

Series: The Upper Room Discourse

John 15:18-16:4

Understanding hatred

by Scott Grant

'A pile of soot'

Terry Mullholand, a pitcher for the San Francisco Giants, has been having a rough year, winning only two games and losing 10. A columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle wrote that the team's pitching staff was "a pile of soot." Later, a man handed Mullholand a baseball and asked for his autograph. After the pitcher signed it, the man told him that the columnist was right. "You are a pile of soot," he said. "You're a sucker for signing this ball."

The pitcher was so hurt that he contemplated retirement. That day Mullholand pitched without inspiration. "I went out to pitch and I just didn't care about anything," he said. "Maybe I'm weak mentally. Maybe I don't have what it takes to pitch in the big leagues. Normally, I go out and want to win for my teammates and the people who come to the game. I can honestly say I had none of that drive today."

Give him credit for honesty. He was deeply hurt by the incident, and he said so. He was devastated by someone's hatred of him. Hatred is inescapable. Sooner or later, despite all our precautions, someone, somewhere will hate us. And if we're followers of Jesus, it will happen sooner rather than later.

In John 15:18-16:4, Jesus helps us understand this hatred. The world hates followers of Jesus Christ. The word "world" or a pronoun for it occurs 27 times in this passage. The verb "hate" appears seven times. The emphasis in the preceding section (John 15:1-17) is the love believers should have for one another. This is contrasted, then, with the hatred that believers will incur from the world.

Objectifying the world's hatred

John 15:18-21:

(18) "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. (19) If you were of the world, the world would love 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 slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. (21) But all these things they will do to you for my name's sake, because they do not know the one who sent me."

The world can simply be defined as constituting those who don't believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus tells his disciples that they should "know" that the world hated him first. This is something important for us to know. Hatred seems to be a given. Our response to it is not. Our response to hatred is predicated on what we "know" about it. What Jesus wants us to know is that before anyone ever hated us, he or she hated Jesus. He gives us a way of objectifying hatred toward us. He lets us know that the world's hatred toward us is, in reality, hatred toward him.

Jesus then lays before them a condition that is contrary to fact. If they were of the world (and they are not), the world would be loving them. We often expend much effort trying to get the world to love us, or at least not to hate us. The effort is not only wasted, it's misguided. It's wasted because the world will never really love us. In order for it to love us, we have to act like people we are not. We'd have to be like the world's "own." If the world loves in response to an act, it's not loving what's really there. It's misguided because

in order to be like the world, we have to adopt its ways, which are destructive.

Jesus says that "I chose you." The construction emphasizes the pronoun "I." Jesus, then, is taking responsibility for the world's hatred toward us. When the world hates us, it's not our fault, so to speak. Jesus chose us.

He chose us "out of the world," which raises the world's ire. When we were on the world's side, playing for its cause, all was well with the world. All is often well with the world when we live as if we were still on the world's side. But when Jesus chose us, we changed sides. We're playing for a different cause. Our cause is a threat to their cause. When Christ calls us to himself and we become his followers, we become turncoats in the world's eyes.

And if the cause of Christ is the right one - yea, the only right one! - what does that say about the world's cause? If we have the gold, they're guarding the wrong vault. The world hates such exclusive claims and those who make them. Cries of "narrow-mindedness" and "intolerance" are heard throughout the land. But the claim of exclusivity originated with Christ, not us. The world's complaint is with Jesus, not us. We simply believe what he says.

Earlier, in John 13:16, Jesus said that "a slave is not greater than his master." He did so then to show them that they should serve just as he did. Here he applies that same saying to persecution. Because they are followers of him, and because he experienced persecution, they will experience it as well. Clearly, this is something we should expect. If they persecuted Jesus, and they did, they "will" persecute us.

On the other hand, if they kept the word of Jesus, they will keep the word of the disciples as well. The "word" would be the content of the gospel, which some, in addition to the disciples, believed. Some may believe the gospel through the testimony of our lives, or some who are already believers may be positively impacted by us. This gives us a way of objectifying so-called "success" as well. As we shouldn't take hatred personally, neither should we take success personally. We needn't own either one. It keeps us from having our self-worth fed by the effect that we have. Whatever we receive, whether stones or flowers, it's attributable to Jesus, not us.

The emphasis in verses 18 through 21 is not the success we achieve but the hatred we receive. Jesus returns to this in verse 21. He tells the disciples that people of the world will do "these things" - meaning, acts of persecution - to them "for my name's sake." As an ambassador represents the "name" of his or her country, we represent the "name" of Christ. If they hate the country, they'll hate the ambassador. It's as if Christ's name were stamped on us. The world sees the name and gets angry.

As Jesus says, the world is also angry because it doesn't know the Father. If it had a relationship with the Father, it would know that Jesus was sent by the Father, and it would hate neither Jesus nor his disciples. But apart from a relationship with the Father, the world hates the Father as well, as Jesus will make clear in verses 23 and 24. The Father, even beyond Jesus, is the target of the world's hatred.

Lest we adopt an "us vs. them" mentality, a word of explanation is appropriate here. All hatred is rooted in hatred toward God. If God is sovereign, as he says he is, he is able to control every circumstance. He is responsible for every person that might generate our hatred. He created all people, and he is sovereign over every circumstance in every person's life. Therefore, if we respond in hatred to a person, we are responding in hatred toward God, who could have chosen not to create that person or to allow inciting circumstances to proceed. All hatred, even hatred perpetrated by believers in Christ, is rooted in hatred toward God. So we need not get angry with the world for its hatred, for we also hate. And if we're targets of hatred even within the family of God, we can still objectify that hatred as hatred toward God, not us.

Although the expression of the hatred perpetrated by both unbelievers and believers is the same, the identity of each is different. The hatred perpetrated by an unbeliever originates in a different identity - one defined by the flesh. The source of a believer's hatred is also the flesh, but there's an important distinction: A believer is no longer defined by the flesh. His or her identity is defined by the Spirit, who calls that person a child of God. That person's flesh hates God, but his flesh doesn't define him anymore. God defines him. And God defines him as a child of God. Paul explains this distinction in Romans 6-8.

At any rate, the point of the passage isn't the hatred we perpetrate but the hatred we receive, even hatred from other believers. And Jesus gives us a way to objectify it; in fact, he gives us a way to double-objectify it, so to speak, for hatred that we absorb is directed both toward Jesus and the Father, not us. We're simply in the line of fire. If we step out of the picture, instead of being involved in it, we'll be able see it and not take it so personally. The following illustration may be helpful. If we pull "us" out of the picture, we can see that the world's target is not us but Jesus and the Father.

Father ----- Jesus ----- Us ----- World

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|
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Us

A few weeks ago I was sitting at an outdoor table in downtown Palo Alto when a couple walked by. Suddenly, though there wasn't a cloud in the sky, water came streaming from above, drenching the man who was walking by. Shocked (and soaked), he looked up. The water could have come from any of six windows in the building above. After composing himself, he said, "I'm going to do the civilized thing and not throw rocks." I told him, "Even if you threw rocks, you wouldn't know which window to aim at." He retorted, "Oh, I have a lot of time" - the implication being that he had enough time to shatter all six windows. And if he had thrown rocks, at least five people not responsible for dumping the water would have been targets. The man's problem was with one person, but because he couldn't identify that person, he was inclined to strike back at everyone in the vicinity. The world's real problem is with God, though often it can't quite identify him. So it strikes back indiscriminately. As followers of God, we're simply "in the vicinity." The world's rocks break our windows, but its true target is God.

In verses 22 through 27, Jesus explains the world's hatred.

Testifying into the world's hatred

John 15:22-27:

(22) "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. (23) He who hates me hates my Father also. (24) If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated me and my Father as well. (25) But they have done this in order that the word may be fulfilled that is written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause.' (26) When the helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness of me, (27) and you will bear witness also, because you have been with me from the beginning."

Jesus paints a courtroom scene for the disciples. There are a multitude of witnesses regarding the world's hatred: the words of Jesus (verse 22), the works of Jesus (verse 24), the word of God (verse 25), the Holy Spirit (verse 26) and the disciples (verse 27).

First, Jesus' words witness against the world. This would be speech regarding the sin of the world, such as, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father" (John 8:44). If Jesus had not spoken in this way, they "would not have sin." This does not mean that they wouldn't have been guilty of sin if Jesus hadn't opened his mouth. The second line in the parallel structure explains what not having sin means. The second line says that they "have no excuse for their sin." So not having sin is equated with not having an excuse for sin. The parallel structure can be seen in the following sentence diagram. Notice how the words "they," "have" and "sin" link the two lines. Notice also how the blank space in the first line is filled out, or explained, by the addition in the second line.

If I had not come and spoken to them,

they would not have sin

but now they have no excuse for their sin

The reason the world hates Jesus, and those of us who bear the name of Jesus, is because Jesus exposes their sin. And with their sin exposed, they have no excuse for ignoring it. People of the world don't want to be told their sinners, because if they are sinners, they need a savior. They don't want a savior. Or they want to pick their own kind of savior, which ultimately means they want to be their own saviors. But Jesus tells the world the truth it needs to hear. Jeremiah lamented over the prophets of Israel, who ignored sin: "Your prophets have seen for you false and foolish visions, and they have not exposed your iniquity so as to restore you from captivity, but they have seen for you false and misleading oracles" (Lamentations 2:14). Jesus exposes the sin of the world in order to restore it from captivity to sin. But the world hates him for it.

Jesus also says that hatred of him is equivalent to hatred of his Father. This follows on the heels of his discussion of sin, linking sin with hatred of Jesus and the Father. The rightful ruler of a person's life is his or her creator, God. But all of us, as inheritors of the rebellion of Adam, rebelled against God and took over. We perpetrated a coup, so to speak. Before we allowed God into our lives, he was a threat, because he represented a threat to our control. Therefore, he was hated, whether we acknowledged such hatred or not or whether we even acknowledged his existence or not. Even as believers, our sin still represents hatred of God. But as noted earlier, that hate originates in our flesh, which is not us. The sin of the world, therefore, is not the evil things it does but hatred toward God that expresses itself in evil things.

The evidence that Jesus' words regarding sin are true are "the works which no one else did." These would be works of redemption in the lives of people, some of which were obviously supernatural. The world, represented by the Jewish leaders, had a strong adverse reaction to these works, even though they obviously benefited people. That's because these works endorsed the words of Jesus, who told the leaders that they were sinners in need of a savior.

Jesus says the people of the world "have both seen and hated me and my Father as well." The Jews on one level "saw" what Jesus was about, knowing at least that the works tended to give credence to the words. They knew the words alleged that they hated God. And they hated him for telling them so. That represented hatred of the Father, who sent Jesus on a mission to rescue them. But they would have none of it. How dare Jesus suggest they needed rescuing!

Brennan Manning speaks of an acquaintance who will not allow any representation of the cross in his home. The man says, "I can't stand the cross. It is a denial of all that I value in life. I am a proud man, sensual; I seek pleasure. The cross reproaches me. It says, 'You're wrong. Your life must take this shape. This is the only true interpretation of life, and life is true only when it takes this form.'" This is a man who understands, at least on one level. He "sees and hates" both Jesus and the Father. He knows that the Jesus of the scriptures says he needs a savior, and he wants nothing to do with a savior. We can appreciate this man's honesty. Many others "see" a kind of Jesus and don't hate him. They may even let him - and maybe even his cross - into their homes, but they don't allow themselves to see the real Jesus, whom they would hate.

We tend to think that if the world could just see Jesus, or if we could just present him attractively, it would embrace him. But most folks just don't want to be rescued, or they want to be rescued in a way that has nothing to do with confronting the truth of their hatred toward God.

Jesus says that the world's hatred of him was prophesied in "their law." He equates people of the world with the Jews, for the law is the Hebrew scriptures. The Jews thought of themselves as the people of God, but Jesus defines the people of God not along national lines but spiritual lines. The people of God are those who believe in Jesus. The people of the world are those who don't, regardless of national origin.

The word written in their law comes from either Psalm 35:19 or Psalm 69:4, or perhaps both. In each case

King David is writing of his enemies, who hate him "without a cause." Jesus, as the eternal inheritor of the throne of David, understands these words as his own. In Psalm 35, David said of those who hated him: "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer kept returning to my bosom. I went about as though it were my friend or brother; I bowed down mourning, as one who sorrows for a mother" (Psalm 35:13-14). Those who hated David not only had no cause to hate him; they had every cause to love him, for he treated them as friends.

Certainly, on one level the Jews had cause to hate Jesus, because he exposed their sin. On another level, they had no cause to hate him, because in exposing their sin, Jesus was doing them a favor. He was being a friend who wasn't afraid to tell the truth.

How does this relate to the people of the world today? These words aren't written in "their law," unless, of course, we're speaking of unbelieving Jews today. But in a sense, these words are written in the law of the world. A law that might be worded something like this is virtually universal: "Don't hate a friend." In that anyone hates Jesus - and everyone who doesn't know the real Jesus hates him- he is breaking his own law, in that he's hating a friend. And Jesus is the best friend anyone could hope for.

Another friend is the Helper, the Spirit of truth, who also is bold enough to speak the truth. At this point in the narrative, the Spirit's arrival is still in the future, for Jesus says he "will" send the Helper. The Spirit arrived for the disciples on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2. Today the Spirit arrives in an unbeliever's life whenever he or she believes. So Jesus has already sent the Spirit into the lives of all who believe in him.

The Spirit's role here is that of a witness. This is in keeping with his title "the Spirit of truth" and with the courtroom image. The Spirit, though taking up residence in believers and in the church, also has a ministry to the world, and that concerns communicating to it the truth about Jesus. But Jesus says to the disciples that "you will bear witness also." There is a joint witness regarding Jesus emanating from both the Spirit and followers of Jesus. This joint witness was first seen on the day of Pentecost, when Peter testified about Jesus, the Spirit went forth and 3,000 people were "pierced to the heart" (Acts 2:37, 41). The involvement of the Spirit means we can simply speak the truth and let the Spirit take care of the rest.

And what truth do we speak? Jesus says that the disciples are qualified to testify about him because they have been with him from the beginning. They are qualified simply on the basis that they have been with Jesus. Therefore, they are able to speak about Jesus. In that we have been with Jesus, and all believers have been with Jesus, we are qualified to speak about him. We don't have to know everything there is to know about him, or have all the right answers to all the tough questions; we simply need to say what we know, even if we think it's very little. The Spirit testifies alongside us, and only the Spirit can change a heart.

One thing we don't need to testify about is a user-friendly Jesus. Witnesses tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. There are two primary elements concerning the truth about Jesus. One is the fatal diagnosis; the other is the miraculous cure. The world is lost. It constitutes sinners who hate God. We do it no favors by soft-pedaling this. For if it doesn't know the diagnosis, it doesn't know it needs a cure. But if the world knows it is guilty of rejecting God, it has an opportunity to embrace the cure: forgiveness in Christ Jesus. If we remove the cross from the gospel, we have no gospel. If we try not to offend the world with the cross, we do it no favors. If we try to lure the world in with good feelings and no talk of the cross, and then sneak the cross in sometime later, we lie and do not practice the truth. Our testimony can and should include how Jesus, our Friend, personally gave us the fatal diagnosis and the miraculous cure, and how he continues to love us enough to confront us with the truth, however painful it may be. Then perhaps the world can see that it has hated Jesus without a cause and embrace him as a Friend.

David Klinghoffer, literary editor of the National Review, recently reviewed two non-fiction bestsellers with Christian overtones for the Wall Street Journal. He opined that one author "entertains no dark notions about sin, no upsetting thoughts about the possibility that there may be such a thing as religious truth - or untruth." The other author, Klinghoffer wrote, offers a version of Christianity in which "'peace' is the thing to be desired above all else and in which the idea of Judgment Day complete with a resurrection is simply too 'distasteful' to believe."

Klinghoffer, who is Jewish, finished his review with these provocative words: "At the same time, I'd wish there were some other bestseller on the scene more like the preacher I see in the subway station every day under Times Square: 'You kin pra-ay to Booda. You kin pra-ay to Mary. You kin pra-ay to yo' dead ancestors. But you better pray to Jesus, 'cause he's the only one gonna hear you.' It's debatable whether these are the only choices, but to the reader of these two books, the stark seriousness of such language comes as a welcome slap in the face."

Here's a man of the world, an unbeliever, begging for "a welcome slap in the face." Will we give it to him, or will we give him a user-friendly Jesus?

Most, of course, aren't hoping for a slap in the face, however well-intentioned. Jesus, therefore, tells his disciples that they should expect hatred.

Expecting the world's hatred

John 16:1-4:

(1) "These things I have spoken to you that you may be kept from stumbling. (2) They will make you outcasts from the synagogue; but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. (3) And these things they will do, because they have not known the Father or me. (4) But these things I have spoken to you that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. And these things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you."

Four times in these four sentences the words "these things" appear. They also appear in 15:21. They appear with two different meanings: one being the things that the world will do and the other being the things that Jesus has spoken. The two meanings are related in this way: The things the world will do are expressions of hatred, and the things Jesus has spoken concern understanding and expecting the expressions of hatred. The emphasis in these four verses is on expecting hatred, for Jesus promises that the people of the world "will" do (verses 2 and 3) and that their hour "will" come (verse 4).

Jesus says that he has spoken "these things" so that they, literally, "may not be caused to stumble." What might cause us to stumble? The world's hatred is at issue here, so this has the potential to cause stumbling. How might the world's hatred cause us to stumble? We are caused to stumble by the world's hatred when we are overwhelmed by it. In being overwhelmed, we might adopt the ways of the world in order to fit in and not be an object of hatred. Or we might hunker down in a fox hole and never come out, fearing the bullets of hatred. Or we might fire shots of hatred in return. But any of these potential reactions is diffused if we embrace the things that Jesus has told us. He has told us to objectify the world's hatred; to firmly and lovingly testify about him in the face of it; and, finally, to expect it.

Jesus then tells his disciples that "they will make you outcasts from the synagogue," again equating the people of the world with the Jews, for Gentiles didn't have synagogues. Certainly no one makes Gentile believers today outcasts from the synagogues, for they were never part of any synagogue to begin with. But we may experience being outcasts in the public arena - in the schools, the government and the workplace. We need not react in horror to this, for Jesus tells us to expect it.

For many early followers of Jesus, and for many more throughout history, the hatred they experienced culminated in death, and sometimes death at the hands of people who thought they were serving God. We may wonder how anyone could ever think such a thing, but we need only consider our own Christian heritage, which has produced piles of dead bodies in the name of Jesus, with the Crusades heading the list. And we need only consider our own thoughts of hatred, which Jesus equates with murder (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus says the people of the world will banish the disciples and even kill them because "they have not know the Father or me." We can't get the world to stop persecuting us by persuasion, education or legislation. They do these things, simply, *because* they do not know God. If they knew God, they wouldn't do these things. So if we're interested in having schools and workplaces and governments be more friendly to

believers (although the apostles didn't seem preoccupied with such interests), we best go about the business of testifying about Jesus (an interest the apostles seemed extremely preoccupied with).

If they knew the Father and Jesus, they would understand them to be friends. They have no idea that this banquet of divine fellowship is even possible. How tragic. This should engender our sorrow, not our hatred.

Jesus speaks of the time "when their hour comes." There seems to be no doubt about it; their hour will come. And when it does come, Jesus wants us to remember that he told us of them. In other words, when we experience the world's hatred, Jesus wants us to remember that he told us about them, what they would do and why they would do it. Life consists largely of remembering what Jesus said. How easily we forget. The hatred of the world, expressing itself in various forms of persecution, is part of the normal life of faith.

I think most boys go through a period in which they're fascinated with explosives. I was no exception. One day a neighbor and I decided to construct a miniature pipe bomb by cramming match heads into a small piece of aluminum piping. We attached a fuse, placed it in the middle of a field and lit it. We were expecting a small little bang and a slightly bent piece of pipe at the end of it all. To our shock, the explosion disintegrated the pipe, which ended up in thousands of microscopic pieces. We were shocked, but we should have expected it. Similarly, we should not be shocked by the world's hatred. On the contrary, we should expect it.

Finally, Jesus tells the disciples that he did not tell them about the world's hatred earlier inasmuch as he was with them. During their infancy, so to speak, he protected them. He absorbed the hate and shielded them from it. Now that he will no longer be with them physically, they will feel like direct targets, and they need to know all about hatred. He'll protect us as well through the various stages of our journey of faith, illuminating his word through the Holy Spirit in the right way at the right time so that we can withstand the hatred that comes our way.

Understanding hatred

Jesus wants us to understand the world's hatred toward his followers. First, it's rooted not in hatred toward believers but in hatred toward God. This allows us to distance ourselves from it. Second, we can testify about Jesus in the face of the world's hatred. And finally, hatred is not something we need be surprised by; in fact, we should expect it.

- SCG, 1995

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