

Committed to Christ: Rejected Servants

By Dr. William W. Goligher

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Bible Text: John 15:18-27

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Tenth Presbyterian Church

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

Page 902, John chapter 15. We are going to read from verse 17. This is the third in a series that we have been doing on John 15. We are breaking into our Lord saying to the disciples, verse 17:

These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

“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.¹

The surgeon general of the United States has a very important and very responsible role. I guess that whenever he issues a health warning you and I better sit up and take notice and we are well advised to do what he says. And it seems that his health warning is beginning to percolate down even to the drug companies. Something happens here that doesn't happen so much in the UK and that is that drug companies are trying to sell their wares straight to the customer—what used to be the patient in the olden days is now the customer or the client in British terms—and is trying to persuade the client, the customer,

¹ John 15:17-27.

the patient to buy the drug that they want you to buy, the drug that will solve all your problems, the drug that will make you healthy and slim obviously in the process, just exactly what you need. But after you have listened to the hype selling you the drug, you then have to listen to the little blurb at the end that tells you that if after taking the drug you start to lose your hair, your eyes begin to fall out, your ears fall off, your skin goes dark, your kidneys pack it up, then you should, in fact, stop taking the drug, which I would have thought was fairly obvious and then go and see a physician.

All of this to say this morning is that this passage of Scripture that we have read together is telling us that Christianity comes with a health warning straight from the Lord Jesus himself.

If I can remind you of the context, Jesus is describing his people and their relation to him.

“I am the vine; you are the branches.”²

He is talking about what that means for ourselves. We are to bring forth fruit. We are to live productive lives. And the productivity he is looking for is the fruit of godliness. It is Christ likeness. It is becoming more and more like Jesus. It affects our relationship to one another as believers, as Christian people. We are to love one another as the Church... as the world looks on at the Church it is to see a Church that shows observable love and oneness among themselves.

Now Jesus is moving on to the third area, having a connection to him, being related to him is going to affect not only the way you live and the way you relate to one another, it is going to affect the way you relate to the world, to the world outside.

So as we walk our way through the passage, notice, first of all, the Church’s relationship to the world. What is Jesus saying about the Church and the world?

Now what do we mean by the world? He uses the expression six times in the space of these verses. And when he talks about the world he is not talking about the physical world around us, the world that we admire, the world whose beauty we love and the world that we can enjoy. He is talking here about the moral world, the moral world that is in rebellion against God. Whether it is a religious society or a secular society such as certainly the UK is and the United States is, whether it is religious or secular, nonetheless it is godless as far as God is concerned, because society as a whole has rejected the one and only God there is, who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world lies in the power of the evil one.

When he talks about the world, he is talking about human society that rejects or ignores Christ over which Satan is God and prince which is in a state of active rebellion against God, is populated by rebels and is heading for judgment. That is the world.

² John 15:5.

Now what do we mean by the Church? Well, in John 15 the Church is the congregation, the gathering of those who are joined to the Lord Jesus. They are united to Christ.

If the image of the vine and the branches is saying anything surely it is saying that people have to have a living, vital, personal, dynamic relationship with the vine.

Jesus says, "I am the vine."³

The question you are to ask yourself this morning is this. Do I have a living, vital, personal relationship with the vine, with the Lord Jesus Christ or do I really resemble a bauble on a Christmas tree rather than a branch in the vine taking its energy and life from the living Lord who energizes his people?

So the Church is composed of people who are united to Jesus Christ. And it is composed of people who are under the authority of Jesus Christ. That is why we began in verse 17 which is a transitional verse, I think, from one section to the next and talks, do you notice, about Jesus' commands. "I command you," he says in verse 17.

In other words, the Church is composed of men and women who live their lives under the authority of Jesus Christ. We serve another King, one Jesus.

This was brought out in the history of the Church in Scotland. There was a man who stood before King James VI of Scotland and we exported him down south and he became James I of the United Kingdom, was one of the best exports we ever made. But we were glad to get rid of him. But King James was not wanting Presbyterian worship in Scotland. He wanted to be the king of the church as well as the king of the country. And this bold minister said to him on one occasion, "Sire," he said, "There are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland. There is King James the head of the commonwealth and we will give to King James all due reverence and respect and obedience. But there is King Jesus, the head of the Church. We dare not give to James the allegiance that we owe to King Jesus."

You see, the Church of Jesus Christ is composed of a subversive group of people who are under the authority of another king. And those who live in the old order find that strange and hard to deal with. Believers are united to Christ, they are under Christ as their Lord and they have been chosen by him.

Did you notice that chosenness is one of the things that provokes the world?

Jesus says this. "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."⁴

³ John 15:5.

⁴ John 15:19.

By the grace of God you and I have been chosen out of darkness and brought into light. We have been chosen out of the world and he has put his hedge of grace around us and said, "These are mine."

In other words, we are what we are today not because of anything in us, nothing about which we should boast, rather we are what we are today purely by the choice of God and by the grace of God.

So believers then find themselves in a world populated by rebels against God. Having been rebels themselves, they have been reconciled to God by the grace of Christ and become his people. That is the Church's relationship to the world.

But what about the Church's rejection by the world? Well, what Jesus teaches us here is this, that the very grace that reconciles us to God alienates us from the world.

You can see how he spells this out. Look at verse 18. The world hates the Church as it hated Christ, he says.

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you."⁵

The world hates the Church because it first hated Christ. That is hard to imagine anyone hating the Lord Jesus.

For a number of years I conducted university missions in universities throughout the UK and in Europe and one of the things I would say to the students very often was this. As they came along they were un-churched, non-Christian students. I would say, "You know, you are going to find two contradictory things happening as you come to these talks that I am doing these evenings. On the one hand you will find yourself strangely drawn to the Lord Jesus. You will find him attractive. You will find things about the Lord Jesus that are captivating, that are wonderful. But you will also find yourself increasingly repelled by his message. And that really is reflecting, isn't it, what Jesus is saying here. We know that people were attracted to him. They applauded the loveliness of his life. He had an integrity. He had a beauty to his life that both friends and foes acknowledged. He loved and he cared for ordinary people. They were attracted to him. The people that no one else had time for, Jesus had time for. Compassion and love were the things that people inevitably found when they met him and came into a living contact with him.

Tennyson said about Jesus' character, "It was more wonderful than the greatest miracle."

Dostoevsky once said, "I believe there is no one lovelier, deeper, more sympathetic and more perfect than Jesus."

And even an arch Atheist like Bertrand Russell said of him, "If the world lived the way Jesus lived, then the world would be a paradise."

⁵ John 15:18.

So if Jesus is so wonderful, if he is so lovely, why does the world hate him?

Back in John seven verse seven Jesus said, “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.”⁶

And our living connection with him and our growing likeness to him and our concern to proclaim his truth, you see, tars us with the same brush as Jesus.

Here is how John puts it in 1 John three.

“Don’t be surprised, my brothers,” he says, “if the world hates you.”

There is this attitude of antagonism and hostility that is only just beneath the surface. It only takes something, some disruption in someone’s life, some major problem in their experience, a break down in their health, of their relationships or some great event in world history to make that inner hostility somehow burst through and we see the evidence of it.

Something goes wrong. Who is the first person they blame? God.

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.”⁷

And you look at verse 19. It is our distinctive attachment to Jesus the world hates.

“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.”⁸

Now you notice here it is our difference the world hates. It is our likeness to Jesus the world hates.

If we were like the world, if there was nothing that they could see that was different, then they would treat us with total indifference. The world loves a worldly church. The world loves a church that is compromised in its truth and its worship and its behavior and its ideas and its morality. The world can deal with that. The world hates a Church that is like the Lord Jesus Christ.

Archbishop William Temple put it like this. “The world would not hate angels for being angelic, but it does hate people who are being Christians. It grudges them their new character. It is tormented by their peace. It is infuriated by their joy.”

In this chapter Jesus has been describing what it means to be a Christian. We have looked at that in these last weeks, an intimacy with himself, joy and peace in the heart, a sense of

⁶ John 7:7.

⁷ John 15:18.

⁸ John 15:19.

love, being loved by God and loving one another as a response to that. The world cannot cope with that. And so the world has hated the church because it hated Christ.

Not only that, it goes on. The world persecutes the Church as it persecuted Christ. It doesn't stop at hatred. Do you see this in verse 20?

“Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’”⁹

Well, when were they to remember that word? That word is spoken just a couple of chapters earlier in chapter 13:16 where Jesus washes his disciples' feet and gives them that great example of humility and service and selflessness. He washes their feet, you remember, and he says this.

If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master.¹⁰

There it was about service. Here he uses the same expression and he says it is also true about persecution. It is the way the master went. Should not the servant tread it still?

So he says in verse 20, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”¹¹

Now this needs to come on register on our clocks this morning. It needs to come before our mind and be there at the forefront of our mind.

Paul says, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”¹²

There is nothing that unites people in the world like opposition to God's Church.

Martin Luther once said, “Towards each other, apart from Christ the men of the world are as little friends as dogs and cats. In all that concerns Christ they are unanimous in their hatred.”

Well, I have seen that happen in churches. I remember going to a church where we had two leaders who were not, I think, really had... did not have a living relationship with the Lord Jesus. And they would often stand at the Lord's table with me, one on either side of them and they had not spoken to each other for 12 years. They were brothers-in-law. They had married sisters. And they had never talked to one another. Everybody in church knew about their hostility. Those men however discovered there was one thing that could bring them together and that set a reconciling ministry because those men

⁹ John 15:20.

¹⁰ John 13:14-16.

¹¹ John 15:20.

¹² 2 Timothy 3:12.

discovered that one thing they were united on is that they hated the Word of God as I preached it.

Well, you can have a uniting ministry even where you are not looking for it.

Anyway, what it means is that the world and the people in the world divide around Jesus. That is what Jesus is saying here. That is what he meant when he said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”¹³

Now why this violent reaction to Jesus?

Look at verse 21. He explains the source of the world’s hostility. It is down to its willful ignorance of God.

“But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.”¹⁴

You see, at the end of the day, the Christian’s experience in the world is not a sociological problem. It is not down simply to our political views or our sociological background or our social background. Ultimately it is a theological problem.

These words “on account of my name,”¹⁵ mean, literally, “because of me.”

I know that sometimes the Church is hated by the world because the Church isn’t like the Lord Jesus. Sometimes we have been too associated with the state and confused the barriers and boundaries that should be there. Sometimes we have been hypocritical. Sometimes we have been just plain wrong in the things we have done and disobedient to God. But here you notice he is talking here about when we are persecuted because of me on account of my name. He is talking here about when we are most like the Lord and the world reacts to it. That is the thing that is hard to explain.

And the reaction, we are told as the reason, is this.

“Because they do not know him who sent me.”¹⁶

If they had really known God—he is talking about these people in his own day, these Jewish authorities. If they had really know God, they would have recognized the revelation of God in Jesus.

And this was a culpable ignorance. Look at verse 22.

¹³ Matthew 5:10.

¹⁴ John 15:21.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

“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.”¹⁷

It wasn't that the coming of the Lord Jesus introduced sin into the world, but rather this, that the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world exposed what is beneath the surface of everybody's heart and everybody's life. Here is the issue. What will humanity do when the living God comes within reach of us, when he becomes vulnerable like a little baby thing. The authorities will amass themselves to destroy him or as a young man when he comes into their hands. What will they do with him? Here is the issue. Man, if given the choice, will murder his maker. That is what is happening in the cross of Jesus.

The humanity's sin is so exposed there that we see what is really beneath the surface of everyone's heart and life. No wonder Jesus, as he speaks to these people, these Jewish people and his Galilean contemporaries in particular, warns them of the greater judgment that is coming to them, greater than the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon, greater than the punishment of Sidon because they have rejected him.

What had they rejected? Verse 22. They have rejected his words.

“If I had not come and spoken to them...”¹⁸

Verse 24. They had rejected his works.

“If I had not done among them the works that no one else did...”¹⁹

His words and his works, his teaching and his miracles, these are the things that he had given to them. And in spite of these things they did not believe in him.

And, by the way, there are two levels to this. His words, they are the most important things. Those are the things they had rejected. Faith as a result of miracles is a very weak faith, but even that level of faith they did not have, even having seen the miracles they would not believe.

You think today if we were able to perform the miracles Jesus performed people would be more likely to believe in him if he couldn't get them to believe?

His very presence exposes what is beneath the surface of the world.

Now Jesus... the rejection of Jesus' words and works is our clearest... a rejection of the clearest light and the fullest revelation that there is.

¹⁷ John 15:22.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ John 15:24.

The reality was that in Jesus' words God's voice was heard and in Jesus and in Jesus' works God's actions were seen and in Jesus himself the invisible God had become visible so that to hate Jesus is to hate God.

Now that is what led to Israel, like a dead branch, being removed from the vine. There was no excuse for their ignorance of God and for their rejection of Christ. It was inexcusable. David, their greatest king who was a poet and a prophet had warned them over and over again in the book of Psalms that when the Messiah came the nation would hate him and reject him through no fault of his own.

Isaiah had said that this coming servant of God who was absolutely pure and righteous and good and true would be despised and rejected by the people. They had not listened to the Word. They had not believed it. And they were going to put their Messiah to death. And even as Jesus speaks these words, Judas Iscariot has assembled with the high priests his little army and they are coming up the hill now with their torches and their swords and they are intent with murder on their mind. The world's rejection of the Church because of the Church's connection to the Messiah.

Well, the third thing in the passage is the Church's response to the world. You know, this caricature and mockery of Christ has gone on to this day. It goes on in our theaters, doesn't it? Martin Scorsese portrayed Jesus in the last temptation of Christ as wracked with doubt and beset with lust. Andreas Soranos funded to portray Jesus on a cross sunk in a bottle of urine. The *daVinci Code* portrayed Jesus as a mere mortal who married and fathered children. The University of Seattle this year produced cartoons lampooning Jesus as a homosexual.

How should his followers respond? Well, on one level we are grieved and angered. But on another level we identify with Christ and we embrace the shame and we embrace the suffering and we rejoice in afflictions and we say with the apostle Paul, "Vengeance belongs to the Lord."

Let's love our enemies and let's win them for the gospel. For if Christ did his work by being insulted, so can we. And if Christ accomplished our redemption by being rejected, so can we. And if Christ drew men and women to the Lord God and drew men and women to himself by being despised by people, so can we, so can we.

What is the Church's response to the world for its hatred and persecution? It isn't to be resentment, retaliation or revenge. Jesus did none of those things. When he was reviled he did not revile in return. When he suffered he did not threaten.

Nor are we to withdraw from the world and hold a kind of pity party, you know, where we just kind of group together and we exclude the world outside and we pretend it is not there. That is not the way either. No, the church's response to the world is not retaliation nor withdrawal. It is mission.

Do you notice one word in verses 26, 27 that is repeated? It is the word “witness.” That is what describes the Church’s responsibility to the world. Witness. This is the provision God makes.

Now I want you to notice two things about this witness. First of all it is the witness of the Spirit. Do you see that? The Spirit’s witness.

“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.”²⁰

It is the Holy Spirit, in other words, who is the chief witness to Christ before a hostile world.

Back in chapter 14 verse 16 Jesus said that the Father would give the Spirit in response to the Savior’s prayer. In chapter 14 verse 26 the Father would send the Spirit in Christ’s name. And now here is Jesus saying that he will send the Spirit to them from the Father.

So as the creed says, “The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son.”

The Holy Spirit is intimately connected with both the Father and the Son and his present ministry in the world is to represent the Son or even replace the Son in the world.

You notice the personal reference there. It is he who will testify of their witness.

What does the Holy Spirit delight to do? He delights to have a spotlight ministry and to turn the spotlight on to the Lord Jesus.

You know the Holy Spirit is present when Jesus is exalted. You know the Holy Spirit is active among a church when that church loves to sing the praises of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is most evident when Christ is most evident and most lifted up and exalted amongst us. That is his ministry. He bears witness.

And how does he bear witness to Christ? Look at verse 26 again. He carries out this witness as the Spirit of truth.

Now earlier Jesus had said, “I am the truth.” Later on he is going to say to the Father, “Your Word is truth.” The Word of truth we have in the Bible in the New Testament is the word about Jesus and the Holy Spirit bears witness to the world by compelling men and women to listen to the truth about Jesus, by pointing men and women to him, by exposing men and women’s need for him.

He is the Spirit of truth. And as we look at Church history with its record of our persistent failures to be what we should be, it is one of the wonders of God’s grace that Jesus by his Spirit has been building his Church despite bannings and burnings and

²⁰ John 15:26.

persecution and errors and evils within her corporate life. The Holy Spirit has been bearing witness to Christ.

But there is another witness here. Do you see it? There is the witness of the Spirit, but there is also the witness of the Church. Look at verse 27.

“And you also will bear witness.”²¹

Now I need to be clear about this with you. This witness of the Church is primarily, do you notice, the people who are in the upper room with Jesus here. Over and over again he has repeated this. When you read chapters 13 to 16 and you see the word “you” it primarily refers to the apostles who were there with Jesus in the upper room.

“I have more things to say to you,” he says, “which you can’t take right now, but when the Spirit comes, he will lead you into all truth. He will remind you of things that I have said. He will tell you things that I would like to have told you. He will also tell you things to come.”

There is a promise in the upper room of the New Testament, of the anointing of the Spirit on these first eye witnesses which was to give us our New Testament. And that is primary. That is first and foremost. That is why in the book of Acts when they are looking for someone to replace Judas Iscariot what do they look for? They look for someone who has been with us from the beginning. You were with me from the beginning.

And that immediately sets the apostles apart. It means the Church is an apostolic Church. That is why from the earliest days the Christians gathered together, Acts two, and they gathered together to devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching.

So it applies primarily to the apostles. Theirs is the primary witness. It comes to us through the New Testament. Ours is a secondary witness in that we get what we have to say out of their witness. Their witness gets into the Bible. Our witness comes out of the Bible.

Either way the Church is still called to apostolic witness.

Now here is the deal. We witnesses heeded by speaking the truth to a world that rejects the truth, but prefers the lie. We witnesses heeded by enduring patiently what the world throws at us without resorting to violence, taking their blows without hitting back, putting up with their blasphemies without resorting to threats. This is what sets Christianity apart from other religions and from the secular power brokers for whom might is right. This is why over the hundreds of years of the development of the English language the word for witness became the word for someone who dies, who lays down their life for their faith, the word martyr.

²¹ John 15:27.

Now you may sit here this morning and think, “Well, this is a million miles away from where we are at suffering for Jesus.”

Some people will hear this sermon and other parts of the world are already suffering for Jesus. And certainly in Europe and in our country legislation that is going through is setting us all up that somewhere down the road, 30 years, perhaps, away, people will suffer for Jesus. For those who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. It has been the history of the Church.

The words of godly Samuel Rutherford in his letter to William Fullerton at a time when things were going badly for the cause of Christ in Scotland, he talked about the wind being blowing in Christ’s face in Scotland in these days. And he wrote this from his prison cell to this young man.

“I earnestly entreat you to give honor and authority to Christ and for Christ. And be not dismayed for flesh and blood while you are for the Lord, for his truth and cause. And howbeit we see truth put to the worse for a time. Yet Christ will be a friend to truth and will act for those who dare hazard all that they have for him and for his glory. Sir, our fair day is coming and the court will change and wicked men will weep after noon and sorer than the sons of God who weep in the morning. Let us believe and hope for God’s salvation.”

I remind you of the context again. People who are hated and persecuted are hated and persecuted because of their connection to Jesus. And the hallmarks of these people are that they are in intimate relationship with the Lord, that they are demonstrating by the fruitfulness of their lives that they are Christ like. They have his joy and his peace. They love one another. And they have his Word, his Word of promise and his Word of truth and God’s Word, for all their craft and force, one moment will not linger, but spite of hell shall have its course, ‘tis written with his finger. And should they take our life, goods, honor, children, wife, yet is their profit small. These things shall vanish all. The city of God remaineth.

Let us pray together.

Do you know the solemn question that comes to me as we bow before the Lord just now? It is this. And if tomorrow it were made illegal in your country and mine to be a Christian, would the authorities find enough evidence to convict us for the way we live, the values we hold, our behavior towards one another, the way we love God’s people, the way we hold out for his truth.

Father, we humbly bow before you this morning and it is a very hard work for us to hear, but you have called us to follow the master and not knowing what it means and often confessing to you that the minor inconveniences of church life can often irritate us. We think those are things that are persecuting us. Someone looks at us the wrong way and we confess that often we have felt hurt. And those things are ephemeral, passing. They are nothing. We ask that you would give us that clear headed, clear sighted vision of the

sovereignty of King Jesus that he might be first in our hearts, first in our affections and that we would give to him obedience and allegiance all of our lives to your greater glory. Amen.