

“Hated because of love”

JOHN 15



This sermon outline can be used at a *Suffering Church* service or meeting. It can be read out as it stands, though you may want to add some illustrations of your own or take some from the information on pages 9-14. You might also find helpful material in the **small group Bible study** on page 18 or the **eight-day devotional booklet**. Alternatively, the outline can be used as a framework for your own ideas and applications.

Introduction (JOHN 15:18-21)

John wrote his Gospel towards the end of the first century, at a time of intense persecution. It could well have been during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81 to 96 AD) who was a ruthless tyrant, very active in persecuting Christians.

Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire at this time. Anyone who admitted in court to being a Christian

was handed down a sentence, sometimes a death sentence.

But no Christian could say that they had not been warned. For Jesus had explicitly told His followers that they should expect to be persecuted. “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first ... If they persecuted me they will persecute you also.” (v.18,20). There is no reason or cause for this hatred (v.25), nothing but the love of Jesus.

1 Chosen to be His friends (JOHN 15:1-17)

A We did not choose Jesus. He chose us (v.16). In His grace and love, He made us the amazing offer of friendship.

B “You are my friends, if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants” (v.14-15). These words would have been even more meaningful to their first hearers than to us.

- In a society of slaves or servants, status depends very much on who your master is. A *doulos* (servant or slave) of God was not a title of shame but of highest honour. Paul and James used it of themselves (Titus 1:1; James 1:1). Moses, Joshua and David were each called a servant of the Lord (Deuteronomy 34:5; Joshua 24:29; Psalm 89:20).
- But a friend of God is even greater than a *doulos* of God. Jesus offers an intimacy which no one knew before. Abraham was called the friend of God (Isaiah 41:8) but even he did not know the closeness that Jesus now offers. Jesus’ first hearers lived at a time when Roman emperors were surrounded by a very select group of confidantes called “the friends of the emperor”. These men had more access to the emperor than did generals and governors. They could see him at any time, and he would talk with them before talking with anyone else. Jesus

welcomes us into His inner circle of friends.

- As friends of Jesus, we do not need to gaze longingly from afar. We are not like slaves who have no right to enter His presence. We are not like the crowd who just glimpse the emperor passing by at some grand occasion. We are not even like those senior statesmen who could meet the emperor by appointment at a particular time and place. We are His dearest and closest friends, who can come into His presence at any time.
 - Jesus shares His mind with us, His friends (v.15). A slave is only told what to do, without any reason given. But we are His friends, and he tells us what is in His heart.
 - Jesus sends us out, not as slaves obeying their master’s bidding, but as friends who are partnering in His task.
- C** An important part of any friendship is staying in touch. But abiding in Christ, remaining in Him, is even more important than that. For our Friend, the Lord Jesus, can keep us from falling. We cannot bear fruit in the tasks He gives us, we cannot glorify Him through our lives, unless we cling to Him moment by moment, and allow Him to abide in us (v.1-10).

2 Causes us to be hated (JOHN 15:18-21,22-25)

We have seen that friends of Jesus are normally hated by the world, that is, by “human society organising itself without God”.

A Many Christians are persecuted by their governments. When Roman emperors were worshipped as gods, all

Roman citizens had to join in this worship at least once a year. Not much was asked – just offering a pinch of incense was sufficient. But those who say “Jesus is Lord” cannot say “Caesar is God” even for one day. Christians were seen as disloyal citizens, a threat to society, even

traitors and possible leaders of rebellions, because they put King Jesus first. Offering that incense was what made a person belong to Roman society. Christians do not belong to the world (v.19).

B Many Christians are persecuted by society at large. Tacitus¹ wrote of the people “hated for their crimes, whom the mob call Christians”. But Christians were not criminals; they followed the King of love. Sad to say, there was much slander against them in Roman times.

- They were accused of being cannibals because their worship included the words “This is my Body ... this is my Blood .”
- They were thought to be immoral – they greeted one another with a kiss and they called their meetings *agapes* (loves) making non-Christians think of orgies.

- They were suspected of starting fires. This was because they were known to be waiting for the Second Coming of Christ, which was to come with fiery destruction (2 Peter 3:10 and many Old Testament prophecies about the Day of the Lord).
- They were felt to damage family relationships. This was the only accusation that had some basis of truth. For Jesus Himself said that families would be divided as some believed in Him and others rejected Him (Matthew 10:34-36).

C Now in the twenty-first century, the world still hates Christians because of their loyalty to Christ. The triggers may be different from those in the first century, but the hatred and persecution are just as real (see examples on p9 -14).

3 *Called to be His witnesses* (JOHN 15:26-27)

When we are hated, we often want to retreat and avoid those who hate us. But Jesus tells us to do the opposite. We must go out into the world and testify about Him.

A This is the task which Jesus sends His friends out to do.

- A witness must speak from personal experience. So we testify to what the Lord has done in our own lives.

- A witness must speak from inner conviction. Ours comes from our intimacy with Jesus.
- A witness must speak what they know to be true. Our Friend is full of grace and truth. He *is* the Truth. (John 1:14; 14:6)

B We are helped and empowered in this task by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth (v.26).

4 *Consequently we are persecuted* (JOHN 16:1-4)

By the time John was writing, some Christians had already fallen away because of persecution. Elsewhere he records the Lord's condemnation of the cowardly and unbelieving (Revelation 21:8). Pliny wrote to the Roman Emperor Trajan² about apostate Christians who had left the faith 20 years earlier. These are the ones who did not abide in Christ, unfruitful branches of the Vine, which are cut off and burned (John 15:5-6).

A Some Christians were excommunicated from the synagogue, that is, thrown out of their community (v.2).

- Isolation and ostracism are very hard to bear for most people, but this is often the price that believers have to pay for being a follower of Christ, especially if they are converts from another religion.

But Christians can endure this loneliness with Jesus as their intimate Friend.

- Persecuting authorities today go to great efforts to prevent Christians meeting together. They know the importance of fellowship and teaching, and they try to prevent it happening (see pages 8-14).

B People thought they were offering a service to their god when they killed Christians (v.2). In our day, there are devout followers of other religions who sincerely believe that their god wants them to kill Christians. These are the beliefs of terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram and Islamic State. Countless thousands of Christians have suffered or been martyred in the twenty-first century because of these beliefs.

Conclusion

Our Friend and Lord was hated without reason (Psalm 25:19; Psalm 69:4). His character, message, life and death are summed up in one word: love. He was hated because of love.

But what about us, His followers? It is true that some people are uncomfortable being around “good people” who have higher standards of honesty, kindness, self-control or self-sacrifice. They may react with suspicion, resentment or even hatred. We must ask ourselves if this

is ever true for us it. Is my life *really* Christ-like enough to challenge others?

Sadly, Christians and the Church have all too often failed to live up to their calling, failed to abide consistently in Christ. Then we have been hated with good reason.

We should strive and pray that our lives will be Christ-like, so that there is no reason to hate us except that we bear the Name of Christ.