

“If the World Hates You ...”

John 15:18-16:4a (NRSV)

In June 1926, a young American correspondent, **John McCook Roots**, a recent graduate of Harvard, was working in China. In the course of his job, he sought an interview with a shadowy Russian Bolshevik figure named **Michael Borodin**. Borodin was at that time the cause of considerable chaos in western trade. The young correspondent located Borodin in Canton, presented his introduction to Borodin’s Vietnamese secretary (later known to the world as Ho Chi Minh), and was ushered into the Russian’s presence. The American was surprised by the Russian’s reception.

I found my hand pumped by a burly six-footer clad in a crumpled white jacket and trousers, with a shock of unruly black hair, a neat handle bar mustache, and a booming voice that bade a stranger welcome in heavily accented but fluent and idiomatic American English (John McCook Roots, Chou: An Informal Biography of China’s Legendary Chou En-Lai, NY: Doubleday, n.d., p. 32).

Seated with Borodin, the reporter’s mind sped through the scant information available about his interviewee. Apparently, Borodin had served time in a Glasgow jail. Earlier, he’d taught school in Indiana and Illinois. Now he’d been handpicked by Lenin for this job. Eagerly the novice reporter began the interview, asking questions about the realism of Borodin’s goals. But in a short time the tables were turned, and the Russian pressed an attack.

“You forget, young man, that I am not here for my health, or I would not be working in this barbarous heat. I don’t spend my time at the bars and the races like the English and the French. I am not interested in a career or fortune like the Americans. I serve an ideology. And with an ideology it is not numbers that count. It is dedication. You Americans wouldn’t understand that. I have lived many years in your country and I know what goes on. You concentrate on comfort and personal success” (p. 33-34).

Uncomfortable with the Russian’s rebukes, the young journalist feebly attempted to divert the conversation. **“Do you enjoy your work in China, Mr. Borodin,”** he asked.

“Enjoy!” he echoed scornfully. “A bourgeois question. It is not a matter of whether we enjoy our work here. The work is necessary. That is all that counts. It is of course far from the friends, the concerts and the theatre that mean so much in Moscow. But long ago I made up my mind that Communism alone held the answer for the world... Nothing else matters.

From the first time I read this account, the reporter’s question has stuck in my mind. Borodin was right; western society’s commitments and pursuits are largely determined by the question of personal enjoyment. That isn’t wrong in its self, of course, but it shouldn’t be the controlling force of our existence. Dr. **Herbert Hendin**, author of The Age of Sensation: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Youth in the 1970s, said:

It is no accident that, at the present time, the dominant trends in psychoanalysis [include] the rediscovery of narcissism.... [Our] society is marked by a self-interest and egocentrism that increasingly reduces all relations to the question, **“What am I getting out of it?”**

That attitude has also penetrated the church. Many think the Christian faith is there to make us **feel good, be healthy and wealthy and wise**. We come to worship to **“have our needs met.”** But godly people are not always well; they are certainly not always wealthy, either; nor are they always wise. The dangers of the health-wealth and smooth sailing gospel should be obvious. Life isn’t easy, and Christians cannot escape suffering and persecution.

John 15:18-16:4a deals with **Christian believers’ relationships with the world, and it is not a pretty picture**. Life is tough for Christians. What are some proper expectations and duties as we seek to follow Christ in this fallen, broken and rather hard and cruel world? Jesus’ words must have jolted his disciples for they came on the heels of some positive encouragement he’d given them earlier. He’d told them they ought not to let their hearts be troubled (Jn. 14:1a). He was preparing a place for them in heaven (Jn. 14:2-3). And until then, he would be with them. He would send his Holy Spirit, “another Advocate,” to be with them (Jn. 14:15-20, 26-27). He had also told them about the benefit of abiding in him and about the love that would exist between believers (Jn. 15:1-11 and 12-17). Then, all of a sudden, he turns to the trials and the tribulations of the world’s hatred and persecution of Christian believers.

1. **What Christians should expect** (John 15:18-25).

He spelled it out for them, **“If the world hates you ...” do not be surprised** (15:18-20). What a jolt! A Christian who follows Jesus Christ must expect to be hated. (The form of the Greek in verse 18 suggests certainty: “You **will** be hated.”) This is rather strong language. Not only is it accusatory, but, it is also aggressive, and sounds rather angry, although it isn’t. And it seems so personal. When our children were younger, my wife would try to teach them that the phrase “I hate you” was not the best one to use. She suggested some toned down alternatives like, “I am not happy with you,” or “There are some things I would like to talk to you about.” But, here, Jesus doesn’t mince any words. It is clear the world will hate Christians.

He gave several reasons for this. First, **the world hated Jesus**: “If the world hates you, be aware it hated me before it hated you” (15:18). Second, **his words and actions convicted people of their shortcomings and sin** (15:22-25). Jesus’ life, specifically through his words and his works, demonstrated by contrast how sinful his contemporaries were, and they hated him for that. His deep inner righteousness, which naturally shone forth wherever he went, drew their abiding hostility because it revealed the shabbiness of their own rather superficial and external goodness.

The story is told of **an African tribal witch doctor** who visited a mission station. Hanging outside the missionary’s cabin, on a tree, was a little mirror. The witch doctor happened to look into the mirror and saw his own reflection, with its hideous paint and scary features. He gazed at his terrifying countenance and jumped back in horror, exclaiming, “Who is that horrible-looking person inside that tree?” “Oh,” said the missionary, “it is not in the tree. The glass is reflecting your own face.” The African wouldn’t believe it until he held the mirror in his hand. He said, “I must have the glass. How much will you sell it for?” “I don’t want to sell it,” replied the missionary. But the witch doctor begged until he capitulated. He took the mirror, exclaiming, “I will not have it making faces at me again,” and threw it down and broke it into pieces.

That’s exactly what Jesus’ contemporaries did with him – “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (Jn. 1:11) – and, tragically, it often happens today. We hate to see what we really are. **A good look at Jesus results in either abiding hatred or passionate love**, and people have the same reaction to Jesus Christ’s followers.

The **second reason for the world's hatred** is found in verse 19: "If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you" (15:19). The English word, "**world**," for the Greek word, "**kosmos**," is used five times in this verse and it refers to **the entire sinful world system**. The world hates believers because they refuse to be a part of the system. It always opposes those who do not conform.

Of course, **persecution is not always violent; nor is every Christian constantly persecuted; nor do all unbelievers hate Christians**. The system always does, but not every individual. Persecution wears many faces. Most often it is reflected in an attitude and not necessarily in action. Sometimes it takes the form of indifference, and we are treated as nonentities. Other times it is avoidance as antagonists reroute their paths. Sometimes it reaches repulsion or a growing animosity.

A few years ago, **Robert Garret** compiled a list of degrees of persecution. The list is instructive as to how persecution can become more and more vicious. Sadly, persecution can be experienced not only in the world, but also in the home. 1. Disapproval, 2. Ridicule, 3. Pressure to conform, 4. Loss of educational opportunities, 5. Economic sanctions, 6. Shunning, 7. Alienation from community, 8. Loss of employment, 9. Loss of property, 10. Physical abuse, 11. Mob violence, 12. Harassment by officials, 13. Kidnapping, 14. Forced labour, 15. Imprisonment, 16. Physical torture, 17. Murder or execution (Faith Works, July/August 1999, pp. 17-20).

Persecution often begins with **pressure to conform**. Writing to the Christians in Rome some years after Jesus' words, the apostle Paul encouraged them, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves you towards the goal of true maturity" (12:2, J. B. Phillips).

And, of course, **sometimes persecution turns violent**. A fine philologist, **A.T. Robertson**, says "persecute in verse 20 has the sense "to chase like a wild beast" (Word Pictures in the NT, 1932, p. 262). We may not be experiencing this in North America, but it is happening in many other parts of the world. Over half of the Christians in Iraq have had to flee to Damascus in Syria. Some say there have been more martyrs for Christ in the twentieth century than ever before. And it hasn't stopped. The misery of

the early church on the run is being reenacted every day. The world will always persecute those who are not part of its system.

The third reason for persecution is stated in verse 20: “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also” (15:20). Maybe that’s why most Christians lie low on the horizon. Maybe that’s why they’re timid and don’t often speak up or stand up for their faith. They don’t want to get into trouble. Sooner or later, if they’re vocal, if they’re real about what the Christian faith asks them to do, they know they’re going to get it.

“If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.” Historically this has proven true. In 1937 **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, who was executed in 1945 just before the Second World War ended, prophetically wrote in his book on the Sermon on the Mount entitled, The Cost of Discipleship,

Suffering is the badge of the true Christian. The disciple is not above his master.... Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church.... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer [for their faith] (p. 100-101).

Such suffering will be proportionate to the extent of one’s identification with Christ. Jesus’ teaching demands that we draw some conclusions.

2. **What God expects** (John 15:26-27).

One primary deduction is that **smooth sailing** is not necessarily a sign that God is pleased with our lives. The absence of persecution may actually indicate something is wrong. Such was the case with the patriarch Abraham’s young nephew, **Lot**. He tired of the separated life in the Negev desert of Palestine and pitched his tent in “the well-watered” Eden-like plain of the Jordan near Sodom and Gomorrah until he was firmly entrenched in the life of the city, and when the day of judgment came, the angels commanded him to go to his relatives in the city with the message that judgment was coming. But as Scripture records, his sons-in-law thought he was joking (Gen. 19:14). He had somehow lost his convictions and his credibility along the way.

Most people are not so crass. Rather, they try to find a **comfortable spot** between the extremes of a godly life and a sinful one – and they achieve this at the cost of their souls. They prefer a **smooth sea** to the stormy weather of being possessed by God. They go through life with little difficulty because they have accommodated themselves to the world.

At the same time, persecution is not necessarily a sign of God’s blessing. Some people just seem to **like being persecuted**. They think it will “win them brownie points.” Much like the rather sectarian Jehovah’s Witnesses, they think that somehow, by their obnoxious, persistent behaviour -- suffering many slammed doors in their faces -- they are actually winning God’s approval, when nothing could be further from the truth. Because these people are wrong, dead wrong, in their interpretation of Scripture. Genuine Christians, too, sometime get caught up in this game. In their overzealous zeal for the Lord, they are persecuted because of their stupidity, rudeness, annoying personality, or false piety. Persecution is not necessarily a sign that we are following Christ!

Further, the godly are not under the sword at all times. Proverbs 16:7 says, “When the ways of people please the Lord, he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them.” That is true. We are also called to be “salt” and “light” within the world and our communities. We are called to preserve righteousness and good order. We are also called to build up rather than only to tear down. A life that is pleasing to God is a life that by example, word and deed demonstrates the righteousness of Christ. If it is this that condemns the world, and engenders persecution then so be it. Consider **Daniel**, one of a very few people in Scripture about whom much is written, but who, like Job, has no recorded sin. Exiled in Babylon with his people, he was an exemplary man, obedient to the traditions of his faith. He was also faithful at his work. He tried to serve his Babylonian masters well. Nevertheless, the Pooh-Bahs of Babylon tried to exterminate him. The world system was against him. Yet, God stopped the lions’ mouths.

William Temple, in his Readings in John’s Gospel (1945), states the third reason for persecution from a Christian perspective:

The world would not hate angels for being angelic; but it does hate [certain people] for being Christians. It grudges them their new character; it is tormented by their peace; it is infuriated by their joy.

(p. 272)

Jesus adds, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning” (15:26-27). Persecution is not an excuse for silence; in fact, it challenges us to witness, to share Christ lovingly in a hostile world, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A little boy named **Stevie**, who was quiet and shy, moved to a new neighbourhood. One day he came home from school and said, “You know, Mom, Valentine’s Day is coming, and I want to make a valentine for everybody in the class. I want them to know that I want to be their friend. His mother’s heart sank at the prospect of her son’s rejection. Every afternoon, she’d watched the children coming home from school, laughing and hanging on to one another – all except with Stevie, who walked home alone, behind them. But at the same time she did not want to discourage her well-intentioned son. So she purchased glue and paper and crayons, and for three weeks, Stevie patiently made 35 valentines. When the big day came, he put the valentines in his backpack and ran out the door.

His mother thought, “This is going to be a tough day for Stevie, so I’ll bake some cookies and have some milk ready for him when he comes home from school. Maybe that will ease the pain of not getting many valentines.” That afternoon she had the warm cookies and milk out on the table. She went over to the window and looked out. Sure enough, here came all the children, laughing, valentines tucked in their hands. And there was Stevie. Though walking behind the children, he was walking faster than usual, and she thought, “Bless his heart; he’s ready to burst into tears.” His hands were empty; he wasn’t carrying any valentines. Stevie came into the house, and his mother said, “Sweetheart, Mom has some cookies and milk for you, just sit down.” But Stevie’s face was all aglow, and as he marched right by her, all he could say was, “Not one, not a single one. I didn’t forget one. They all know I love them.”

Figuratively speaking, Christ did not get a valentine, but he did not forget a single person, and we are to be like him. Lovingly, we are to “go get ‘em” for Jesus. Openly, vulnerably, joyously!

Then Jesus added in words that meant, “I’ve told you these things, so that if you have supposed in following me you’ll have smooth sailing, you will not be disillusioned. To be forewarned is to be forearmed” (16:1-4a). What

Jesus prophesied came true, and the disciples did not stumble! All except John, it appears – and he was exiled on an island – died martyrs' deaths. They understood Jesus Christ was hated and so were they. They were not part of the world order that was passing away; they were part of a new world that would never pass away. They were obedient as they lovingly, boldly shared the name and the power of Jesus Christ.

That young reporter in China, John McCook, saw Borodin once again, later, and the Bolshevik was in a more contemplative mood. In the course of their conversation they discussed the Christian faith.

After a long silence, Borodin, still gazing out the window, began murmuring, half to himself. "You know, he mused, "I used to read the New Testament. Again and again I read it. It is the most wonderful story ever told. That man Paul. He was a real revolutionary. I take my hat off to him." He made a symbolic gesture, his long hair falling momentarily over his face.

Another long silence. Then suddenly Borodin whirled, his face contorted with fury as he shook his fist in my face. "But where do you find him today?" he shouted. "Answer me that. Where do you find him? Where? Where? Where? Then furiously, triumphantly he shouted: "You can't answer me!"

But we can!

Followers of Jesus Christ have been in China – Hudson Taylor and Jonathan Goforth and many others. Men and women whose lives were like Jesus and like those of the apostles. Today they are on every continent. Some are suffering persecution, others are not, but all their lives all speak about the mercy and forgiveness and power of Jesus Christ.

We are called to follow their example of following the Saviour, no matter what the cost.

Amen

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