

THE COST OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

SERIES: PREPARING FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

By Danny Hall

All of us wish that life could be easy. We want people to like us. Most of us spend a lot of time trying to make our lives comfortable, and even in our walk with Jesus we often work very hard just to make things go smoothly. There is a lot of joy in following Jesus, of course, but we know that in the real world, anything of value has a cost, and the truth is that when we follow Jesus we pay a price. We are attracted by the glory of following him, but sometimes we are not prepared for the difficulty that can come. In fact, in many ways following Jesus makes our lives more difficult. When we follow him, we are entering a war zone.

We are continuing our study of the Upper Room Discourse, in which we are examining how Jesus prepares his disciples to put on the mantle of leadership in the kingdom of God; to take over after he leaves earth; to build, expand, and lead the kingdom of God; to be the people of God in a hostile environment. He has challenged them to root themselves in the security of their relationship with God, to rest in his abiding presence in the Holy Spirit, to allow God to transform them completely into the people they need to be in order to lead in his kingdom. He has challenged them to trust the work that God is doing to make them into a community of faith in which they express the love of God one for another, which demonstrates Jesus' presence and power.

Jesus now moves on to a teaching that is in many ways troublesome. What he does now is spell out to the disciples what it's going to cost them to follow him. For so long as they began to understand more and more who he was, their excitement about following him grew. Now he is slowly but surely dismantling that starry-eyed, exuberant view of what is about to take place in order to give them a solid dose of the reality of what God has called them to be and do. He describes for them the milieu in which they will work and the cost of being leaders in God's kingdom, of being the people of God in this world.

Let's read John 15:18-16:4 and work through this teaching, then go back and reflect on some of the implications.

"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 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. 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. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also. 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. 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.' 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, and you will bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.

These things I have spoken to you, that you may be kept from stumbling. 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. And these things they will do, because they have not known the Father, or Me. 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."

Jesus makes three overarching points in this passage. He first describes part of the reason for the opposition they will face.

The opposition of the world

He begins by saying, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me first. In other words, the opposition you face is because of me. The world does not believe in me or accept me. It's not about you." Jesus is partly helping us to get our hearts and minds around the cost of following him, and partly, in some ways, protecting us from the onslaught. We are always vulnerable to criticism, and none of us likes to be hated. And lest we personalize that and think it's all

about not being liked for who we are, Jesus reminds us right up front that he is the point of the confrontation.

You see, our identity and calling set us at odds with the world. Jesus says, “If you lived like the world and were part of the world, and were not a follower of mine, the world would love you. You’d get along just fine. But I have chosen you for a different purpose.” Jesus has just told the disciples that he has chosen them and commissioned them to be the ones to bear fruit (15:16). Now he says, “I have chosen you out of the world, shifted your citizenship from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God. Now you are part of what I am doing. And it is this association with me that causes you to be at odds with the world.”

The idea that we are no longer part of this world is a theme that runs throughout the New Testament. The apostle Paul often talks about the citizenship we have that is not of this world but is of the heavenly kingdom. As citizens of that kingdom, we are objects of the world’s scorn.

Having lived a good part of our adult life abroad, Ginger and I know what it feels like to be foreigners. Even in a relatively peaceful and not terribly different culture like that of Austria, the fact that we were Americans made us stand out. Even while we interacted with others in a good way, it was immediately recognizable that this was not our home. In fact, we carried our passports around to prove it should the need arise. During the eighties the team I was part of traveled in the Eastern European countries, which were very hostile compared to Austria, and so we were even more aware of the fact that we were out of place, that this was not our homeland. In the same way, spiritually we are no longer part of the kingdom of this world, and we are at odds with that kingdom by our very identity with Jesus.

But Jesus also offers a ray of hope in this description of the opposition. He told them when he was washing their feet (John 13:16), “A slave is not greater than his master.” Now he is reminding them of that in order to say, “You are not greater than your master. It’s true that if I am persecuted, you are going to be persecuted too. But if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.” What he is saying is that there are others who are ready to enter into the kingdom of God, and part of being the people of God in this world is having the privilege of introducing others to God’s kingdom. This is the nature of being a follower of Jesus.

In the second section, verses 21-25, Jesus makes another overarching point. He explains that this opposition is rooted in the ungodliness of this world.

“They hated Me without a cause”

“But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent me.” Ungodliness simply means not knowing or understanding who God is. The fact that people do not know him determines how they will react to people who do know him.

He goes on to explain that people are without excuse in this. There are two reasons. One is that he has come and proclaimed to them who God is. If he hadn’t done that, they would have had an excuse for their opposition. But God spoke through Jesus to announce the coming of his kingdom and to announce that Jesus was his Son. Now the curtain has been pulled back, and here is Jesus front and center, fully revealed to the world. Having had these things spoken to them, those who are of the world hate Jesus. They have rejected this proclamation that he is the revelation of who God is, the locus of salvation, the Messiah who has come. They hate the Father also, because as Jesus said earlier, he speaks only what the Father has told him to speak (John 12:49-50; 14:10).

The second reason people are without excuse, Jesus says, is that he did works before them. “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.” Jesus has demonstrated the truth of who God is and what he is doing through miracles, acts of compassion, and the whole way he has lived his life.

Jesus’ explanation of the underlying reason for the world’s opposition is really simple. And we as followers of Christ are drawn into that spiritual battle where the very truth of God is called into question, resisted, and even hated. Jesus reminds the disciples that they shouldn’t be surprised by this. “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.’” It was predicted long ago that when the Messiah came, opposition would come. He brings love and salvation, yet they still hate him and the Father. It has

always been that way and it will always be that way. The selfishness, self-preservation, and self-promotion of the human race have been at odds with God since Day One, and throughout the history of God's people, the enemies of God have always opposed the truth of God. So Jesus is just spelling it out for them. There is a war going on between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. We are dragged right into the vortex of the cosmic spiritual conflict of the forces of evil vs. the forces of God as we follow Jesus.

In the third section of this passage, verses 5:26-6:4, Jesus makes his last overarching point. He talks about engaging the opposition.

Proclaiming the truth of God's love

Jesus says, "When the Helper comes . . ." referring to the Holy Spirit. He has been talking more and more about this Helper. He has already told them the Helper is the one who will mediate Christ's presence, that he will make Christ real in their lives so they will never be abandoned. In the next message we are going to see that the Holy Spirit will equip us for all kinds of activity in serving Christ in this world. But here in the context of teaching about opposition, Jesus simply says, "The Helper who comes is the Spirit of truth." The Helper is going to be proclaiming and testifying about Christ. In other words, the battle is on, and God and his kingdom will not shrink back. The kingdom of God will stand firm and continue to proclaim God's love even to a world that rejects and opposes it.

In verse 27 Jesus says on the heels of his declaration of the Spirit's witness, "You too will testify about me, because you have been with me from the beginning. You're the ones who know me. You're the ones I'm preparing. The Spirit is going to come upon you and work in and through you to bear witness about me."

One of the things that happen to pastors is that they are often asked to write recommendations for people. All through my pastoral career I've done that. As college pastor for the last five years I've written recommendations for students applying for admission to college, for scholarships, for admission to graduate school, and for jobs. One of the first questions asked on the recommendation forms is, "How long have you known this person?" That provides some sort of context for the rest of what you say.

Jesus is saying, "You disciples have been with me from the beginning of my public ministry, so you are going to be the ones to bear witness." The assumption behind this statement is that the people of God are those who know him. Out of the experience of walking with him, learning more of him as we study the Scriptures and as the Spirit opens up our understanding, we have become the ones who know him and therefore can testify about him. And that is what we are called to do: engage the opposition through our testimony of who Jesus is.

He goes on to say once again in 16:1-4 that when we engage the world and become proclaimers of who Jesus is, there are going to be consequences. He even describes some of them. "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue." The synagogue is the cultural comfort zone where the disciples grew up and worshiped. Their whole world is going to be turned upside-down because of their proclamation of who Jesus is. And in fact, Jesus tells them, "An hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God." The first thing that comes to my mind when I read this is the apostle Paul in his days as the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, before his conversion. Saul, who cheered when Stephen was martyred for his faith, was rounding up Christians and throwing them in prison, breathing threats and murder against them. And he thought he was doing God a favor! He thought Christians were teaching false ideas, leading people down the wrong path. That's why Jesus says, "People are going to be so opposed to the proclamation of who I am that you might as well expect that when you faithfully testify for me, it may mean persecution or even death."

Finally, Jesus says, "I have been walking with you, and I was the focal point of all this danger, so I haven't taught you about it before. I could interpret it for you, even protect you from it. But now I am about to leave, and the full force of the opposition is going to be targeted at you. I want to prepare you for it, and I am telling you these things so that when it all comes to pass you will recognize it."

Jesus lays out for the disciples in the starkest of terms what it is going to cost to be a follower of his. They disciples aren't going to understand it until a little later. But with each passing moment Jesus' arrest and crucifixion are getting closer. He is going to live out these words right before their eyes in the next few hours. And he knows that in their first steps they are going to fall. They are going to run, hide, and deny him. Not until the power of the Spirit comes upon

them at Pentecost, and they are given boldness, will they begin to live out what Jesus is saying and become proclaimers of who he is in the face of the opposition.

So following Christ has a cost. Now let's think about some implications of this.

The risk of following Jesus

First of all, we need to be reminded that this is the normal experience of following Christ. Consider some other passages from the New Testament. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:10-12.)

The apostle Paul says, "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Again Paul says, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31) in that glorious passage about how we can never be separated from the love of Christ, and right in the middle of those glowing words, he says, "Just as it is written, 'For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'" (8:36.)

The degree to which we will be engaged in the battle will be different for each one of us. The opposition we actually encounter may be anything from being considered weird by our neighbors, being misunderstood in our job situation, having our family think we've gone off the deep end, all the way up to giving our life.

The second implication is that this opposition has nothing to do with human agendas or obnoxious personalities. I say that because a lot of times we create agendas around Jesus that bring opposition against us. And sometimes the very way that we proclaim what we believe can infuse situations with obnoxiousness, and then we somehow think that we are suffering for Christ when people don't like us. I say this just as a caution, because sometimes we actually feel proud of the opposition we're experiencing. I've known people who were just boorish, and when people couldn't stand them, they said, "Well, I'm suffering for Jesus." No, they weren't. They were just obnoxious. There is nothing of this in the tone of what Jesus is saying. He is saying, "This is about me, and when you faithfully proclaim who I am, the opposition will come."

Third, we expend enormous effort, both as churches and as individuals, getting the world to like us. That is normal human behavior, and I'm not saying we should go out of our way to be unlikable. But how many times have we had opportunities to talk about Jesus, and when we came right up to the moment to say something, we pulled back because the person might not like us? We even couch those kinds of choices in very spiritual terms: "If I talk about Jesus now, this person is going to reject me, and that will end any chance I have to win them to Christ. So rather than bring Jesus up now, I'll just keep being nice, and hopefully someday they'll get it." What we are really saying is that we don't want to risk giving up that relationship.

Fourth, there is nothing at all about being on the defensive in the description that Jesus gives. There is an assumption that the followers of Jesus, then and now, will be out there, that we are not going to build up walls of defense and hide behind them out of fear. The more I thought about this passage and examined my own heart in light of it, the more I realized how easy it is for me to take a defensive posture toward the world, rather than wanting to engage the world in ways that will allow me to proclaim who Jesus is.

Let me suggest a couple of ways that we need to specifically apply Jesus' teaching.

The call for courage

First, let's face it: we're all afraid of this. None of us wants to die for our faith. None of us wants to be rejected. We are afraid for our physical safety, for our reputations, for the loss of comfort in our lives. We are afraid for what is going to

happen to our children. We are afraid for the security of our jobs. And, lest we think we are different, in the verses that follow the disciples are going to display for us what fear is all about. In the hours immediately after they hear this very teaching, they are going to run and hide. Peter, the bold one himself, will cower before a lowly slave girl, who is totally powerless in that society, who challenges him about being a follower of Jesus. Peter will curse her and deny it because he is afraid, and he doesn't know what's coming down. So we have all been there.

But throughout this whole Upper Room Discourse Jesus just keeps saying, "Don't be afraid. Trust me." We have to become men and women of radical faith who actually believe what we say we believe: that God is sovereign, that he is building his kingdom and we are part of that, and that our eternal security is in him—not in the world of comfort that we construct. We have to overcome our fear.

The second way we need to apply Jesus' teaching is in resisting the temptation to withdraw from the world. We live in a Christian culture that has grown more and more defensive over the years. The world is a horrible place, and there's all this evil out there. Our response is to build walls between us and the world. The church is multiplying the activities that it offers: Christian sports, Christian schools, Christian yellow pages for Christian stores and Christian auto mechanics, and so on. If we work really hard at it we can avoid the world altogether. Now, many of us haven't gone to that extreme, but there is a sense in which we have started to view the world as something that we have to protect ourselves from. But there is absolutely nothing in the life or teachings of Jesus that encourages that. In fact, he encourages the opposite. That doesn't mean we are not to be wise about the ways of the world. Our engagement must be Spirit-led, and we must keep our eyes open. But it is totally antithetical to the call of Jesus for us to erect walls to hide behind.

This is ultimately about courage. Courage is not being fearless, but being able to stare into our fears and discomfort and say by the power of the Holy Spirit, "I will obey. I will be a witness. I will step forward." We of all people should be courageous. Let me share with you a quote that I've used before. In the epilogue of the very fine book *Finding God at Harvard*, Kelly Monroe, the editor, is sharing thoughts about the testimonies of people who have stood for God in the Harvard academic world. She quotes a friend:

"As Christians we have many freedoms, one of which is the freedom to die because of the hope we have in the resurrection from the dead.' This life has no hold on us, so we are beginning to live it with courage." (1)

If we are believers in Jesus, if we really believe we have an eternal home with him, then we are free to engage the world, to be the people of God, knowing that the worst they can do is punch our ticket to heaven a little sooner. We ought to be men and women of freedom because of what Christ has bought for us.

I'd like to be able to tell you that I'm the world's boldest witness, but the truth of it is that I can look back over my life and give you a litany of cowardly episodes in my walk with Jesus. The times when I was actually courageous are too few and far between.

I remember the first time that I ever publicly put myself on the line for Christ. I had been a Christian not quite a year, and I was a freshman at the University of Atlanta. It was back during the free-speech movement, and most campuses had public places where you could make speeches and have rallies. Two of the seniors who had been like big brothers to me got the idea of targeting a week to preach Jesus to that campus. I was gung ho, but then they said, "We want you to give your testimony." I had thought it all sounded great up until then! But these guys had invested so much in me that even though I didn't have a lot of courage to give my testimony, I had even less courage to say no to them. I swallowed hard and said, "Okay, I'll do it."

Well, when the week got set up, it turned out I was going to be the first person to say anything. They had someone who was going to sing a couple of songs to gather the crowd, and then they wanted me to stand up and explain why we were there and give my testimony, before one of the other guys preached. I was shaking in my boots during all the weeks of preparation. But the cool thing was that while I was shaking and stumbling over my words (I could not even begin to tell you what I said, although others said that it was relatively articulate), God came through. His Spirit was there. He gave me the strength to actually put something on the line.

I later ministered for years in Eastern Europe among people who put their lives on the line for Christ every day. Many times I've been embarrassed by others' courage, because like you, I am a coward at heart. But the call to be the people

of God requires us to stand against that.

A week ago Ginger and I took a walk down memory lane and went to a Peter, Paul, and Mary concert. Peter, Paul, and Mary have been singing together for forty-two years. We were enjoying the music and nostalgia of the night, but I realized that they are still singing the same message about justice after all these years. Whether we agree or disagree with their political agenda, we have to concede that they have remained true to what they believe. Two years ago they were in a strawberry field outside Santa Cruz doing a concert for farm workers because they believed in them. And it made me think: “You know, I don’t put myself out there like that. I live in a comfortable place. I keep myself protected way too much.” And I was embarrassed by Peter, Paul and Mary, of all people, because they had the courage of their convictions to keep right on going.

We have the most important message in the world, but we shrink back. Well, Jesus said it wouldn’t be easy, yet he will be with us. The Spirit will bear witness and so will we. And in the power of the Spirit we can make a difference no matter what the opposition is.

In closing let’s remember Matthew 5:13-16:

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

NOTES

(1) Kelly Monroe, *Finding God at Harvard*, © 1996, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 354.

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