

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 68 – Facing Persecution

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In the following letter of Paul, to Timothy, we find Paul strongly urging Timothy to remain loyal to Jesus in the face of persecution. Paul's resolve and commitment to Christ, as well as the Christian virtues he exhibited are undeniable to Timothy. Timothy had witnessed much of Paul's suffering for Christ. He may have been in Lystra and seen Paul stoned and left for dead. There is no doubt that Timothy knew intimately of Paul's teaching, purpose, and way of life.

II Timothy 3:10-15 (NIV) – *You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

[Bold emphasis mine]

Timothy needed to understand, as do all Christians today, that *persecution* awaits everyone who wants to live a *godly life* in Christ Jesus. Though some may choose to “bail out” (stop proclaiming Jesus) to avoid persecution, Paul's point remains, persecution is inevitable for those who want to live *in Christ Jesus*, with true “godliness”. It is a given, those who live faithfully in the truth of the gospel will face opposition. This is why Paul admonished Timothy, with friendly earnest advice, to continue in what he had learned, and had become convinced of, so that he would have the guts to endure the difficulties ahead.

The world's hatred of Christians is nothing new.

The world's hatred of Christians will be new to you the first time you experience persecution as a Christian. The persecution could be totally unexpected. If you do not understand *why* it happened, you may just walk away from Jesus, never opening your mouth again. The apostle John spoke about this to the Christians of

his day, when he brought strong counsel about how to handle persecution when it comes.

I John 3:11-13 (NIV) – *For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.*

[Bold emphasis mine]

John cautions not to be surprised (caught off guard) if the world detests and pursues you with hatred. Do not be like the world, which belongs to the evil one. Do not strike back. Instead, follow the righteous One, by responding with love. Do not fall for the distraction. Keep your focus on what God has called you to do.

Jesus clarified why the world hates Christians.

John 15:18-21 (NIV) – *If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ **If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.*** [Bold emphasis mine]

Jesus was fully aware of the persecution His true followers would be required to bear, in proclaiming His name. For this very reason, Jesus interceded in prayer for them, because they had received the *Word of God* in their heart and they were of great value to Him.

Jesus' intercessory prayer to His Heavenly Father:

John 17:14-18 (NIV) – *I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*

Christians, understand who your real enemy is!

You may think that the people who come against you (the ones who criticize and persecute you for speaking the *Word of God*) are your real enemies. You may be so convinced that you are ready to go off on them, to argue, to tell them a thing or two, to get back at them. If you do that, you will be making a big mistake. You will be fighting the wrong enemy.

Do not be deceived, brothers and sisters. Satan is your real enemy, along with his demons. Satan is the one behind every personal affront (insult) you encounter. The people, who persecute you for speaking the *Word of God*, are simply being used as Satan's tools. The sad thing is; they may not even know it. So, do not get sidetracked into fighting people – flesh and blood.

Ephesians 6:12 (KJV) – For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.
[Bold emphasis mine]

Understand the ploys of Satan, the rulers of darkness. You have become a threat to Satan by putting the *Word of God* into your heart. He wants to choke the Word (Mark 4:17-19), so he sets out to *distract* you, to get your mind off what God has called you to do. He wants to make you ineffective for the kingdom of God. Do not let him get away with it. Do not get wrapped up in the criticism by stopping to argue with people, or by trying to defend yourself.

How do we deal with flesh and blood?

How, then, are we to deal with people who are dishing out their disparaging comments and criticisms? Jesus gives us the perfect answer.

Matthew 5:44-45a (KJV) – “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.”

Why would Jesus command such a thing (that God's children should show such undeserved kindness to persecutors)? Because, Jesus wants those who are oppressed by the devil (the persecutors) to be set free from his grip. Jesus wants folks healed and delivered from their distresses. Much can be accomplished when God's children exercise their authority over the devil, by responding in love, not hate toward people.

Remember, brothers and sisters, if you take your eyes off God and fight with people, you are playing Satan's game. Stay on God's side; trust Him to see you through any persecutions the devil brings, for speaking the name of Jesus. Blessings will follow.

Matthew 5:11-12 (KJV) – Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Matthew 5:16 (KJV) – Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Questions for Personal or Group Study

- 1) Why was it important for Paul to get across to Timothy that persecution awaits all those who want to live a *godly life* in Christ Jesus?
- 2) Some Christians stop proclaiming the name of Jesus to avoid persecution. What does this say about their commitment to Jesus?
- 3) The world's hatred of Christians is nothing new. In speaking to Christians of his day, how did the apostle John deal with the subject of persecution? (See: I John 3:11-13)
- 4) Jesus, Himself, clarified why the world hates Christians. What did He say was the main reason? (See: John 15:18-21)
- 5) In Jesus' *intercessory prayer* for His disciples, notice He did not ask the Father to take them out of the world, but to protect them from the evil one, instead. What does this say about the importance of the Christian witness to the world? (See: John 17:14-18)
- 6) When people come against you, criticize and persecute you for speaking the *Word of God*, why is it a big mistake to strike back at them? Who is the real enemy?
- 7) We learn in Ephesians 6:12, not to fight against flesh and blood (people). How does knowing *who* is behind every personal affront (insult) you encounter when proclaiming Jesus, help you in your personal witnessing?
- 8) In what way does God expect His children to exercise their authority over the devil, when being persecuted by those the devil simply uses as his tools? (See: Matthew 5:44-45a)