

Ticket for Two: Witness (Jn 15:26-27)

Chris Altrock - April 17, 2016

18 “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 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. 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. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. 21 But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. 22 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. 23 Whoever hates me hates my Father also. 24 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. 25 But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause.’ (Jn. 15:18-25 ESV)

What do you do when the world “hates” you? That is, what do you do when the culture around you disagrees with or is hostile toward your faith? That’s what Jesus takes up in this text. Remember, this is part of Jesus’ sermon on the Holy Spirit--the largest teaching on the Holy Spirit in the Bible. It’s found in John 14-16. And here Jesus takes up a difficult topic--what do you do when the culture could care less about what you care most about? What do you do when the world hates you?

60% of Americans feel like this is a pretty critical issue. A recent study finds that 60% of Americans feel that religious liberty is on the decline in America.¹



A lot of Americans say they are feeling tension between Christ and culture. Feeling like culture is more intolerant of Christ. Some might even use the word hate--feeling that culture hates Christ. At the very least they’d say they feel the world doesn’t agree with their faith, their values, their morals. More and more Americans feel culture has become intolerant toward Christians.

What do you do when the world hates you?

We saw religious intolerance of a far greater degree in China. Part of our China Missions Team recently visited the city of Hangzhou, China. It’s a city of about 8 million people. And, on the one hand, there was surprising tolerance of the Christian faith. For example, one afternoon we ate lunch at a Christian coffee shop and cafe.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/march/more-americans-agree-christians-face-intolerance-complain.html>

Everything from the sign on their building, to the way they finished their coffee, to the sign along the street explicitly spoke of God's love. This coffee shop didn't have to hide these references to God's love. Thus there was a certain tolerance for the Christian faith in the city of Hangzhou.

But we also found a grave intolerance toward the Christian faith.

An American missionary who spent 8 years in Hangzhou ate lunch with us at that Christian coffee shop. He told us of a colleague who held a Bible study for students. That Bible study was shut down by government agents because the colleague was too public about the study and not discreet enough about it.

A Chinese Christian we met told us of going to college in Hangzhou and of she and her friends turning off their cell phones when attending Bible studies. They did this because they honestly feared the government might use the phones to listen in on their spiritual conversations.

The one in Hangzhou is the largest Protestant church in China. Ten thousand people worship there each Sunday. It is the first megachurch in China.² It is called the Chongyi Church. We were given a tour of the massive building.

Some might be tempted to think that, because Chongyi Church is a state-sponsored church it's somehow less Christian. But I can testify that we spent two and a half days with two members of that church and they are two of the most devoted Christians we've ever known.

And even though they are in a government approved church, they face religious intolerance. We were told about the cameras in the church building. The government keeps tabs on what is said and done in that church building by means of those cameras.

In addition, the preacher of that church had recently been put in jail. Even though the church is legally sanctioned by the government, the preacher had been imprisoned. Why? The church had several crosses on the exterior of their building. One of the crosses had been deemed too large by the government. The government demanded it be removed. When the preacher refused, he was put in jail.

This was actually the climax of a longer tension between him and the government. For years the government has been forcing churches to remove crosses. Overall, more than 1,500 Protestant and Catholic churches have lost their crosses since 2013. The preacher of this large church eventually spoke out against this government campaign. Thus, the government came after him and finally jailed him.

What do you do when the world hates you?

The first thing Jesus wants us to know is not what do we do but what the Holy Spirit does. This is often a hallmark of the Bible. Most religion is first about what we do. But the Bible, the Gospel, is almost always first about what God does:

26 "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. 27 And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-27 ESV)

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/february/pastor-china-largest-church-jailed-crosses-gu-yuese-chongyi.html>

The word translated “Helper” is the Greek word *parakletos*. That’s the word we’ve been exploring in this series. John 14-16 is Jesus’ sermon on the Holy Spirit. And within that sermon, Jesus uses this rare word to talk about the Holy Spirit: *parakletos*. Different translations translate that word differently: Helper, Advocate, Comforter, etc. In this series, we’re looking at each case where Jesus uses that word and we’re trying to learn what Jesus teaches about the Holy Spirit through its uses.

In the ancient world that word could refer to someone who appeared in a court to advocate on behalf of someone who had been accused. A *parakletos* would appear in court to speak up for that person. To say, “You know, I think you’re wrong about that person. *I think that person is outstanding. I think you’ve made a mistake about him/her. I want you to change your mind and heart about that person.*”

A few weeks ago our daughter Jordan, a freshman at college, found herself in this situation. A friend was giving her the silent treatment because someone had told him Jordan had said something unkind about him. In truth, she had not said what she was accused of saying. And friends of Jordan were now stepping in and acting as a *parakletos*. Telling him, “You’ve got the wrong idea. You’ve made a mistake. I think Jordan is outstanding. She would never say that. I want you to change your mind and heart.” And, in the end, he did.

And Jesus is saying that’s the role of the Holy Spirit. When the world starts to dislike people of faith for their faith, the Holy Spirit starts to step in as the *parakletos*. The Holy Spirit starts to work changing hearts and minds. That’s what Jesus means when he says the Holy Spirit “will bear witness” about him. *When it seems the culture dislikes Christ (and thus dislikes us), the first thing Jesus want us to know is that the Holy Spirit is working to reverse this dislike of Christ.*

We aren’t told how that works. We aren’t told what that looks like. We’re just given this promise.

- No matter how hostile your work environment is, you can be certain every morning you show up for work that the Holy Spirit has also shown up for work and that he is busy witnessing to men and women there about Jesus.
- No matter how godless you feel your school environment is, you can be certain that even before you rolled in for your 7:30 AM class, the Holy Spirit was already there. And he will be there long after you leave working to win hard hearts and minds over for Jesus.
- No matter how callous you feel the hearts of your family members are as you sit down for dinner one more night, you can be sure the Holy Spirit has also pulled up a chair at that dinner table and he’s at work witnessing to each person at that table about Jesus.
- And you can be sure that even when you fly in a jet halfway around the world and you step off onto a continent led by a government whose official policy is less than friendly toward your faith, the Holy Spirit is there, in every apartment, every government office, every bus and restaurant, witnessing about Jesus.

And this reality, Jesus says, enables us, to then do something ourselves:

26 “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. 27 And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-27 ESV)

Because we trust that the Spirit is at work even in a hostile setting, because we trust that the Spirit is witnessing to people about Jesus, this gives us the courage to also witness.

And this stands in contrast to what we are probably more tempted to do. When we find ourselves in a world that hates us, or at least seems to be intolerant of us, our first temptation may be to war against that world. But Jesus says our calling is simply to witness to the world and not to war against the world. *The work of the Spirit as witness enables us to witness to the world rather than war against the world.* What Jesus wants us to see is that our primary job in a hostile context is not to wage war. Our primary job is not to engage in battle against the people around us. Our primary job is not to draw lines in the sand or to build up defenses. Our primary job is simply to do what the Holy Spirit is doing - to keep trying to point people to Jesus. To help the world around us see that they've got it wrong when it comes to Jesus. To help people see that Jesus is pretty outstanding and that his way of life is pretty remarkable.

In the end, Jesus simply wants us to know that no matter how difficult things get between us and our larger culture, we've still got the same job: witness. Whether we are in the minority or the majority. Whether we have a seat at the table of power or no seat at all at any table. Whether our voice is loud and respected by all or our voice is quiet and heard by none. Our calling is still the same: witness. Put in a good word for Jesus. Share some good news about Jesus. Keep living out the way of Jesus. And all along trust that the Holy Spirit is at work right along with you.