The Word Made Flesh

Disciple or Pharisee?

The Pressure, the Disciple, and the Honest Question

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 He is the One who **comes us to bear fruit**.

Then Jesus shifts the conversation. He has told us all of this, He says, because we are about to be pressured for following Him. And to just a few short verses, He uses the word *world* six times. Last week we began unpacking what Jesus actually means by "the world," and today we go deeper. Because the answer is going to expose more than we expected.

Rethinking "The World"

When we hear Jesus say the world is coming against us, our minds tend to go in one direction. The world is the secular system. The non-Christians. The pagans. The atheists. We instinctively reduce this to a simple equation: there are two players, the world and the church. The world hates the church and comes against her because the world is under the influence of Satan.

But anyone who reads the Gospels carefully knows that Jesus's teaching is not that simple. Satan influences the people of God just as much as he does the outside world. To be contextually accurate to the Gospels, Jesus almost exclusively confronts the devil's influence within the people of God, not among the outsiders. When He teaches on the kingdom of darkness, He almost always teaches in a way that exposes how that kingdom operates inside the Kingdom of Light.

This is why Jesus spends so much energy confronting the religious leaders of His day. This is why His apostles so much time preparing His people for the reality that there are false prophets, false shepherds, and false Christians. He warns us to beware of false prophets who look like sheep but are ravenous wolves. He says, in Matt. 7, "I am the door" watching, that not every shepherd comes through Him. Many circumvent the door and sneak in through the back.

In the context of today's passage, Jesus makes it very clear: The "world" He is preparing His disciples for is not the secular system of atheism. It is the religious institution led by religious people. He is not grooming them up for persecution from Pharaoh Pentatchel. He is grooming them up for persecution from the religious institution that hold credibility within the people of God. And He does not just explain who will persecute them. He explains why.

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: 'Servants are 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 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.

ASSUME WE'VE GOT FASTER

Two Angles to Read This

I want you to take this in from two angles before we look at it closely.

The first will come most naturally to you. You are the disciple, the one being warned. Some of you know exactly what this feels like. You have been convicted, slandered, outed, and shamed by religious zealots inside the church. You have struggled to make sense of it, wondering what you could possibly have done to prompt such a response. My hope is that this passage gives you light, strengthens your faith, and reminds you that the Lord sees you, loves you, and does not waste that for you.

The second angle is harder. It is easy to read this text and assume we are the disciples and Jesus is warning us about the persecution coming against us. It is easy to be the protagonist of the story. But I want you to have some fear, a more sobering possibility. Maybe you are not the victim. Maybe you are the Pharisee, the one persecuting the people of God while thinking you are offering service to Him. People do not turn into Pharisees overnight. It happens slowly, over time, because they did not stop and ask, "Am I getting off course?"

Don't think about anyone the right now. This is between you and God. Are you a disciple? Or are you a Pharisee? Or are you a disciple who has been quietly losing his way?

Five Marks of the Pharisee

The Pharisee in this text is not a foreign creature. The marks below are root drivers from a far-away religion. They are drawn from people who carried Bibles, sat in the front rows, and built their lives around their understanding of God. Look at each mark and ask honestly whether it is more familiar that you would like to admit.

I. Misplaced Zeal Without True Knowledge of God

Jesus says it twice in this passage:

> *But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.*
>
> JOHN 15:21

> *They will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.*
>
> JOHN 16:3

This is the core issue. They are not atheists. They are misinformed worshipers. They have zeal without knowledge (Romans 10:2). They love their idea of God, but they reject God as He truly is.

Knowing God in this passage carries a double meaning. It is knowing Him rightly and relationally. It is knowing God as He is revealed in the Scriptures, and as He is revealed by the Spirit. What you typically find in the Pharisee is that they only do one of those.

There is the Pharisee who knows the Bible but does not know its Author. They have all the right verses, but they misuse them, because they do not have the heart of the Author behind those verses. They spend no time in prayer, no time in fellowship, no devotional life, no real striving to grow in the fruit of the Spirit.

The opposite Pharisee is the one who has very little Bible in them but is convinced they know the Author. They spend all their time in prayer and feeling. They make comments like, "Why settle for the book when you can have the Author?" They know just enough Bible to be dangerous. They go to know the whole counsel of God, but they think they do. This person has a relationship with something, but it is likely not with the Father. Or if it is, it is unaffirmed and estranged, because their relationship is built on what they have picked up from Christian culture or their feelings. It is not rooted in truth.

The root of why the Pharisee persecutes the disciple is that the Pharisee does not actually know God. The terrifying part is that they think they do. And all of their friends are telling them they do. So when someone shows up bearing the Spirit, speaking differently, and thinking differently, because that person is rooted in the Scriptures and the Spirit, the Pharisee persecutes.

To avoid becoming this person, you have to know the Word, not a few verses or chapters or favorite books. You have to know the whole thing. You have to know what the church has historically taught about it. You have to do more than read it. You have to get it in you. And then you have to take everything you learn and aim it toward the Father. Pray it. Engage with the Holy Spirit through it. It is not enough to know the book without the Author. And you cannot rightly know the Author without knowing the book.

II. Threatened by Religious Systems and Power Structures

Jesus did not just challenge sin. He dismayed deep-rooted religious systems that were maintained by loyalty to tradition rather than devotion to God. Look at what He did. The temple cleansing in John 2. The Sabbath confrontations in John 5. His authority claims in John 5 and John 8, where He insists He alone can forgive sins, completely bypassing the priestly system.

What often happens in religious history is that new build hierarchical structures designed to give the institution power, frequently concentrated in a single leader at the top. And if history has taught us anything, it is that people do not give up power easily. So when someone says or does something that could undermine that power, the Pharisee does what is necessary to protect it. The result is the persecution of the outsiders.

This is exactly why, when Jesus builds His church, He places shepherds and servants at the top, with a plurality of elders governing the church together, not one man at the top.

When Jesus shows up, He calls out hypocrisy. He undermines control. He removes human leverage over people. He exposes inconsistent and harmful theology. And the persecution that follows happens for one reason: true gospel authority threatens man-made authority.

III. Hatred of Exposure

> *If I had not come... they would not be guilty... but now they have no excuse.*
>
> JOHN 15:22

Light creates accountability. People do not just hate truth. They hate what truth reveals about them.

Inside the church, when sin is exposed, when motives are revealed, when pride is confronted, the Pharisee responds first with defensiveness, then with hostility, then with separation. The reaction is not because the truth is wrong. The reaction is because the truth is too close.

IV. Belonging to a Different Kingdom

> *Because you are not of the world...*
>
> JOHN 15:19

Every within religious spaces there are two identities. There are those who belong to God, and there are those who belong to the system. There are those who are loyal to the ethics of the Kingdom, and there are those who are loyal to the workings of the system.

Same room. Same hymns. Same vocabulary. Different kingdoms. That is why persecution can happen sitting next to someone in the same pew.

V. Sincere but Wrong

> *They will think they are offering service to God.*
>
> JOHN 16:2

This is one of the most sobering lines in the New Testament.

You can be sincere. You can be passionate. You can be convinced. And you can still be completely wrong.

The Pharisee Crucified Jesus

Look at who actually killed Jesus. It was not Rome, primarily. The religious leaders handed Him over. The Pharisees. The chief priests. The Sanhedrin. And they did it for the same three reasons we covered last week. He exposed them. He refused to submit to their authority. He redefined righteousness in Himself, not in their performance.

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

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. Which means the Pharisees in the Gospels are not the only Pharisees on record. Every generation has them. And we have to be willing to see if we are them.

Two Warnings for the Faithful

This text comes with two warnings the disciple has to hold together carefully.

Don't Be Surprised

Jesus says, *I have told you beforehand.* When persecution comes from inside the church, do not treat it as a malfunction. Do not treat it as a glitch in the system. It is part of following Him. It happened to Him. It will happen to you.

Don't Become Bitter Toward the Church

The warning is real, but the solution is not cynicism. There is false religion inside the church, and there are true brothers and sisters inside the church. Both are true at the same time. We must learn to discern without becoming jaded or disillusioned. We must hold discernment and trust together. Not every immature believer is a Pharisee. And not every seemingly mature believer is a disciple.

The Spirit's Timing

JOHN 16:5–15

> I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.
>
> And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.
>
> I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

There is a final word in this passage worth pausing on. Jesus had truth to share with His disciples, and He did not share all of it at once. He waited.

He waited for the right method, and He waited for the right time. The method would be the Holy Spirit. The time would be when His disciples could bear it.

The question is *were we I share what is true?* The question is always *how, and when?* Truth without the Spirit becomes ammunition. Truth at the wrong time becomes a wound. Jesus knew this, and He withheld certain truths until the Spirit could carry them and the disciples could receive them.

That is the heart of the disciple, not the Pharisee. The disciple does not just know what is true. The disciple knows when and how to deliver it, because the Spirit is leading and the timing is His.

So, Which Are You?

The Pharisee in this text is not far from us. He is sometimes the one in the rear pew. And on a hard day, he is sometimes the one in the mirror.

The honest disciple lives close enough to the Spirit and the Word to know which one he is, and humble enough to repent when he finds out. May we be disciples. May we know God truly, refuse to weaponize religion, welcome exposure, belong to His Kingdom, and let Jesus continue to do in us what His has always done: tear down what He never built, and replace it with Himself.