

MAKING THE RIGHT ENEMIES

by Steve Zeisler

You have probably been following the news of the extraordinary events of the past couple of weeks, in which Nicole Brown Simpson, the ex-wife of O.J. Simpson, was found murdered along with a friend on the steps of her home. O.J. Simpson, one of this country's most famous citizens is an actor, sports commentator, and former football player. He was eventually arrested last Friday, but not before attempting to flee. That afternoon under massive press coverage, helicopters were flying over Los Angeles freeways tracking a white Bronco carrying O.J. as he held a gun to his head. It was an incredible scene that mesmerized the nation and for many served as a wake-up call, a challenge to the normal, ordinary, and every-day appearance of things.

One truth that struck me from the incidents that eventually led to O.J.'s arrest was the profound biblical declaration that we walk by faith, not by sight; that the unseen things in history and in an individual's life are really the controlling things. Who you are at the deepest level is who you really are. It doesn't matter if you have everything going for you on the surface, as was the case for O.J. He had fame, fortune, good friends, education, standing, opportunity, a winsome personality---an altogether attractive life. But if your heart is crumbling, then you are crumbling. Gloriously, the reverse is also true, isn't it? Even if your life is a mess on the outside, you are a person who has been hurt by living in this world, and your prospects are not very good at all; if you have the Spirit of God within you and you are a child of God, then you have life itself.

Three generations

I also found myself thinking about generations as that story unfolded. In a letter that was read publicly, O.J. begged that his children be taken care of, and he remembered his mother and her influence on his life. Thus there were three generations affected: O.J.'s (which is my own generation), that of the children, and that of O.J.'s mother.

In recent messages I have been saying that it is critical for us as a church family and for individuals in the body of Christ to care about the generation of young people who are growing up now. Of course it has always been critical, but now it is more than ever a matter of crisis that we understand what it is like for children to grow up in this world. The plight of the Simpson children is extreme---they are orphaned, their mother violently taken from them and their father falling apart, desperate, lost, and publicly humiliated. Imagine those children, whose lives have been trashed by what has happened, trying to make sense of life. What does the world they have been given by the generation that went before them look like? Too many other kids today have been handed futures filled with emptiness and desparation as well.

With regard to the middle generation, O.J. called himself "this lost person." It was striking to me that at the very end of the story, the last person he wanted to talk to before he surrendered to the police was his mother. In reference to her he said in his letter, "She is the one who taught me to turn the other cheek." These are words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, the passage of Scripture that we are focusing on in this study. O.J. was saying in effect, "I'm lost now, but there was a time my mother taught me the words of Jesus. And I wish you would remember me as the person who had some familiarity with those things." He also quoted Jesus, "you ought to treat others the way you want to be treated," and tried to assign himself to the category of people who live that way as well. The generation represented by his mother knew Christ's teachings and taught them. Simpson heard and remembered, but never embraced them. He became a lost person, a wanderer driving the freeway with a gun to his head.

As for us, we have been given everything in Christ---hope, truth, family, the Spirit of God himself, and the fruits of the Spirit. Will we take up the challenge to give it away?

The Beatitudes

We have come to the end of the statements of blessing often called the Beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount. The first four Beatitudes focus on discovering on how inadequate we are as human beings in rebellion against God. We are poor in spirit, we mourn for our sinfulness and poverty, we have no basis for defending this poverty of ours, hungry and thirsty for righteousness. These statements are a dethroning of self in our lives. Our best efforts don't work.

The next three Beatitudes describe a life that, because of the recognition of our inadequacy, is able to center itself on the living God. Mercy from God extends through the life of a believer to other people. Seeing God leads to purity of heart, which leads to increasing perception of God and to increasing purity of heart. And an identity as a son of God offers the possibility of being a peacemaker in the world, which reinforces our identity as a child of God, which in turn reinforces the opportunity to offer the peace of Christ to a world that needs him. Dethroning ourselves leads to enthroning the Lord God at the center of our lives.

If we were writing the script, at this point I'm sure we would say, "...And the peacemakers, giving away life in Christ wherever they go, are widely approved of and cheered on in their efforts to do good to one and all." But what comes next is exactly the opposite. It is not widespread approval of the God-centered peacemaker, pure in heart, and merciful that we come to now, but their persecution. Matthew 5:10-16:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil
against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for
in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This last Beatitude is the only one that is explained or intensified. And all of the others are stated in third person only, while in this one the Lord goes on to say directly to these disciples who are sitting in front of him on this mountainside, "Blessed are you...." In doing this he means, "Pay attention to this and understand what it is going to mean to you in your experience."

Verbal persecution

The Greek word *dioko* is what has been translated in all three verses as persecution. The idea behind that word is pursuit; a relentless, dug-in, and thought-through commitment to hurt somebody, to put them down, or to destroy them, if you will. It is not merely a flash of anger that leads to harsh words at a given moment.

Seeing the way the Lord expands verse 10 in verses 11-12 will help us understand what he means in the whole of these three verses. One of the things that Jesus does in verse 11 is to highlight in particular persecution by verbal assault. Persecution has always included all kinds of things in this century and every century: death, imprisonment, economic deprivation, social ostracism. You may never face any of these threats, but you are likely to face the threat of being taken advantage of by the speech of other people; being misunderstood, put down, rejected, laughed at, set aside, and lied about because you belong to Christ and are committed to him, and the people around you recognize that.

It is interesting to me, as many have noted, that on secular campuses today the only group of people left who are fair game for rejection, who may be roundly insulted without anyone's objecting, are people who live their lives with an outspoken commitment to Christ. Every other religion, ethnic group, and other category of people are welcomed as part of the multicultural environment. But Christians who take the Bible seriously are ridiculed, and accused of causing most of human suffering. At times we are lumped together with televangelists, David Koresh, or some other horror show. We are not able to make others understand what our commitment and our beliefs are, who our Lord is, and what he is doing in our lives. The assumption is that because we walk a narrow road, we are narrow-minded; because we live life with a clear purpose, we are arrogant; and because we are willing to call sin sin, we hate sinners. On and on go what Jesus calls insults and evil false statements.

A number of years ago Bob Dylan wrote a song in which he was watching the verbal persecution of a Christian man take place:

Go ahead and talk about him because he makes you doubt,
Because he's denied himself things that you can't do without,
Because he can't be exploited by superstition anymore,
Because he can't be bribed or bought by things that you adore.
He's the property of Jesus, resent him to the bone.
You've got something better---you've got a heart of stone.
When the whip that's keeping you in line doesn't make him jump,
Say he's hard of hearing, say that he's a chump.
Say he's out of step with reality as you try to test his nerve.
Because he doesn't pay tribute to the sovereign that you serve.
He's the property of Jesus, resent him to the bone.
You've got something better---you've got a heart of stone.

"Because of me"

A second insight we gain by taking verses 10 and 11 together is what the word righteousness means. Righteousness is the quality in our lives that draws rejection, insults, and persecution, Jesus says, "because of me," or for his sake. Righteousness is specifically that which has Jesus at the center of it.

Many times Christians have misunderstood rejection by those who oppose the gospel. There have been times when believing people have been boorish, insulting, naive, arrogant, or shallow, and they assumed that they were being persecuted for righteousness' sake and claimed the corresponding blessing. But what they were being persecuted for was being fools, being selfish, or in some other way misrepresenting the Lord.

There are also times when our Christian convictions lead us to champion a cause---protecting the environment, opposing funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, influencing the curriculum in a school, or wanting tax vouchers for private education, for instance. As Christian citizens we enter the fray and find ourselves resisted by those championing the opposite cause. But if the battle is for political control of money and power in any given place, there is very little likelihood that those who oppose us are persecuting us for righteousness' sake. The best explanation is that they just want their cause to prevail over ours.

What the Lord is saying about persecution for righteousness' sake is the point that Paul makes in 2 Corinthians 2:16 when he says that there is about the life of genuine believers an undeniable aroma; an invisible, difficult-to-explain influence that some people oppose because to them it means death, while other people embrace it because to them it means life. It is the confrontation that Jesus himself makes to the spirit of a person when our influence in their life brings him close to them. It is because of Christ himself, and for his sake, that we are either winning people to him or driving them into fury because they hate him.

Think about why the Lord himself was persecuted to death. Ultimately it was not because he was an economic threat to the business interests of the Roman Empire. Nor did he pose any direct political threat to Rome by raising an army or championing political unrest. He said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). And he did not propose to set up a rival religion to that of the Jews. As he said (Matthew 5:17), "I have not come to abolish [the Law] but to fulfill [it]."

What made Jesus a threat to everyone was that he exposed what they were on the inside. Some people had claimed their own righteousness. Some had believed themselves a success in living life. Some had gathered power and authority. They all patted themselves on the back, but when confronted by Jesus, everyone in those categories, whether religious Jews or Roman authorities, found themselves having to see who they were in fact. And God-centeredness always shames man-centeredness. The exposure of the real poverty of spirit that is true of all humans caused people in every setting to hate Jesus. Nobody wanted to see what was underneath their facade and own it for themselves. So because all of that happens when Jesus is present, those who bring him into a given setting will be persecuted.

We don't belong here

Lastly Jesus talks about blessedness and rejoicing. "Rejoice and be glad when you are rejected for my sake, because you are like the prophets who have gone before you. Yours is the kingdom of heaven." Even though persecution is painful; it can be a very good, joy-filled thing nonetheless. There is not any good in pain for its own sake. Nor is Jesus pleased that those who do the persecuting are getting away with it; all that means is that their rebellion against God has taken more control of them, and that is a cause for mourning. But what he is saying is that when you are persecuted, you know for sure that your citizenship is not of this world. You don't belong here. The reason for the rejection is that your passport is for another country. The prophets were killed because they talked about a new world, an era that was not this era, in which all that is wicked will be banished and in which the Lord is worshiped at the center of everyone's experience. That is the country that is ours.

Hebrews 11:13-16 makes that point very clearly. Speaking of Abraham and others, the writer says, "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country---a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them." The surest way to be certain that we don't belong here is to be persecuted for honoring Christ in the midst of this world that is in rebellion against him.

Being genuinely different

Now in Matthew 5:13-16 two images follow. They are often referred to, and I'm sure you will recognize them immediately. If anything has suggested to me that the Sermon on the Mount issues a challenge to care about young people, it is these images: the need for salt to be salty and the need for light to be placed high so that it can shine out and dispel the darkness around it. These speak of the need for Christians to make a difference in their community.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Jesus' primary reason for referring to the church as salt is that salt inhibits corruption. In the ancient world there was of course no refrigeration; the only way to keep meat from going bad was to salt it down. It is a process still in use today. And light obviously drives back the darkness. We live in a world in which corruption is advancing at an extraordinary clip. Things that were once neutral or benign more and more we find to be sources of decay, whether the thinking that is broadcast to us through the media, the things that are taught in schools, or the discussions that are held in business settings. What the world needs is salt that is salty, that keeps the corruption from getting worse, that offers the possibility that not everything will decay and become harmful. The world needs a light to be set on a high place, not covered up so that just a little bit of light shines out. Light set on a stand is broadcast widely and can dispel the darkness. If a city is built on a hill, people out in the wilderness can see it from a distance and find it. The world needs us to be like that, not hidden away by ourselves in a cloister, huddled together around the light and warmth and fellowship.

The call for us is to realize that in order to be most helpful to the world we live in as we serve Christ, we have to be substantively different, and we are going to pay for it if we are. The people who can really offer help and genuinely be different are those who are so much like Christ that they are going to be rejected for doing the very things that are needed. The peacemakers sow life and give away hope in Christ, and for doing so they are being persecuted. We will not always be loved for being sources of Christ's influence in people's lives. Jesus

says that it is our Father who receives the glory; his influence in our lives and his gifts to us are not to glorify us.

Scientists would say that sodium chloride, or salt, is a very stable chemical; it doesn't change much. That is, it doesn't stop being salt. So the Lord's metaphor makes sense immediately. If you could imagine salt that no longer changes the flavor of anything or arrests decay, it is clear that it would be completely worthless. And if there is nothing about us in the church that marks us off as different from the world we live in, then we are completely worthless. We won't be persecuted for the edge in our lives; we will instead be trampled underfoot by men because there will be no point to our being here. The world needs the church to tell it the truth and to be the truth, to name the name of Christ where he otherwise will not be heard of, so that individual souls can come to saving knowledge of Christ and so that the environment that everybody lives in will not be completely corrupted and destroyed.

But the question is, what is the process of temptation that leads us to lose our saltiness, that inclines us to take our light and put something over it? What ruins the effectiveness that we ought to have? For most people it begins with good motives. For example, I want to be able to influence my unbelieving neighbors and friends, the schools my kids go to, the sports teams they play on, the associations I belong to, and so on. So my thinking goes, what I can do to get closest to the most people, build the firmest bridges, and so on, is to discover the best in the people around me, the noblest thing to which they aspire, and fan that flame: "That's a really good side of you! I appreciate that; you ought to build on that." And of course they will like my discovering nobility in them, my encouraging them to do their best, our sharing of goals, and the reassurance that there is not that much difference between us. But if all I'm doing is cheering them on, then there is nothing unique about me anymore. It is as if a doctor were too nice a person to ever tell the patient of a terrible disease that required radical intervention in order for them to be saved, and so the patient died.

What the world--our neighbors, friends, associates, school districts, clubs and every other place we are in--needs is for us to say, "I am completely undone apart from my Savior. I don't have anything to offer and neither do you. We are desperate apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can't fan the flames of our nobility because we aren't going to make it, even by doing our best. God's answer is in Christ; the gospel is our only hope." Sometimes we need to say, as in the old story, that the emperor has no clothes on. We need to make the hard announcement in order to have some hope of seeing faith in Christ begin. Our friends, family members, and any other lives that God privileges us to touch in the world we live in, need us to be different enough for Christ's sake that there is an edge to who we are. The salt needs to be really salty; the light needs to shine in the darkness. Otherwise everyone loses.

We need to be salty among Christians as well. I have certain Christian friendships that very often degenerate into worldliness. When I get together with those friends, we wink at bad behavior, laugh at crude jokes, and give ourselves permission to live at a lower level than any of us really wants to. But I have other Christian friendships that are very salty. Being with those people inspires me to pray more and dispel the corruption in my experience, to put aside things that are worthless. When I am with those people, I am much less likely to pout, covet, swear, feel sorry for myself, or lie. Having salty friendships inspires life that is really worth living in me.

I have other friends as well who are sources of light to me; they tell the truth when I need to hear it. They remind me that I am not some accident of evolution with no purpose in life, but the creation of God himself and infinitely valuable. Every time I feel that I am valueless they remind me that it is not true. There are times when it feels like I am going nowhere but to the grave and am having no impact at all, and then some will say, "Don't forget that the Lord inhabits that pot. There is a great treasure in you!" I have friends who will remind me that the power of the Spirit is greater than the power of sin, so that I don't have to be victimized by habits that have gripped me all my life.

We need to have the kind of relationships with one another in which the Lord Jesus is present. We are made better for that, in order to take what we are given in fellowship with each other to places where there is none and champion Christ there, not ourselves. We don't want people talking about us when we leave, but glorifying our Father who is in heaven.

Ancient cities were different from modern cities. Most of us would like to stay away from at least parts of modern cities because they are crime-ridden, dirty, and so on. If you were to think today of a visual scene that represented the presence of God, it would probably be one of a mountain meadow or a beautiful lake that is as far away from civilization as possible. But in the ancient world cities were places of refuge, and the wilderness was dangerous. There were bears, wolves, robbers, cliffs you could fall off of, and sunstroke to contend with. In cities you could be protected by the wall, enjoy fellowship with other people, and find a home where there was food and water and shelter and belonging. And in that sense we have to set the city on a hill; the Christian community has to be in a place where it is inviting those in the wilderness to come, not hiding out for its own sake. That way the needy can find their way to the Lord who indwells us.

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