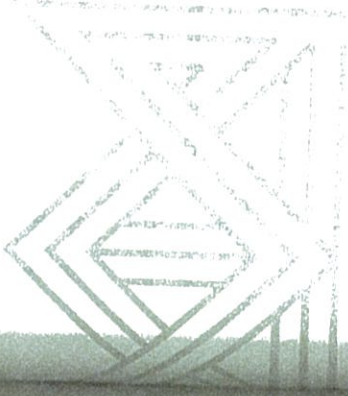


SALT AND LIGHT: THE BELIEVER'S WITNESS TO CHRIST IN AN UNGODLY SOCIETY



MATTHEW 5:14-16

Albert Mohler

When Christians feel unthreatened by the culture, they fail to think about the church's responsibility to the culture. Indeed, in the history of the church, the question of responsibility to the broader culture most often appears in the context of great controversy and crisis. The most prominent example of this is Augustine's work *The City of God*, which plumbs the depths of the church and culture in the midst of the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Christians in the West do not face the absolute collapse of all government and order. Believers certainly feel threatened, however, and at odds with the culture around them. The culture shift is not something that just happened in the last few years. This "moral revolution" has arisen in Western societies at least for the last 125 to 150 years. Thus, there should be little surprise that Christians have started asking questions like, "How is the church to engage the culture?"

The question of the relationship between the church and the culture confronts many, and dubious answers abound. Some suggest that Christians have zero responsibility to the culture. Others purport that culture bears little to no impact on the role of Christian ministry. The former of these perspectives fails to recognize the full implication of the Great Commission, while the latter holds

a naïve belief on the reach and influence the culture can have on doctrine, theology, and Christian living.

Viewing culture as too important, however, raises a potentially greater danger to evangelicals in this generation. Evangelicals who see the culture as too important begin to adopt clever and sophisticated strategies aimed at erasing the clear distinction between the people of God and the people not of the kingdom. Yet this view is profoundly at odds with the teaching of Scripture and what Jesus taught His disciples in John 15.

Not If but When the World Hates You

In John 15:18, Jesus says, “If the world hates you . . .” The “if” can, if taken improperly, seize the reader and lead to a dangerous interpretation. It may cause the reader to think that there is a chance the hatred of the world may not come upon those who follow Christ. A close reading, however, of Jesus’ words reveal that it is not so much a matter of *if*, but *when*:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 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. 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. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: “They hated me without a cause.” (John 15:18–25)

As a Christian reading these words, tension should begin to rise. The Christian knows that they have been called by God to do good works (cf. Eph. 2:10). The kindness and love of Christian character should only stir up love and admiration, not hatred, for the broader culture. Christians, therefore, can feel that if they put on enough good works, love, and charity, the culture will adopt a friendly attitude

towards the church. Christians feel a tension as they read John 15 because their works lead the broader culture to see the glory of God and desire Him rather than stir up hatred for God and His people.

The Bible seems to give warrant for the tension Christians feel as they read Jesus’ words in John 15. For example, in Matthew 5:16, Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” And 1 Peter 2:12 adds: “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” Thus, a biblical logic arises in these texts amounting to the idea that if Christians do good works, a light shines to the broader culture resulting in the glorifying of God.

The Scriptures, however, must be interpreted together. John 15 does not stand at odds with Matthew 5 or 1 Peter 2. In the latter texts, Christian obedience necessarily leads to good works that the culture will see and bring glory to God. When natural disasters like hurricanes occur, Christians lead the way in providing relief and care for those hurt and displaced. That shows the love of Christ to a dark world and gives glory to God. When Christians lead the charge against sex-trafficking and strive to help abused and subjected women, this culminates in a glorious display of beauty to the world and serves as an act of worship to God. The world, however, will not hate Christians for doing good deeds. We must, therefore, look at Christ’s words in John 15 with great care if we are to understand how the hatred of the world comes upon followers of Christ.

To begin, have the conditions of the “if” clauses in John 15 been met? John 15 presents the reader with “if x, then y.” Some may try to read that phrase and avoid “x” so that “y” does not happen. However, in John 15, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that every single condition necessary for the “if” to be fulfilled has occurred. Jesus addresses His disciples in a way that demonstrates all the conditions for the hatred of the world to come have been met. He says in verse 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.” Christ was in fact persecuted and nailed to a cross. Persecution, therefore, comes to all those who seek to follow Jesus Christ. He continues, “If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.” The world, however, already broke Jesus’ words. Again, “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin” (v. 22). Yet Jesus already came and preached the good news of the gospel.

The “if” clauses of John 15 lead us to conclude that all the conditions have been met in Jesus Christ, even before He spoke these words to His disciples. The coming of the cross looms over this discourse in John 15. Christians, therefore, must understand that the “ifs” of John 15 are in fact reality. They are fulfilled.

Jesus' ministry met the conditions that make clear Jesus' words, "But all these things they will do to you" (v. 21). Therefore, Christians must see John 15 and know that the question is not if persecution will come, but when.

How Did We Get Here?

A full range of emotions should set in as the Christian realizes the reality of Jesus' words in John 15. No doubt, fear and anxiety can seep into our minds as we understand that faith in Christ necessarily leads to persecution from the world. In grappling with this reality, perhaps we need to ask, "How exactly did we find ourselves in this predicament?" The Christian might be tempted to think that a life of persecution denotes a failure of the divine Messianic strategy or a mere plot of Satan himself. Both of these hypotheses, however, fail to understand the context of John 15 and the mysterious beauty of what Christ teaches us as He Himself was about to head to the cross.

Chosen by God Himself

In John 15:16, immediately before Jesus tells His disciples of the coming persecution they will face, He says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." Christians must know that persecution and suffering in the Christian life do not come as lapses in God's strategy. Nor does persecution come because God cannot protect His Bride from the attacks of Satan. Jesus reveals that His people endure persecution because of divine sovereignty. You were chosen by God's good pleasure and love.

Indeed, Christians find themselves in a life of persecution and suffering because they were chosen by God out of the world. John 15 reveals that Christians live as vines, abiding in the very person of Christ for strength and nourishment. Christians find themselves at odds with the world because they have been called out of the world and now live as ones who belong to the King of kings and Lord of lords. Christians abide in a new Master and live for a new kingdom. Christians face a hostile world because they belong to the Father, and the world hates the Father.

Therefore, whatever Christians face in this life, they face by the sovereign plan of the triune God. Through this truth comes Christians' hope and strength. We can hope because Christ has gone before us and, as He tells His disciples in John 16, has overcome the world before us! The Christian also finds strength from this glorious truth. If persecution comes as a sovereign plan of God, then we know God supplies His people with the necessary resources to endure and bring glory to His name. Christians hope and survive all that the world and Satan

throw their way because they abide in the very person of Jesus Christ.

Thus, Christians find themselves in their current predicament because God chose them out of the world by His good pleasure for His glory. Though persecution comes, Jesus comforts believers with the vivid imagery of abiding in Him. Though hatred and even death await the people of Christ, Jesus shows that His people live in His very person. Their lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). Christians, therefore, dare not try to extricate themselves from this predicament. The thought that the church could somehow be sophisticated, smart, kind, or civil enough to assuage the hatred of the world is not only wrong thinking but blasphemous. Jesus said, "A servant is not greater than his master" (John 15:20). Jesus' very own people crucified Him and rejected Him. He was perfect in all His ways. It is, therefore, arrogance of the highest order to think that the world will treat us better than our perfect Savior.

Persecuted because of the Gospel

The culture rejects the gospel and persecutes its adherents because of the absolute scandal the gospel purports. The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:22-25,

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

In this passage, Paul echoes Jesus' teaching in John 15. The message of the gospel offends the wisdom of worldly thinking. The culture trips over the gospel to their destruction because of its scandalous content. The Jews looked for a conquering king, not a murdered Messiah. The broader culture found the idea of a Father giving up His Son for the sins of mankind ridiculous. Yet Paul would not capitulate to the itching ears of his hearers, no matter the cost. He longed to proclaim Christ crucified, and only Christ crucified, for the gospel "is the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16).

Christians must understand that it is the message of the gospel itself which elicits the response of persecution. Singer-songwriter Michael Gungor is a recent illustration of the offense of the gospel, even in "Christian" circles. He tweeted, "Questioning penal substitutionary atonement really brings out the 30-year-old white dudes on my feed. I would like to hear more artists who sing to God and

fewer who include a father killing a son in that endeavor." For Gungor, the substitutionary atonement accomplished by Christ amounts to a horrific message of a father slaughtering his son. This type of message, in Gungor's mind, must end if the culture is to be reached for Christ. He goes on to say, "To see it as literal and out of context that God needed to be appeased with blood is not beautiful, it's horrific." Gungor is willing to stand with a gospel, but not *the* gospel. Gungor calls Christians to get away from substitutionary atonement because it is too crude to be respected.

The pagan culture believes they promote a message of tolerance. The culture believes that true morality does not impose belief systems on others. This emphasis on tolerance led to a radical shift in the ethics of American culture. America became intolerant of intolerance. The message of the gospel stands at odds with the new morality that abhors any claim to exclusivity. The world thinks it possesses the moral high ground to label anything it dislikes as intolerance.

The leading edge of the apologetic challenge in our generation is that the God of the Bible is an ogre. Gungor's sentiment abounds in the broader culture, revealing that the objection to the gospel is a moral one. The moral arguments against the gospel are not based in rationalism so much as in a great shift in morality. The culture feels hatred toward a God who would actually dare to be God. Hatred toward a God who actually is concerned first and foremost with His own glory. Hatred toward a God who doesn't offer multiple pathways for creative humanity to try to resolve their cognitive dissonance. That kind of God is hated. That kind of God who wills the death of His own Son on a cross and then vindicates His atoning work by raising Him from the dead. That kind of God is not admired in this society, morally as well as cognitively. Therefore, the entirety of Scripture is now held up as suspect.

Christians, as adherents to the Scriptures and believers in the infallibility of the God's Word, must understand the current trajectory of the culture. The accusations have come, and, no doubt, laws trying to stamp out the intolerable gospel of Jesus Christ will come. No doubt, Christians in America will face the threat of ostracization. Christians *must* understand this and be fully aware of the cultural landscape if they are to respond in a wise, godly fashion.

If the culture marches toward an increasing hatred of the message of the cross, how will Christians respond? Some abandon the gospel altogether. False teachers craft false gospels that promise our "best lives now." False teachers are raised up by the itching ears of the culture clamoring for messages of inclusion that promise social justice, happiness, wealth, and prosperity. As the moral revolution wars with the message of Jesus Christ, ministers of the gospel invariably capitulate on the central doctrines of the faith for the sake of relevance. Make

no mistake, the desire for cultural relevance is nothing less than idolatry. The messages of these false teachers will lead, albeit in an inoffensive way, countless souls to eternal perdition. Capitulating on the central truths of the gospel will only play into the hands of Satan himself, who longs to devour as many souls as he can.

Christian, do not forfeit the message of the gospel. Only the people of Jesus Christ possess the words of truth. The culture may be offended by the message of the gospel. Well, let the culture be offended! No doubt, however, as offense comes, salvation will come too. The message of the gospel must necessarily wound if it is to bring healing. The gospel does offend. It reveals our sin and the depth of our depravity. It manifests in the darkest terms the end that we deserve as rebellious people. The gospel displays the glory and holiness of an infinite God who burns with wrath against our sin. Furthermore, the gospel reveals that we cannot save ourselves. This is offensive! Yet it is the same gospel that brings healing and hope as it gloriously tells of the God who sent His Son to die in our place. If the church abandons the gospel, it abandons the only hope for salvation.

Yes, the world may hate you. For carrying this message, countless have died, giving their lives for the sake of the gospel. Their lives, however, live as fragrant offerings, used by God to draw many to Himself. Christian, realize that suffering is coming and it is promised to you. Our enemy abhors the message you carry and will do anything to silence you. We, however, *cannot be silent*. Though suffering may come as a result of proclaiming the truth, the glorifying of our God comes, too, as the lost are found. It is only through the gospel, not cultural relativism, that sinners will be won for Christ. Press on, then, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ (Phil. 3:14). Hold fast to the words of life (Phil. 2:16). Proclaim the excellencies of Christ (1 Peter 2:9). Guard the good deposit entrusted to you (2 Tim. 1:14).

Why Persecution?

Jesus teaches His followers the inevitability of suffering and persecution in the Christian life. The reason for this hatred stems from the message of the gospel itself. The culture questions the morality of a gospel articulating that all must have faith in a murdered Savior, hung on a cross by the will of His Father. Blood is needed for forgiveness of sins. This entire notion enrages the culture and wars with their fallen morality. This leads to persecution of God's people.

This hard truth can lead a Christian to ask, "Why?" When approaching the Scriptures, it can feel impertinent to ask "Why?" of certain commands. When God commands something, a proper response should not be to get His reason

for the command. We simply obey because of who He is as God. John 15, however, displays the mercy and grace of God by answering the question “Why?” for us. Jesus says:

But when the Helper 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 also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.
(vv. 26–27)

Jesus tells His disciples that all their suffering, all their persecution, the need for the Helper to come and be with them, is for witnessing. The root of the word for *witness* is *martyr*. The word *martyr* conjures up images of saints in the history of the church burned at the stake, fed to lions, beheaded, and subjected to countless other torturous acts. Those images, however, seem far removed from our civilized day. To preach “Be a martyr for Christ” in the comforts of our Western society feels safer than what Christians had to endure in previous ages or in other places. However, Jesus never promised that His disciples would die safely and sweetly in their beds. He never promised us a tranquil life.

We have been lulled into a false complacency by the pervasive reality of nominal and cultural Christianity. Christians have allowed the culture around us to create something of a safe zone, lulling us into longing for the respect and adoration of the masses. We believe that the title “Christian” should endow us with privileges and rights from a pagan world hostile to God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. If a church claiming the name of Jesus Christ exists in harmony with a culture that rages against the reign of God, then it is no church of Jesus. A church at peace with the culture, rather, has capitulated to the influences of the world around them for the sake of relevance and peace. This is not what Christ called His disciples and His bride to do when He commissioned them as His witnesses.

Christians must recognize that the saints’ witness and martyrdom verifies and amplifies the gospel of Jesus Christ. The persecution of believers powerfully magnifies the worthiness and glory of God. The persecution of God’s people is the vindication of the Son of God. *This is not a losing strategy*. This is the Father vindicating the Son and the Son vindicating His own. Therefore, when the apostles were persecuted, they could cry out with joy and rejoice that they had been “counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name” (Acts 5:41). The suffering of God’s people, in a peculiar way, brings glory and honor and praise to His name. Your suffering for the gospel displays powerfully the worthiness of the triune God.

But Take Heart—He Has Overcome the World

The scandalous nature of the gospel and the promise of persecution might cause some to become depressed or discouraged. Jesus’ words in John 15 appear to be the worst rallying cry of any leader. Jesus promises that the world will hate you. Does this foster depression? If the suffering that Christians will face brings depression in the people of God, then they have failed to understand the glory of Christ, the beauty of the cross, and the power of an empty tomb.

Though Christ promises His disciples suffering in John 15, He promises them something glorious in 16:32–33:

Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. 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.

If depression fills us by the promise of suffering and the warnings that Christ issued for all who follow Him, then we trust not in Christ and the fact that He has overcome the world.

“In this world, you will have trouble. Fear not, take heart, I’ve overcome the world.” Do you believe that? If Christ has overcome the world, and we know He has, then we can face whatever may come. If Christ has overcome the world, then we can leave everything to Him. If Christ has overcome the world, then no sermon that is truly faithful and is genuinely biblical will ever go without an increase, because the Word of God never returns without accomplishing what God sent it out to do. If He has overcome the world, then we can die with confidence and joy—whether in our beds or in the marketplace or in jail or anywhere it may happen—because we are safe in Him.

Christian, know that Jesus Christ has overcome the world. Without knowing His conquering power over Satan, sin, and death, little reason remains to endure persecution. Through Christ’s victory, however, Christians can and must preach the gospel. We can engage the culture and stand firm upon the solid rock of God’s Word because Christ reigns supreme over the creation, has secured the victory, and is coming again.

John 15 provides a clear instruction on the manner of the church’s engagement and responsibility to the culture. Jesus teaches us that even with the promise of persecution, the gospel must be proclaimed. Indeed, it is through the proclamation of the gospel that persecution will come. This remains the duty

of all disciples of Jesus Christ and it is a duty of the highest delight. Christians proclaim a message none other than that which exalts the excellencies of Jesus Christ. Though the gospel spurs persecution, it also brings salvation to the lost. Though we will meet hostility orchestrated by Satan himself, we go forward in the resurrection power of our risen, conquering Savior.

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COUNTED WORTHY. SUFFERING FOR CHRIST IN A WORLD THAT HATES HIM

ACTS 5:41

Paul Washer

In this chapter, I want to explore Acts 5:27–42, and other related passages in Acts, focusing on four things: (1) how apostles were persecuted, (2) the cause of their persecution, (3) what was *not* the cause of their persecution (which is crucial to understand), and (4) how they were able to respond with joy and endurance amidst their persecution to the end of knowing how we can do the same.

How the Apostles Were Persecuted

Once, I was being interviewed on a radio program in Detroit, and the interviewer said to me, “Mr. Washer, there are a lot of people who do not like you. How do you handle persecution?” I thought, *When was the last time I was beaten forty times? When was the last time all my possessions were taken from me? When was the last time I was thrown down and kicked until my ribs broke?* I said, “Sir, I’m not persecuted.”

It’s amazing how in America, we take the word *persecuted* and redefine it to mean that someone looked at us harshly. That is not what happened in Acts. Luke tells us that the apostles were flogged (Acts 5:40). The Greek word translated “flogged”