

If They Persecuted Me

The World's Hatred, the Religious Hand, and the Servant's Calling

JOHN 15:18-16:4

Where We Are

We are continuing in our series on the Gospel of John, still in the upper room, still building out our pneumatology, our study of the Person and works of the Holy Spirit. Across these last several weeks Jesus has told us a number of important things about the Spirit.

He is the **Helper**, who enables us to love our fellow saints. He is the **Spirit of Truth**, who teaches us to love, live, speak, and stand for what is true. He **dwells in us**, making us both temple and priests. He is our **teacher**, who brings the Word of God to our remembrance. And last week we sat in front of what is perhaps the most important and most often neglected work of the Spirit in the body of Christ: **He causes us to bear fruit**.

I rarely do this, but I would highly encourage you to go back and listen to last week's message. I genuinely believe it was the most important message of the series so far.

Today we continue in John 15 and step into the opening of John 16. Last week we sat under the warmth of the analogy: vinedresser, vine, and branches; love, fruit, and abiding. Today Jesus turns from that warmth to something much harder. He turns to the world's hatred. And the source of that hatred will not be where you expect it.

The Text

JOHN 15:18-16:4

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.'

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.

I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.

The Shocking Source of Persecution

When Jesus speaks of persecution, He names the source explicitly. And the source is not who we tend to assume.

Listen to His words again:

JOHN 16:2

They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.

That is not Rome. That is not the pagans. That is the religious community.

The persecution Jesus is describing here is not primarily secular. It is religious persecution, rooted in spiritual blindness. And that pattern has not changed in two thousand years.

CHARLES SPURGEON

Spurgeon warned of this pattern repeatedly: the church has often been the greatest persecutor of the true church.

D.A. CARSON

Carson puts it this way: the greatest hatred often comes from those who think they see clearly but are actually blind.

Look at what unfolded in the Gospel record. It was not Rome that handed Jesus over. Rome wrote the sentence on the cross, but the Pharisees, the chief priests, and the Sanhedrin orchestrated it. They were the ones who hated Him, plotted against Him, and demanded His blood.

The greatest hatred often comes from those who think they see clearly but are actually blind.

Why They Hated Him

So why? Why did the religious leaders, the very people who should have recognized their Messiah, hate Him so deeply? Three reasons rise to the surface in the Gospels.

i. He Exposed Them

Jesus saw what was beneath their robes and named it. He pointed at the gap between their public piety and their private hearts. Religious people do not handle exposure well, especially when the One exposing them carries the authority of the Father.

ii. He Refused Their Authority

The Pharisees, the chief priests, the Sanhedrin: they expected deference and submission to their religious system. Jesus did not give it. He answered to His Father, and that was enough. He would not be domesticated by men who claimed an authority the Father had never given them.

iii. He Redefined Righteousness in Himself

This was the deepest offense. For centuries, the path to righteousness ran through the law, the priesthood, and the temple. Jesus said it now ran through Him. He was the way, the door, the temple. He was Jesus. That collapsed the entire system the religious establishment had built itself on, and they could not forgive Him for it.

He Still Does This

This is not first-century history. Jesus still does this work today, in His church and in our own lives.

He still exposes. He still refuses to be put under our religious systems. He still insists that righteousness is found in Him, not in the structures we have built around Him. And every honest follower of Jesus knows this from experience. He keeps showing up where we did not invite Him, naming things we did not want named, dethroning idols we had grown comfortable with.

That means there will be moments when we feel something of what the Pharisees felt. Exposed. Dethroned. Asked to bow. The question is whether we will let Him do it.

Jesus still does this today. We must allow Him to do this with us.

The servant is not greater than his Master. If they hated Him, they will hate us. If they cast Him out, they will cast us out. But His promise stands. The Helper is coming. The Spirit of truth will bear witness through us, and we will bear witness with Him. And the hatred of the world, even the hatred of the religious world, will not be the last word.