppression everywhere in those countries, and more than once I have been delivered from the hands of those who would have severely persecuted me had I been caught spreading the Gospel. This is a daily reality for our brothers and sisters in many countries throughout the world.

For others, the opposition is more subtle, but it’s there. When Christy and I first moved to Kansas City we developed quick friendships with many of our neighbors whose kids played ball with our kids. We were invited to a few “outings” with those friends, but when we chose not to get drunk and carry on like they did, the invitations stopped coming. We are still friends with those families, but we don’t get invited to their parties. That’s not persecution by any stretch, but it’s still the cost of discipleship…sometimes following Jesus can feel lonely in the world. By the
way, this is exactly why Jesus spent significant time teaching His disciples to abide in Him and to love one another within the Church! No Christian should ever feel alone if we are attached to the True Vine loving each other like Jesus loves us. Our friendships should be deeper and stronger than friendships built on sinking sand, right? Church, let us not feel sorry for ourselves when the world excludes us; instead, let us feel sorry for the world because they do not yet know Jesus and the joy of Christian friendships!

Now…not all of us could identify even a stitch of opposition, persecution, or even inconvenience when I asked the question a minute ago. So let me speak to that for just a moment.

First of all, we should acknowledge that indeed, we are humans after all. That is to say, we all need to eat, sleep, work, play, pursue our passions and raise our families. As believers we still have much in common with unbelievers in the human pursuits of our daily lives, and that is as it should be. In fact, we often begin our work of evangelism by making connections through those very things we share in common with all people. Nevertheless, we are not of the world…or at least, that is what Jesus is assuming when He speaks to His Church. I suspect, however, that some of us never heard that teaching growing up.

Some of us were brought into the faith by believing in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, “cheap grace.” We were taught a brand of Christianity that was nothing more than a magical elixir: one that costs nothing and asks nothing of us. However, we’ve been promised that if we drink the magic elixir, it will help us become healthy, wealthy and wise…and we will be counted amongst “the good people.” Still others of us grew up in churches that aligned themselves with the world enough to avoid any conflicts regarding our lifestyles or our ethics, so this whole concept of being hated by the world is a foreign concept to us.

Alexander Maclaren writes of this tendency:

A half-Christianized world and a more than half-secularized Church get on well together. When they do agree, their agreement is wonderful. And it is a miserable thing to reflect that about the average Christianity of this generation there is so very little that does deserve the antagonism of the world. Why should the world care to hate or trouble itself about a professing Church, large parts of which are only a bit of the world under another name? There is no need whatsoever that there should be any antagonism at all between a godless world and hosts of professing Christians. If you want to escape the hostility, drop your flag, button your coat over the badge that shows you belong to Christ, and do the things that the people round about you do, and you will have a perfectly easy and undisturbed life.

Let me tell you something: there is no such thing as “cheap grace.” The grace of our Lord was costly…He endured injustice, torture, and a criminal’s death on the cross to save us from our sin. He then called us to follow Him by denying ourselves and taking up our own crosses. He called us to die to ourselves, and to be filled with His presence, that we might be set apart…that’s what the word “holy” actually means. We are to be set apart, to shine like a city on a hill! As those who have been born again, we are a new creation…the old is gone and the new has come. And as ambassadors of Christ, we are to be his witnesses. Do you know what the Greek word for “witness” is? ἀρπαγή. We are to be martyrs for Jesus, and that is always costly. That costliness may cost us our lives, but it will at least cost us our pride! It will cost us time. It will require us to make sacrifices. It will require us to endure scorn from those who are hostile to Jesus. It will require us to resist retaliation, fornication, and indignation--so that we might shine as the light of Christ in this hurting culture.
Following Jesus is always costly; such is why Jesus taught would-be-followers to count the cost, remember that? In Luke 14:25-33 Jesus describes the folly of going to war without first measuring the size of your army in comparison with the army you are facing! Listen: the Enemy of our souls, the ruler of this world…he isn’t playing. Resisting evil isn’t a game, and if you don’t have a sincere faith in Jesus that is willing to endure hardships and persecution, you stand no chance against the “army” that you will face when you walk out of that door today. The temptations to compromise are too strong. The temptations to do nothing in the face of injustice will win the day. The temptations to indulge yourself in sinful pleasure will corrupt your soul again and again. I suspect that sounds very familiar to many of us, which is why we face no antagonism from the world…it is because many of us are of the world and have not yet even tried to resist it! Jesus makes it clear: if He chose you out of the world, the world will hate you. If the world does not hate you, you are still of the world.

In John 15, Jesus is speaking to those then and now who are actually followers of Jesus. These are those who will face certain opposition and fiery trials! But devoted Jesus followers are also those who are filled with the Holy Spirit, and because of the grace and power given to them, they are world-changers. True disciples fight injustice, give generously to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, and bear witness to the truth of the Gospel! That is what true Jesus-followers looks like…they are, in the end, a noble and brave kind of people who both anticipate and endure suffering, and as they do…they become stronger and even more effective “martyrs” for Jesus.

Maclaren says it best: It was out-and-out Christians that He said the world would hate; the world likes Christians who are like itself. Christian men and women! Be you sure that you deserve the hostility that Jesus predicts!

Perhaps Maclaren’s challenge is exactly why James writes: 2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Just as muscles do not grow without repeatedly bearing weight, so our faith grows and our character is refined through the resistance we encounter from the world.

We will return to this teaching of Jesus and our engagement with the world next Sunday.

For now, let us not settle for cheap grace. Let us not compromise and bend to the cultural winds as though we are those who are of the world. I challenge each and every one of us to trust Jesus more…to follow Him into whatever trials and challenges might lie ahead, that we might be faithful witnesses regardless of the cost—remembering the words of our Savior when He said, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Let us pray.