

Servants of God
II Corinthians 5:20-6:10

What does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ? What does it mean to reveal Christ to the world?

Chinese Pastor Wang Yi knows. He, his wife and four elders of the Early Rain Covenant Church have been imprisoned since December because the government considers their faith to be somehow subversive of the state. Last month, the Chinese government raided homes where remaining church members were meeting and rounded up 44 of them. One of the elder's wives has continued to experience police harassment, as they have pressured two different landlords to evict her. People connected to the church continue to disappear under mysterious circumstances.

But Christians aren't just being persecuted in Communist China. We all remember the 21 Coptic Christians beheaded by ISIS in Libya. And according to a report published in November of 2017, conditions for Christians in Egypt, Eritrea, India, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria and Turkey are getting worse and worse, as they face mob violence, destruction of their homes, and even crucifixion.

For people in so many countries, Paul's words in verses 4 and 5 aren't at all academic or difficult to apply to their lives. Like him, they have had to endure all kinds of afflictions, hardships and distresses. They are all too familiar with beatings, imprisonments, tumults and labors. They have all too much experience with sleeplessness and hunger.

Yes, so many Christians throughout space and time have lived out the exact words Jesus spoke in John 15:20 – "A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." In short, being an ambassador for Christ always involves identifying with Him, and thus sharing in the sorts of experiences He went through in this world.

But why did the world treat Jesus this way? And why do so many non-Christians continue to lash out at His followers? Not least because of something else that all ambassadors for Christ have, which Paul details in verse 7: we have the word of truth, the power of God, and the weapons of righteousness. Because the Church must speak the truth that Christ has entrusted to us, because we believe what the Bible says about the power of God and what it means to be righteous in His sight, the unbelieving world in its pride stands in firm opposition to God and to anyone who chooses to follow Him.

Of course, the particular flashpoints have varied according to time and place. In New Testament times, the Jewish leaders opposed Jesus and His disciples principally over their understanding of the Sabbath. You see, over the years after God gave the Law to Moses, the scribes and Pharisees had kept on embellishing that Law, adding all sorts of rules for everyday living, even while they hypocritically failed to follow much of what they taught. It got to the point that, by the time Jesus' ministry began, they even thought that healing someone on the Sabbath was a sin.

But when Jesus tried to correct their errors, when He tried to explain that the Law was not nearly as onerous as they had made it seem, they turned on Him and His disciples, accusing them of

being lawbreakers. They didn't want to hear the word of truth which Jesus spoke about the righteousness of God, so they clung to their own man-made ideas about right and wrong instead.

That sort of opposition to Christian ethics continues all over the world. When women turn from Islam and celebrate their freedom to uncover their faces, or when men turn from Hindu superstitions and embrace the freedom to eat meat, they risk the same sort of violence from their legalistic neighbors that Jesus experienced.

Of course, the Church faces the same sort of problem in reverse in modern America, especially when Christians call the sexual revolution into question. When we insist that unborn babies have a right to live, or that children are much better off being raised by a father and a mother who stay married to each other, we are roundly condemned as being legalists, even though we are simply explaining what the Bible says. Yes, it turns out that the word of Biblical truth and the weapons of God's righteousness still inspire fear and loathing in unbelievers today.

But the unbelieving Jews didn't just object to Christian ethics. As the church began to expand over the Mediterranean region, they also rejected the idea that the Christian faith should be available to the Gentiles, people from other ethnic groups.

But wait – what did we read in Isaiah 49? What did God say to His Servant, the Messiah? “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

So, in spite of what the Jewish leaders thought in New Testament times, it was always God's intention to save people from all over the world. Indeed, as far back as Genesis 12, God told Abram that “all the families of the earth” would be blessed through him. And salvation for all the nations was finally accomplished by the cross of Christ – for immediately after Jesus died, even a Roman centurion could see that “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

But everyone doesn't think this is good news. Just as the unbelieving world continues to oppose the word of truth that the Bible teaches about ethics, the idea that salvation is for everyone is still controversial. And this isn't just a problem for old-fashioned racists of every stripe, for those who insist that black and white folks shouldn't worship together, for those who imagine that it's wrong for anyone to learn from the worship practices of different cultures. Some people even within the Church resist any change, any accommodation that would make it easier to reach out to people from other cultures or even other generations. Some people continue to be more interested in their particular cultural folkways than they are in the word of truth and the weapons of God's righteousness. Sadly, they also risk missing out on the power of God in the process.

But it wasn't just unbelieving Jews that opposed the expansion of the New Testament Church. Toward the end of the first century A.D., the Imperial government of Rome began to persecute the Church. Now, they didn't care about Christian ethics, and such a far-reaching empire certainly didn't mind that people from lots of different cultures associated with each other. No, what they didn't like about the Church was its insistence that Christ was the only true God, and that no other gods should be worshipped.

Now, this wasn't just a problem because people all over the Roman empire worshipped so many different gods. No, the Romans believed that the best way for its people to demonstrate loyalty to the emperor was literally to worship him, to bow down before a statue of him, and to offer ritual sacrifices. So, while Christians professed their loyalty to the empire, they refused to worship the emperor because they had a higher, a more important allegiance to the One True God.

That's why Emperor Nero did things like lighting Christians on fire and using them as torches in his gardens. That's why the Romans threw Christians to the lions in the Colosseum. And that's why so many states continue to persecute Christians all over the world – Caesar will brook no rival to his claims to power. And the more absolute the power a government claims, the greater its hatred of the Church will become.

Sometimes this hatred expresses itself in mere harassment, as when city councils prevent congregations from building or buying worship space because they don't want more untaxable entities within their bounds, or when they prevent restaurants owned by Christians from opening at airports. Sometimes it boils over in laws that require Christian bakers and florists to participate in same-sex weddings, in spite of their convictions to the contrary. And sometimes totalitarian regimes like Communist China tear down church buildings and throw pastors and elders in jail.

But Jesus understands what His followers are going through. In fact, Isaiah predicted it in our responsive reading from chapter 49:7 – he said that the Servant of God would be the despised One, the one abhorred by the nation, and the servant of rulers. And Jesus would indeed die at the hands of Pilate, a government official who was more concerned with peace than with justice, someone who put to death a man he knew to be innocent just to quell the ravings of a mob.

But it isn't just governments that find the word of truth and the righteousness of God offensive. It isn't just rulers who are threatened by the power of God. No, in one way or another, the gospel is always offensive to human pride. The idea that we need to be forgiven – the idea that we owe allegiance to anyone except ourselves, the idea that God gets to decide what's right and wrong – our pride rejects all of this. So it's no wonder that unbelievers have always hated and feared Christians.

So, the question is – how are we to respond to their attacks? Paul tells us in verse 6. Instead of lashing out in response to hatred, we must be kind, remembering that we ourselves are nothing more than sinners saved by grace. Instead of giving up hope that our opponents can change, we must be patient, remembering that only God can open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. Instead of compromising our beliefs, we must seek a more consistent purity, a greater personal conformity to the will of God. Instead of avoiding confrontation with unbelievers, we must pursue greater knowledge of God and of the Scriptures, so that we will be able to explain what it is that they don't understand about Jesus and His Word. And above all, we must respond to the hatred of the world with genuine love – exactly the same sort of love that Jesus had for hateful, ungrateful sinners like us, a love that led Him to die for those that despised and rejected Him. And none of us can hope to do any of these things without the Holy Spirit of Christ living within us.

For that is the message we ambassadors for Christ must carry, even to those who despise us and reject us: that the Messiah has come, just as Isaiah said He would, to keep the covenant God made with His people as long ago as the time of Abraham. Jesus has come to provide for His people, to restore the land, to release the prisoners, to save us from hunger and thirst, to lead us and guide us to springs of

water. Jesus has come to comfort His people and to have compassion on the afflicted – even to die so that we might live with Him forever.

No, as hard as it might be for us to believe, everyone won't receive this message. Those who cling to their pride will continue in their hostility to the gospel and all it means. But try as they might, the enemies of Christ have never succeeded in stopping the spread of the gospel – indeed, their worst efforts often have exactly the opposite effect, as persecution gives Christians a showcase for the depth and sincerity of our faith. And so, in spite of the atheist, communist regime in China, there are more than 60 million Christians there – and those are only the ones the government recognizes. As Bishop Tertullian said some 1800 years ago, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

And that's why Paul could insist in verses 8-10 that, no matter what sort of ill treatment he received, the gospel would continue to go forth. Though the world gave him no honor, and spoke evil of him and called him a liar, he knew he was telling the truth, and that he would receive a good report from his fellow believers and glory from God. Though the unbelieving world considered him a nobody, worthy only of punishment and death, Paul was confident that God knew him well, and that even if he were to die for his faith, he would live with Christ forever. And though in the eyes of the world, Paul was nothing more than a poor, broken-down tent-maker and rabbi, he was able to rejoice because he had the only thing that really matters – a living relationship with a living God.

Pastor Wang put it this way, in a letter he wrote before he was arrested by the Chinese Communists: "Separate me from my wife and children, ruin my reputation, destroy my life and my family—the authorities are capable of doing all of these things. However, no one in this world can force me to renounce my faith; none of them can make me change my life; and none of them can raise me from the dead."

So, whether it be from a Chinese prison, from a Roman jail, or from a cross outside of Jerusalem, the call of Christ and all the servants of God has always been the same: now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation. So, before it's too late, let us urge everyone to be reconciled to God, to turn from human pride and accept His free pardon. Let us be true to our Savior and King, no matter what the consequences may be for us in this world.