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Of Persecution and Purpose

John 16:1-11

Intro: We are looking at the Lord's final instructions to His disciples before He is arrested. This section of John is referred to as the Upper Room Discourse. The particular area we are currently dealing with focuses on 2 very important themes for the church: the opposition of the world against the church and the ministry of the Holy Spirit to and through the church to bring salvation to the world. At the end of [ch15](#), we dealt with a lengthy passage that spoke about persecution and concluded with a brief statement of the work of the Holy Spirit. Today, in [ch16](#), we have a few short verses that speak about persecution which are then followed by a lengthy discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, this section is the longest discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel. This passage reveals the 2-fold ministry of the Holy Spirit: His ministry in the world and His ministry to the apostles.

Why does the Lord shuffle His instructions on the world's persecution of the church and the Spirit's ministry to the church? Part of the reason may be to help us understand that the most effective work of the Holy Spirit in the church is done in the context of persecution. Jesus did not send the Holy Spirit to be a guide and a helper for people who are walking an easy path and are perfectly able to manage the Christian life on their own. The Spirit was sent to assist those individual believers who are caught up in the thick of battle and are tested and tried beyond their strength. Jesus makes it quite clear that the path set before His followers is a hard and difficult path.

What Jesus is telling us in these verses is that there is a cost associated with being His disciple. Not in a spiritual sense for, from the spiritual perspective, there are no disadvantages. Spiritually, all we lose is our sin and in its place we are given the fullness of God's salvation. But, from the human point of view, especially in the eyes of the lost, there's a cost to discipleship for it means leaving anything that might deter us from following God's will for our lives.

That's really what we've been called to do. That's the first battle we enter into in this Christian life. It's not a fight against the world or even against

Satan; it's a battle against our flesh and its desire to have the preeminence in everything we think, do or say. This is how the disciples of Christ through out the ages have been able to stand in the face of horrendous persecution – they've learned to surrender the desires of the flesh to the will of the Father and the gospel of Jesus Christ and they have done this through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

How can we see this reality in our own lives? We start by looking at our daily routine. We know what we need to be doing and we know what we are doing. If those 2 don't match up then we need to start, one at a time, removing the things that are unnecessary and replace them with the things that are. It will take the power of the Holy Spirit to be successful at each step. This is His desire for every believer and His purpose. This is practical sanctification.

But why must it be so? How do we ever expect to be able to pray in the name of Jesus (under His authority, in His likeness) if we refuse to order our lives in the name of Jesus? The Spirit was sent to assist us in this great struggle but we must realize that this is just training for the real battle, boot camp for what is to come. How will we be able to stand faithfully in the face of the world's hatred and Satan's attack? We'll stand because we've already learned how to rely on the Spirit's power to assist us in denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following in Jesus' footsteps.

1-4- Jesus is clearly stating the cost associated with being His disciple but this isn't the first time He has mentioned this. If you recall, back when He delivered the Sermon on the Mount, at the very beginning of the sermon He said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake..." (**Mt 5:10-12**). In these verses, Jesus is saying that persecution should be the normal expectation of the one who follows Him. This is what the disciples learned from Him and they remembered it vividly. Peter refers to the beatitude of persecution twice in his first epistle (**3:14; 4:14**). He even points to persecution as being the norm for believers (**I Peter 4:12-13**). Paul lists some of the persecution he endured in his life in **II Cor 11:22-33** and writes to Timothy that, "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (**II Tim 3:12**). Paul also tells believers in the Philippian church that, "to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but to suffer for His sake" (**Phil 1:29**).

Thus, Jesus takes up the topic of persecution again in our text to warn the disciples of it so they won't be offended or stumbled when it happens. Forewarned is forearmed. There's no reason for the believer to be tripped up when the world cranks up the heat of persecution if for no other reason than the fact that Jesus told us it would happen. But here, Jesus isn't just repeating what He said before; in this passage there is a new emphasis on the specifics of the coming persecutions. They will consist mainly of excommunications and murders with the added caveat that these persecutions will be inflicted on the disciples, not by the secular world but by religious people.

In modern Christianity, excommunication from the church is hardly a threat and being denied membership or being put out of a church for any reason is not a serious matter. There are plenty of churches out there; if one doesn't want you, there are always a whole slew of others that will. Even if none will take you in, it's still possible to function quite well in American society without church membership of any kind.

This wasn't the case for the 1st Century disciples facing excommunication from the Jewish synagogue. This meant a complete and permanent separation from the spiritual life of Israel. For the excommunicated disciple there was no worship, no sacrifice, not even the reading of Scripture, for they were only found and heard in places of worship. It also had a devastating effect on the social life and economic well being of the disciple. All former friends would shun him, treating him as worse than a pagan. His family would ostracize him and consider him dead to them. If he had a job, he'd lose it. If he owned his own business, he'd lose his customers. He'd even be refused the right of honorable burial. So, excommunication from the synagogue was a very real threat with a lot of fearsome consequences.

The second persecution Jesus mentions is being murdered for His sake. Of course, this is not the experience of every follower of Christ but it has been far more common than most people realize. In the early years, some of the apostles and many normal believers were killed by the Jewish authorities or their instigation. Later, they were killed by the Romans. Eventually, killing Christians became the policy of the Empire. Persecutions marked the Middle Ages, reaching their peak during the Reformation period. In modern times, there've been many deaths in pagan areas, in tribal settings, and even in the more advanced countries of the modern East and West. The interesting part of this is that the killing of Christians is done almost entirely

by religious people for religious reasons.

How can believer rejoice in the face of such severe persecutions as are mentioned here? 1) Because the persecution shows us and others that we are identified with Christ. Being hated by a world that doesn't know either the Father or the Son is a clear mark of being identified with both of them (3). 2) Also, since God is sovereign, we know that these persecutions are not accidental; they actually fulfill God's purposes in our lives. This means that through the coming persecution, the disciple's faith will be strengthened. 3) Persecution leads to growth in practical holiness. It strips away the unnecessary dross in our lives and draws us closer to Jesus. Peter knew this, had heard Jesus teach it and experienced it himself (1 Peter 1:6-8). Persecution: the crucible God uses to purify the most precious parts of the believer's life. 4) It allows us to show the presence of God in our lives. It's not just *that* we suffer but *how* we suffer that testifies to the world of reality of the saving and sustaining power of God in our lives.

5-6- For 3 years, Jesus had been with the disciples and protected them from attacks. Now He was about to leave them. He had told them this earlier in the evening and Peter had asked Him where He was going (13:36) but Peter was more concerned with the Lord's departure than he was His destination. Peter just wanted to know what Jesus' leaving meant for himself. His question was focused on the immediate, not the ultimate.

Jesus now finds it necessary to explain why it was important for them that He return to His Father. The main reason was so that the Holy Spirit could come and empower the church for spiritual life and effective witness. As an added benefit, the ascended Savior would also be able to intercede for His people at the throne of grace. For all their many faults, the disciples dearly loved their Master and it was difficult for them to grasp these new and important truths.

7- One of the Bible's great teachings is that believers can always count their losses among their greatest gains. This is true in the greatest sense, for Jesus said, "Whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35). This truth also applies to lesser things: disappointments, sickness, financial setbacks and persecution, as we have seen. The problem is: we don't always believe this and so we sorrow at what seems to be a great loss.

Jesus is impressing this same truth upon the disciples here. God was sending the Holy Spirit to them through the departure of Jesus, yet they were sorrowful. He had prepared a great gift for them, but they could only think of their loss. They were despondent. Jesus, knowing their sorrow, began to teach them once more about the Holy Spirit.

It's important to notice that the spirit comes to the church and not to the world. This means He works in and through the church to bring the truth of the Gospel to the world. The Holy Spirit doesn't minister in a vacuum. Just as Jesus needed a human body to do His work here on earth, so the Holy Spirit needs a body to accomplish His ministries and that body is the church, the Body of Christ. Our bodies are His tools and His temples and He wants to use us to glorify Christ and witness to a lost world.

Oftentimes people will pray for the Lord to send His Spirit to speak to the lost, to go from heart to heart convicting and convincing. I'm sure such prayers are sincere and well meaning but are they biblical? The Holy Spirit doesn't float around in some ghostly way up and down the streets of our community, seeking to win the lost. He works through the people in whom He dwells. Jesus stated as much in [15:26-27](#) when He told the disciples that the Spirit... will testify of Me...and you also will bear witness” Both witnesses are important, although the Spirit's is more so. Jesus then describes the unique relationship the Holy Spirit has with the world through the body of Christ.

8-11- The key word here is convict (reprove). It's a legal word that means “to bring to light, to expose, to refute, to convict and convince.” It could be translated: to pronounce a verdict. The world may think it is judging Christians but its Christians who are passing judgment on the world as they bear witness of Jesus Christ. Christians are the witnesses, the Holy Spirit is the prosecuting attorney and the unsaved are the guilty prisoners. However, the purpose of this indictment is not to condemn but to bring salvation! The Holy Spirit brings this guilt home to the human heart so that the lost individual is disturbed by their sin and seeks to be freed from the guilt of it.

The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin - particularly unbelief. The Law of God and the conscience of man will convict the sinner of his many various sins but it's the work of the Holy Spirit, through the witness of the believer, to expose the unbelief of the lost world. After all, it's unbelief that condemns

the lost sinner (3:18-21) not the committing of individual sins. A person could clean up their life, quit all their bad habits and still be lost and go to hell.

We saw this on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit had visibly come upon the waiting disciples, resulting in them going into the streets of Jerusalem where Peter preached a sermon. He preached Jesus, saying, “let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” We’re then told that “when the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:36-37). When Peter answered their question, 3000 people believed and were saved.

This was a remarkable response, but it was not due to Peter’s brilliant analysis of the gospel or to his eloquence. If he had preached this sermon the day before, nothing would have happened. No one would have believed. He and the others would have been laughed at. What made 3000 believe? The Holy Spirit had come and had begun to do His work of conviction of sin in the world. This is why they were cut to the heart and asked, What shall we do?

The Spirit also convicts the world of righteousness (not unrighteousness). Whose? Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God. The Spirit reveals Jesus in the pages of His Word and in the lives of His followers. The world can’t receive or see the Holy Spirit but they can see what He does as they watch the lives of dedicated believers. This suggests something interesting. In normal human affairs, conviction of wrongdoing usually leads to a judgment (sentencing). But God inserts a different process here – the provision of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Those who believe on Jesus receive His righteousness and are saved from the judgment of sin. So, not only does the Holy Spirit convict the world of sin, which none of us can do, He also directs them to Jesus where only true righteousness can be found.

Finally, The Spirit convicts the world of judgment. He will convince the world that there is such a thing as judgment, being evidenced by the judgment of Satan and the breaking of his power at the cross. No one wants to believe in judgment. We like to think we can do what we want with impunity and no day of reckoning will come. Often we’re encouraged to think this since God doesn’t seem to judge immediately and evil often seems to go unpunished. This is false thinking. It’s true: God doesn’t always judge sinners

immediately and evil often seems to go unpunished. God is longsuffering in His judgments. Still, they come eventually and inevitably, and God's judgment of Satan is proof of this. Peter makes this point in his 2nd epistle (2 Peter 2:9).

If a person refuses to come to Jesus, who has died for him so that his sin might be punished in Christ and God's own righteousness might be applied to his account, then he will experience exactly such judgment. How much better it is to come to Jesus now in this the day of grace than to face God's wrath on your own.

The last point we need to consider is that, while it is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit to convince and convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment; He nevertheless does all of this through us – the church. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to the disciples, believers, followers of Jesus and it is as He works in and through them that He convicts the world.

Every conversion recorded in the Book of Acts was through the agency of someone who was already saved. Jesus bore witness to the 12. They bore their witness of Him on Pentecost and days following. Even Paul was converted through others. For, before his experience on the road to Damascus, he witnessed the stoning of Stephen and had heard his great sermon (Acts 7). Even after his experience with Jesus, while he was in Damascus, Ananias was sent to him as the human instrument by which the Holy Spirit then did his work. Cornelius too. Sure, he was visited by an angel but the angel didn't bring him the gospel. He told Cornelius to send someone down to Joppa to find Peter and bring him back saying, he "will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved (Acts 11:13-14).

This is God's way: by the power of His Spirit working through human channels, like us. Are you His instrument? You can be. Draw near to Him; ask Him to cleanse you. Allow Him to make of you an unobstructed channel for His grace. Witnessing is a great privilege and a serious responsibility. We must wholly rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us to the right people, give us the right words and enable us to faithfully glorify Jesus Christ. ☺