

Message #52

Kurt Hedlund

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JOHN AND THE UPPER ROOM DISCOURSE (Part 3):

FRUITFULNESS IN THE MIDST OF A HOSTILE WORLD

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Kelvin Cochran (PROJECTOR ON--- KELVIN COCHRAN) grew up in poverty in Shreveport, Louisiana. He had a Christian family, and the values that he learned at home resulted in self-discipline and a commitment to hard work. He got a job in the fire department in Shreveport, and made his way up the ranks to become the first African-American fire chief in that city. In 2009 Kelvin was appointed by President Obama to be the US Fire Administrator. In 2010 he accepted the job as fire chief of Atlanta.

This married father of three was a Bible study leader in his Baptist church in Atlanta. He wrote and self-published a book directed toward Christian men seeking to fulfill their Biblical roles as husbands, fathers, and business and community leaders. Six pages of the 162 page book dealt with a Biblical perspective on sexuality.

A couple of Cochran's supervisors in the fire department gave the book out to several firemen. The book ended up in the hands of the mayor of Atlanta, who was offended by his Biblical views on sexuality. He suspended the fire chief, and then fired him. **"When you are a city employee,"** the mayor said, **"and [your] thoughts, beliefs and opinions are different from the city's, you have to check them at the door."**

Kelvin Cochran sued the city, claiming that Atlanta had violated his constitutional rights to freedom of speech and religion. The federal court gave a ruling with a mixed message. The judge determined that the fire chief was an "at will" employee and could be fired by the city for almost any reason. The judge also said that Cochran's free speech rights were not violated. But the judge also ruled that the city's ethics rules were unconstitutionally vague. So the suit was allowed to proceed. The city of Atlanta settled out of court, giving the fire chief \$1.2 million.

We still might wonder what the country is coming to when even in the Bible belt, a government official can be fired for writing about what the Bible teaches. Such is the increasingly hostile world in which we live. The passage before us today provides us with wisdom from Jesus about how we are to engage such a culture. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In our study of John's Gospel we are proceeding more quickly through Chapters 13-17 because we did a more detailed study of these chapters on Sunday mornings a few years ago. This section is called the Upper Room Discourse because Jesus is doing most of the talking in this conversation with His disciples, which occurs in an upper room in a house in Jerusalem on the occasion of the Passover. Jesus will be arrested later this night and crucified on the next day.

Last time, in #14, we saw Jesus address the fears that His disciples had in view of the rising tensions with the religious leaders and Jesus' own statements that He was going to be leaving them. The remedy for their fears and ours has to do with trust in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit. Now Jesus addresses the situation of the hostile world that His followers face.

I.

In vv. 1-17 of #15, which is found on p. 901 of the black Bibles, Jesus describes THE NEED FOR FRUITFULNESS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE NEED FOR FRUITFULNESS) Fruitfulness is to be the focus of the followers of Jesus. There seem to be two aspects to this fruitfulness.

A.

The first is ABIDING IN THE VINE. (I. THE NEED... A. ABIDING IN THE VINE) That is the subject of vv. 1-11. Jesus says, **"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."**

The nation of Israel was compared to a grapevine in several places in the Old Testament. The prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah made such comparisons. In Psalm 80 vv. 8 & 9 (PSALM 80:8-9), the Psalmist is speaking to God and writes, **“You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.”**

In the time of Jesus the temple building in Jerusalem had a giant grapevine on the front of it. (TEMPLE GRAPEVINE) It was made of pure gold. The grapevine was intended to represent the nation of Israel.

It was the spring of the year when Jesus described this grapevine in John 15. (PROJECTOR OFF) His fellow Jews understood that there were two kinds of branches that would appear on grapevines in this season. Some would be fruit bearing branches. Some would not be fruit bearing branches. The fruit bearing branches would be pruned. The non-fruit bearing branches would be tied up to trellises. (VINEYARD TRELLISING) They would be expected to bear fruit in the following year.

The problem in v. 2 is that most translations say that the non-fruit bearing branches are taken away. This is not the best translation and leads to confusion in properly understanding these verses. The original verb here literally means “lifts up.” Such is the translation that is generally used in #11 v. 41 when we are told that Jesus “lifted up his eyes.”

Here Jesus is saying that these branches are lifted up to the trellis. These newer branches need time to mature. So it is that newer Christians often need time to mature before they bear fruit. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The fruit bearing branches are pruned in the spring. The original verb literally means “cleanses.” Little growths, or suckers, on these branches are removed so that the energy goes to the fruit. Likewise, our Lord prunes us so that we will develop spiritual fruit. He gives us challenges and opportunities to develop our faith and our character.

Jesus is addressing the eleven remaining apostles in this setting. They have been cleaned up and prepared to bear fruit. God’s word through Jesus has been essential in this cleansing process. In a few weeks they will experience power from the Holy Spirit which will be essential in enabling them to bear

fruit. The basic lesson is that the followers of Jesus must abide, or remain, or stay close, to Jesus if they want to produce spiritual fruit.

According to v. 7, this abiding involves remembering the words of Jesus and coming to Him in prayer. According to v. 9, this is all to be done in the context of a love relationship. We are to remember that Jesus loves His followers. His followers, in turn, according to v. 10, should keep His commandments. Abiding in Jesus also involves following the rules and the principles that He has provided for us.

The result of this abiding, trusting relationship is fruit. That fruit is not specifically described here. But elsewhere in the New Testament Paul speaks of fruit in a symbolic sense. In Romans #1 v. 13 he speaks of new Christians as being fruit. In Galatians #5 he describes fruit as virtuous character. (PROJECTOR ON-- GALATIANS 5:22-23) He writes, **“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”**

Marjorie Crouch went to Ghana in West Africa as a missionary. She told her home church (PROJECTOR OFF), **“I’m on my way to Ghana in West Africa. I want to see if two Scripture verses are true--- ‘Without Me you can do nothing’ (v. 5 in our passage) and ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ (Philippians 4:13).”** She set out to work with a tribe of only 7000 people called the Vaglas. They had no written language. None of them could read or write. They were a male-oriented society which was not inclined to give much respect to women. They were picked on by other tribes. They had low self-esteem. They seemed to have no interest in learning to read or write, let alone to learn about the Bible.

After her first term in Africa, Marjorie Crouch returned to the States discouraged. She had developed rheumatoid arthritis, which caused her pain. When it was time to return to Ghana, she told the congregation of her home church, **“I now realize how helpless I am in myself. But I’m glad to go back to the Vaglas for this reason: If anything remarkable happens among them, everyone will know that God did it.”**

During her absence, others had been at work to develop relationships with the Vaglas. Interest in reading finally grew. Some of them started to learn to read. Translation of the New Testament was completed. Five hundred New Testaments were published for the 7000 members of the tribe. They sold out. More had to be printed. The mission was accomplished. Marjorie saw the truth of Jesus’ claim that “without Me you can do nothing,” and she was faithful to give God the glory for accomplishing what had once seemed impossible.

We can't leave this part of the passage without noting v. 6. The throwing away of dead branches is often connected by interpreters and students of the Bible to the branches which do not bear fruit in v. 2. My understanding is that Jesus is talking about a different group of people in v.6. It was in the fall of the year when dead and dried up branches were collected and burned. These branches had no connection with the vine. I suspect that Jesus was thinking of Judas Iscariot, who had just left the band of disciples. He was a traitor and an imposter. He never truly was abiding in the vine. The key to fruitfulness is abiding in Jesus. This involves trusting, believing His word, obedience and prayer.

B.

The second aspect of fruitfulness is LOVING ONE ANOTHER. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE NEED... B. LOVING ONE ANOTHER) Jesus says in vv. 12-17, **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another."**

Jesus said a similar thing in #13 vv. 34 & 35. He described the responsibility to love fellow Christians as a new commandment. Here there is a further explanation of what this quality of love looks like. It involves laying down one's life for His friends. This is what Jesus is about to do. He also describes His followers as friends.

A slave in the time of Jesus was expected to do what he was told. He was not necessarily told why he should do it. The nature of the slave-master relationship did not require that information. For one to confide in another person and to share his thinking and to explain his desires was to have a relationship of friendship. Here Jesus says that He has shared everything that He has heard from God the Father with His disciples. So Jesus calls them His friends. Obviously this was not a friendship of equals. Jesus Christ is God. He took the initiative to reach out to the disciples. He chose them to be His followers.

Jesus now calls upon His followers to demonstrate the kind of love that He is displaying toward them. Today we live in a culture that increasingly treats love superficially. We equate love with a craving for a food, with a sex act, with a desire for a particular experience. Genuine, committed love has the need of others as its focus. It leaves a significant mark, a legacy. It points toward heaven.

Christianity Today editor Mark Galli writes (*CT*, May 2012), “Instead of a life of experience, Christ calls us to a life of love. And a life of love for the most part means attending to the tedious details of others’ lives, and serving them in sacrificial ways that most days feels, well, not exciting at all. Rather than sweeping the kitchen, cleaning the toilet, listening to the talkative and boring neighbor, slopping eggs onto a plate at the homeless shelter, or crunching numbers for another eight hours at the office-- - surely life is meant for more than this. We are tempted to wonder, *Is that all there is to the ‘abundant’ Christian life? Shouldn’t my life be more adventurous if God is in me and all around me? How am I going to be all I’m supposed to be if I have to empty bedpans in Peoria? I would just die if I had to do that.*

“Yes, you would. Jesus called it dying to self. Love is precisely denying the self that wants to glory in experience. The cost of discipleship most of us are asked to pay is to live the life God has given us, serving in mundane ways the people he has put in our path.” Such is the nature of loving one another. Such is the nature of producing spiritual fruit.

II.

The second part of our passage describes THE NEED FOR CONFRONTING A HOSTILE WORLD. (II. THE NEED FOR CONFRONTING...) Look at v. 18 of #15 through v. 4 of #16. Jesus says, “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. 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.”

A.

Our primary responsibility is to bear fruit. But there are two things that I find in this part of the passage that we need to keep in perspective in dealing with a hostile world. The first is that we need to EXPECT HOSTILITY. (II. THE NEED... A. EXPECT HOSTILITY) In v. 18 Jesus says, **“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.”** In one sense, the world is characterized by hate. Christians are to be characterized by love.

We have seen the term “world” used in John’s Gospel a number of times. It sometimes refers to the created universe. Sometimes it refers to people in general, as in John 3:16, where Jesus declares that God so loved the world that He gave His unique Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. Often “world” is used in reference to the materialistic order that tempts people to do wrong. Here the term seems to refer to the realm of people who do not accept the claims of Jesus and the values which He promotes.

In the first century the world included the religious establishment and its adherents who did not accept the claim that Jesus was the Messiah. They did not accept His charges that their establishment was corrupt. In our day the world is the people who are offended by Biblical claims about moral absolutes. They are offended by the Christian perspective on marriage and sexuality. They are offended by Chief Cochran. (COCHRAN QUOTATION) He told a leadership conference, **“I came to realize that God has been preparing me for this for my entire life. Suffering is an inherent and necessary component of fulfilling God’s purpose for our lives.”** (7/23/2015, Black Church Leadership and family Conference, Ridgecrest, NC) Thus, we Christians need to expect hostility.

CNN commentator Clay Cane recently discovered that Vice-President Mike Pence’s wife works as a teacher at a Christian school. The commentator found the pledge that teachers are required to sign yearly at this school. It requires an adherence to Biblical standards of morality. On a January 20 broadcast, Cane declared, **“This language is disgusting.”** So much for 4000 years of Jewish and Christian morality.

In John Bunyan’s allegorical book, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian and Faithful are on their way to the Heavenly City and have to pass through the city of Vanity Fair. (PROJECTOR OFF) Vanity Fair is a worldly

place filled with amusements and pleasures and vices--- perhaps like Las Vegas. The people of the city notice immediately that Christian and Faithful are dressed differently. They talk differently. They use pleasant and spiritual language. They refuse to spend their money on the worldly pleasures of Vanity Fair. So the residents beat up the two pilgrims. They accuse the two of being enemies and disturbers of trade. In the end, they kill Faithful. The people of Vanity Fair hate Christian and Faithful because they are not of the world.

So it was to be with Christ's disciples. So it is sometimes to be with us. We Christians believe in right and wrong. We claim to be in possession of definite truths. We promote moral absolutes. But these values do not go over well in Vanity Fair, or Atlanta, Georgia, or, sometimes, in metropolitan Las Vegas.

The people and leaders of first century Jerusalem claimed to abide by certain moral and spiritual absolutes. On the surface, Jerusalem did not look like Vanity Fair or Las Vegas. It was more like Boulder City. But theirs was a false religious system that had strayed away from the genuine truths of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus exposed their hypocrisy, and they hated Him for it. The problem for these disciples was that they were identified now with Jesus. Indeed, He had chosen them, even as He chooses and calls us. In our adherence today to His moral and spiritual absolutes we are labeled as right wing extremists and fundamentalists and religious fanatics. Some genuinely regard us as a threat to society.

In 1 Peter #4 vv. 3 & 4 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 PETER 4:3), the Apostle Peter says, **“For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. (1 PETER 4:4) With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you...”** Simply not doing some of the things that we did when we were unbelievers draws a strong negative reaction from the world of unbelievers.

In the first part of v. 20 in our passage in John (PROJECTOR OFF), Jesus says, **“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.”**

Michael Horowitz, an executive at the Hudson Institute, and a Jew, argues that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world today. Michael Curry, the CEO of Open Doors USA, says that one in every 12 Christians in the world lives in a place where Christianity is illegal, forbidden, or punished. **“Every day,”** he says, **“six women are raped, sexually harassed or forced into marriage to a Muslim under threat of death due to their Christian faith.”** (Breakpoint,1/18/2018)

None of this should be excused, but none of this should take us by surprise either. The Apostle Paul wrote (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 TIMOTHY 3:12) in 2 Timothy #3, **“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”**

Persecution in our country seldom means that our lives are put on the line. But as with Kelvin Cochran, it can mean that our jobs are at stake. Government has tried to force wedding planners and cake makers to support and cater gay weddings. In some places pharmacists have been pressured to give out abortion drugs. Several states have demanded that licensed counselors not discourage children from pursuing same sex attractions. Some colleges have kicked Christian groups off of campus because the Christian groups have the nerve to insist that their leaders be Christians in faith and practice. None of this should take us by surprise. As followers of Jesus, we should expect hostility.

B.

We should also REALIZE THAT THE MAIN PROBLEM IS HATRED OF GOD. (II. THE NEED... A. EXPECT HOSTILITY B. REALIZE THAT THE MAIN PROBLEM...) Notice vv. 21-23: **“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.”**

In some countries, hostility and persecution come from competing gods and their followers. This is true in the Muslim world and in India, which is dominated by Hinduism. In that country the ruling party often encourages hatred of Christians and other minority religious groups. In China there is hatred directed toward any god, other than the state and its leaders. The national government does not want any other entity competing for the top loyalty of its citizens. The root problem is hatred of God.

In the United States, the situation is different. We have currency that proclaims, “In God We Trust.” We have considerable legal and constitutional protections. We have the First Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of religion. At the same time we have legitimate concern that these rights are being chipped away by invented rights like the right to abortion and the right to choose one’s sexual identity.

Underlying all of this is a mindset of the world that is hostile toward God. This mindset rejects the idea that there is one way to God. It rejects the absolute claims to moral and spiritual truth. It rejects the

restraint on personal autonomy which seeks to do what we want when we want it. This is especially the case in the area of sexual freedom. The world system rejects the notion that there should be a limit placed on sex before marriage, that same sex behavior is wrong, that divorce should be avoided and that gay marriage should be prohibited. The world does not want such restraints.

Benedict XVI was pope from 2005 to 2013. He wrote a book entitled *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*. In it he says that **“man’s contradiction of God runs all the way through history.”** We live in a time when **“God himself is constantly regarded as a limitation placed upon our freedom that must be set aside if man is ever to be completely himself.”** We Protestants often have disagreements with Catholic theology. But the pope has this analysis right.

The world says that we must find ourself apart from God. We must seek personal fulfillment and happiness. That is what life is all about. God puts limits on this pursuit. He is the bad guy. So people who identify with Him deserve to be attacked.

When we are attacked, we should be concerned that it is for the right reasons, not because we come across as obnoxious or proud or self-righteous. We must seek to be consistent in the pursuit of our values. This should be true of our marriages and our families and our sexual restraint. It should be evident in the way that we treat the opposite gender. It should be evident in our concern for the down and out--- for the poor and the homeless and the prisoners and the victims of sexual trafficking.

Jesus Christ was God in the flesh. His greatest opposition came from the cultural and religious elites. Such it often is today. As Jesus did, we are to speak truth. But we are also to display love. We can expect hostility. But our focus should be upon bearing fruit. This requires that we stay close to our vine, that we maintain our dependence upon Jesus. For our Savior tells us, **“Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”**