

In the World, Not Of the World

John 17:6-19

“The world hath hated them, because they are not of the world.” Hated – that sounds so extreme. And it’s so far beyond our experience, living as we are in the Bible belt. Surely the worst we Christians should expect at the hands of non-believers is polite indifference, right?

Not if you were living in Saudi Arabia. Christians are not allowed to hold prayer meetings there, even in private homes. On December 15, thirty-five Christians from Ethiopia were arrested for attending such a prayer meeting. The women were strip-searched, and all of them remain in prison. One of them has testified that a high-ranking security official called them “non-believers and animals,” “pro-Jews and supporters of America.” This week, they were forced to listen to a Muslim preacher who, they said, “vilified Christianity, denigrated the Bible and told us that Islam is the only true religion. The preacher told us to convert to Islam.”

But the Saudis aren’t the only persecutors of our Christian brothers and sisters. According to the Pew Forum, Christians are persecuted in 131 of the 197 countries in the world. All told, some 200 million Christians are living in communities where they are persecuted. And 100,000 Christians are murdered every year because of their faith – our faith.

And this has always been the case. As we read responsively from Hebrews 11, those who have sought to be faithful to God have often faced the greatest trials – torture, mocking and scourging, bonds and imprisonment, being sawn in two or slain with the sword, being destitute, afflicted and tormented. Persecution of the Church is thus not the exception throughout world history – it is the norm.

But why? Why has the world always been so opposed to the followers of Jesus? With a few noted exceptions such as the Crusades, we haven’t generally tried to spread our faith by violence, as Islam and Communism usually have. Christians aren’t a threat to our neighbors when we do what Jesus told us to do – “love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.” When we send missionaries into foreign lands, they aren’t trying to conquer people. Instead, they spend their time starting schools and hospitals when they aren’t telling people about the love of Jesus and the gracious God Who wants to save sinners.

So, why do we Christians excite so much hatred and violence against us? Well, what did Jesus say? It’s not so much because of what we are. It’s because of what we are not. It’s not because of what we believe. It’s because of what we don’t believe.

The problem is that we Christians are not of this world. That means we refuse to go along with the sin and rebellion of the world. That's why the world hates us. The communists hate us because we refuse to worship the state, to admit that the government has the final say over everything, including religion. Muslims persecute us because, among other things, we reject the violence and the abuse of women that is so common in Muslim countries. In this country, we are hated because we insist that Jesus is the only way of salvation. We are increasingly scorned as intolerant bigots because we refuse to go along with our anything-goes culture, because we insist, for example, that children deserve the right to be born and to have a father and a mother who are married to each other.

And why do we refuse to go along with what the world says? What did Jesus say in verse 14? "I have given them thy word." In short, Christians believe that God has spoken to us through His Word. Christians thus believe that we are bound to obey what God's Word says, no matter what reason or experience might say. That's why we cannot go along with everything the world believes. Our consciences are held captive to the Word of God.

And it is our devotion to and our obedience to the Word of God that sets us apart from the non-believing world. What did Jesus ask the Father to do in verse 17? "Sanctify them through thy truth. Thy Word is truth." In verse 19, Jesus repeats His desire that His disciples be sanctified through the truth.

What does that mean? To be sanctified is to be set apart. So, to the extent that we Christians believe and follow the truth contained in the Word of God we are sanctified, set apart from the world, living in a way that makes us distinctive from unbelievers. We are set apart from selfishness and brutality and set apart for holy and righteous living, for deeds of love and mercy and justice.

And why do we desire to be set apart like this? Why do we insist on following God's Word, no matter what it costs us? Why do we keep on swimming upstream against the current of a worldly culture that is increasingly violent and vulgar? Why are we faithful to do God's will, no matter what the world may say to the contrary?

It's not because of rules. It's because of a relationship. It's because we belong to the Father. It's because we belong to the Son. Jesus says that the Father has given all those who trust in Christ to the Son: "All mine are thine, and thine are mine," verse 10 says. We long to obey God because we belong to Him.

And how did we come to belong to God? Through the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus mentions these great events in verse 11 when He says, “Now I am no more in the world.” Jesus no longer walks among us as a human being, the way He did with those men who ate the Last Supper with Him. Instead, He was crucified as the perfect sacrifice offered on behalf of all who trust in Him. He died so that our sins might be forgiven.

This seems to be what lies behind verse 19. Jesus sanctified Himself in the way that the Old Testament sacrificial animals were sanctified – set apart for the special and holy purpose of purifying His people. And because He has been set apart in this way, lifted up from the earth on a cross, we can also be sanctified, set apart from sin and for righteousness. We are sanctified through this truth, made holy and blameless through the truth of God’s Word which bears witness to the cross of Christ.

Why would we not cherish such a Word that allows us to draw near to God? Why would we not want to live in a way that pleases Him, even if it means we appear strange to the world? Why would we not long to obey the Word of Jesus?

But we do not simply honor Jesus’ Word as the sayings of a dead prophet. No, as Jesus said, He is no longer in this world. The good news is that Jesus has risen from the dead and has ascended into Heaven. Therefore we revere His Word as the command of our reigning King. We rejoice that we belong to the One into Whose nail-scarred hands all power in Heaven and Earth has now been delivered. Why would we not want to do what He says? No matter what the world may say about us, why would we not count it a much higher honor to declare our allegiance to our sovereign Lord?

And the Lord Jesus has indeed left us in the world for a purpose. Oh, it would have been very easy for Him, once a person had been given new life, once a person had responded to that new life by trusting in Christ for his salvation, to take that person out of the world. I’m sure the 200 million Christians living under the pressure of persecution often wish that Jesus would do just that. It is the suffering Church that most earnestly prays, “Even so, come Lord Jesus,” looking forward to the Day when He will return to put an end to all suffering forever.

But until that Day, it is the will of Christ that those who follow Him remain in the world, even though He has ascended to the Father. In verse 15 he specifically prays that those who believe in Him would not be taken out of the world. Moreover, in verse 18, Jesus says that He is sending those who believe in Him into the world.

That means that Jesus does not desire that Christians remain in our holy huddles, keeping our faith to ourselves, or only professing it in the safe confines of our places of worship. Now make no mistake. Jesus does not want us to be of the world, living like the world lives and thinking like the world thinks. But He does want us to be in the world, living among those who do not belong to Him, even among those who will reject Him and us as well. He desires that we bring the light of the gospel into the darkness of sin all around us. He desires that we rub salt into the decay that sin inevitably produces.

Being in the world while not being of the world is not easy or safe, for the darkness always seeks to hide from the light. That's why Jesus said in verse 12 that He kept the disciples, guarding and protecting them while He was in the world. The only one of them that was lost was Judas – who preferred the praise and the profit that this world can bring.

But even in the betrayal of Judas Jesus found a reason to praise God and to be faithful to God's Word. For the only reason that Judas was lost, Jesus says, is so that the Word of God might be fulfilled. Yes, Judas thought he was betraying Christ, bringing Jesus under the power of the religious rulers of the day. But in reality, Judas simply set in motion the events that had been predicted as far back as the Garden of Eden, the plan of God to save the world through the cross of Christ.

And that's still true today. The good news is that the world's most wicked plans can only serve to fulfill the purposes of God. No matter what the world may do to Christ or His Church, God is still in control, working even in the midst of persecution to accomplish His perfect will for His glory and our good.

The communists have discovered this to their own dismay. After they took control of China, they expelled all the Christian missionaries from that country. For years, the outside world thought that communist repression had stifled the gospel. But in reality, the suffering that the Chinese Christians experienced only proved the truth of the gospel. As their suffering served to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith, more and more people came to follow Jesus. Today, as many as 100 million Chinese are worshipping and following the Lord Jesus. Their faith grew and spread precisely through the suffering they experienced.

And so Jesus prays in verse 15 that the Father would keep us as Jesus had kept the rest of the disciples, that the Father would guard and protect us in the midst of the evil that is all around us. For if God Almighty is watching over us, we have nothing to fear from the hostile world. No matter what happens, He will help us to trust in Him. He will keep us close to Him.

And so we see the balance that must exist in the Christian life. On the one hand Jesus taught us to pray that we would not be led into temptation but would be delivered from the power of evil. Jesus knew He was sending us into the midst of a wicked and dangerous world, a world that crucified Him and that has no use for His followers. Jesus knew it would not be easy to be a Christian in this present evil age. He knew that His disciples would suffer greatly for being faithful to His Word.

And yet at the same time, Jesus calls us to experience His joy, as verse 13 says to have His joy fulfilled in ourselves. He calls us to rejoice in the certainty and the truth of His Word. He calls us to rejoice that we belong to Him and to the Father. He calls us to rejoice that the Father Himself is caring for us and protecting us. He calls us to rejoice because we are set apart from this world, even while we are called to live in it.