

STRONG FOUNDATIONS

LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO CHANGE OUR WORLD

You Will Be Hated

Introduction

“You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.” (Matthew 10:22)

Hated by everyone? That sounds a bit extreme. It is easy to put this into the ‘hard texts’ box, promise to come back to it later, and then try to ignore it.

But it sounds like Jesus thinks this is likely to happen, and there are no exceptions or conditions: this is spoken to the Twelve, His closest disciples, but the instructions and warnings in this passage are clearly addressed to His subsequent followers, telling them what to do and warning them about the consequences.

The consequences are so difficult that there is a question mark over whether they will stand firm to the end. So why will the followers of Jesus be hated?

Dark and Light

The teaching I hear on this topic is all about the need for Jesus followers to be light in a world of darkness, to speak truth in a world of lies. The darkness always hates the light, and they hate us, they love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil.

I’m sure there is some truth in this. Jesus certainly produced some pretty strong reactions, and we can expect the same if we follow Him too closely ... or, maybe that should be, if we follow Him closely enough.

And it makes sense: if you are ashamed of your deeds and want to keep them hidden in darkness, you will hate the light which threatens to reveal what you have done and what you are truly like. Jesus touches on this picture a little later.

*For there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, and nothing hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the housetops.
(Matthew 10:26-27)*

But it seems to me that the ‘darkness hating light’ picture doesn’t capture all that the Bible teaches us about the reaction people had to Jesus. And, on its own, it is not entirely helpful: if we in the Church are the light, and everyone outside the Church are the darkness, and they hate us for what we are, this easily leads to isolation and elitism on the part of the Church. We are special, chosen and holy; they don’t like us, and we don’t want to be contaminated by contact with them. It is easy to see where this kind of teaching leads.

Who is Lord?

The context is that Jesus has just told the Twelve to go out and preach His message: “The kingdom of Heaven is near.” Whenever we preach this message, there is a conflict of kingdoms, a conflict of ultimate authority.

When someone demands obedience, any disobedience must be punished; when someone demands unquestioning loyalty, any limit or condition to the loyalty – even if it is not acted upon – is itself disloyalty. When the people around you are chanting, “We have no king but Caesar!” you either chant with them or stand out like a sore thumb.

The world says, “Caesar is lord!” and Christians say, “Jesus is Lord!” On this matter there is no room for compromise, no middle path. Either, in the end, we choose to obey Caesar and keep him happy – whoever Caesar might happen to be, where we are right now – or we choose to put Jesus first and accept that the authorities will, sooner or later, hate us for it.

Us and Them

But it’s not just a question of conflict with the authorities. Jesus has already covered that aspect: we will be handed over to councils and brought before governors and kings. Jesus warns about conflict with authorities and conflict within families before warning that we will be hated by everyone.

The people at the top demand our obedience, but our friends and families require our loyalty – both to them as people, and to the group, family or tribe we belong to.

Especially when life is tough, we rely on the people around us. You watch my back, and I’ll watch yours. Can we trust you to stand with us, when it counts? Everything within us screams that we want to be good friends, reliable members of the group. We need to fit in, we need to belong.

People don’t generally set out to become criminals. It happens partly because you need to make money, but partly – often largely – because you need to fit in. The specifics vary enormously, but the process is pretty consistent: you bend the rules a little, turn a blind eye to something that may not be significant anyway, and slowly you are sucked in and it just becomes normal life.

But for many of us, the challenges are less straightforward. When we belong to a group, there is often another group we don’t belong to, the people working against us – another team, another party, a competitor, the managers, the unions, the unemployed or the foreigners. In the Christian world, it might be other denominations and traditions, Calvinists, Catholics, Evangelicals, Liberals, Fundamentalists ... the list goes on.

The people who are against us and our group – Jesus calls us to love them, too. Even if they want to close our church because our singing disrupts their Sunday morning lie-in, or their theology is unsound, or they attack our deepest beliefs: when everyone around us is complaining about them or criticising them or poking fun at them, we show them love. This is rarely appreciated.

We show group loyalty when we can. We work hard and contribute. We are good to have around, or we should be. But we can never entirely belong, never entirely fit in – not if we belong to another Kingdom.

Standing out from the crowd is really hard, and people will hate us for it. But they will also love us for being true to our beliefs and faithful to our Lord. They loved Jesus, even though, when they worked out that ‘love your enemies’ included ‘be nice to the Romans’, they knew He had to go. A Messiah who doesn’t stand up for his people is no use to us.

Jesus spent his life reaching out to people who – apart from a small handful – were going to reject and kill Him. He spent His life showing them love, not because this would win them over, but because it was the right thing to do, it was what His Father did, it was the way things are done in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus had a family, a faith and a nation. He did what was expected of Him in each of those areas, right up to the point where He could not. You have to care for your family, you have to care for your nation, but every other loyalty, every other obligation, must take second place because the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

The Other Side of the Coin

It’s not all bad news. The more they hate you, the more the fellowship of believers is precious; the less security you have in the world, the more the security you have in Jesus becomes important and a real source of joy.

The Church has always thrived under persecution, because it helps us to remember what is truly important. The testimony of Christians through the centuries tells us that God’s presence with us is experienced more deeply when other things are taken away; we only know for sure He is all we need when He is all we have.

And hatred creates opportunities: if they love you and you love them, really, who cares? But if they hate you and you love them back, that’s powerful. It doesn’t make sense in human terms: the fact of your love is a powerful reminder that the world is not what they think, and a pointer to the reality and the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Unexpected Discoveries

It is important to remember that the persecution Jesus talks about is when we are persecuted for His sake. There is a great deal of genuine and serious persecution of Christians taking place around the world, and some that takes place in the Western democracies too. But some Christians are keen to claim persecution when they are only suffering for being insensitive, arrogant and obnoxious individuals. When we are rejected, it’s really important to understand why.

When we refuse to walk with our team because Jesus is heading in a different direction, it can be surprising to see who understands and is supportive. Some people who believe they believe in Jesus can be the harshest critics when you don’t do as you are told, and some people who want nothing to do with the church can recognise and encourage your integrity and courage. It’s a strange world.

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
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Last updated: 11:09 on 10 September 2019, revision: 0.9
Location: /home/paul/C/SF/main/SF_You_Will_Be_Hated.odt