

# John 15: Jesus' "Viability" Theology

*Like Master, Like Servant: The Persecution Paradigm*

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John 15.18-21

17 This is my command: Love each other.

18 If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

19 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.

20 Remember the words I spoke to you:

‘No servant is greater than his master.’

If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

21 They will treat you this way because of my name,

for they do not know the One who sent me.

The most profound manifestation of love,  
eternal, infinite, and selfless in nature and efficacy,  
has, nevertheless,  
provoked the most intense and perpetual  
animosity and retaliation.

# The Heart of It All

*“This is my command: Love each other.”*

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*And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

COLOSSIANS 3.14

*And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.*

2 JOHN 6

- ❖ No other apostolic teaching so resonates the words of Jesus spoken this last evening as do the words of the Apostle John. Theologically, we understand from his teaching that God is the personification and definition of love (1 John 4.7-10) and that those who exemplify His love through obedience to His command(s) prove that He truly lives in them (1 John 4.12, 16, 20-21; cf. John 15.5, 7, 10).

# A Series of Defining Standards

*“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.”*

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- ❖ It must have been startling to the disciples to hear the change of direction in Jesus’ teaching, moving in a sentence from loving one another to being hated by the world. But this is the reality that Jesus experienced and for which he was endeavoring to prepare his disciples. Jesus gave his disciples a series of parallel factors that had defined his ministry and would define his true followers—
  - ▶ *“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.”*
  - ▶ *“If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”*
  - ▶ *“If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.”*

# A Preeminent Authenticating Paradigm

*Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is great than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.*

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*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

1 PETER 2.21

❖ Jesus is continuing his viability teaching with a paradigm which the disciples are just hours from personally experiencing—one for which they are unprepared and in which they will miserably fail. Within this paradigm is a reality that is neither appealing (nor acceptable to many “followers” of Jesus) but one that is as old as the history of humanity and profoundly authenticating:

*“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.”*

❖ From Abel to David and his cries in the psalms, from the prophet Jeremiah to the Messiah Jesus, those who authentically represent the nature and will of God have experienced animosity. Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus had clearly portrayed the root of that animosity which manifested itself in those who opposed him—

*“If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.” (8.42-47)*

❖ Throughout his ministry, Jesus' representation of the Father's words and will drew the ire and animosity of many; he never tried to find a middle ground of acceptability, for to do so would have been a betrayal of the One whose nature and will he had come to represent (cf. John 1.18). At stake was a world under condemnation and judgment because of their sin; at the root of that sin was pride and self-will; empowering that pride and self-will was "the lie" and "the liar"—and Jesus was both the antithesis and the antidote, the *One-and-Only-Truth-and-Way* to the Father. Throughout the apostolic writings, the same paradigm is presented: an "other-world" at odds with the present world (or culture), a people distinctly identified with Christ because of a new birth that results in a lifestyle which is provocatively at odds with prevailing attitudes. The Apostle Paul warned—  
*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.* (2 TIMOTHY 3.12-13)

❖ Here is the defining truth: there is no compatibility between the perspective of this world and that of the other world. Jesus said to his disciples:

*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.*

To be a friend of this world makes one hostile to God—

*You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (JAMES 4.4)*

and it was out of that hostile position that we were reconciled to God—

*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. (COLOSSIANS 1.21-23a)*

❖ For the “reborn” follower of Christ, his citizenship, identity, and loyalty belongs to heaven (Philippians 3.19-20) and he is called to represent Christ according to his nature, just as Christ represented the Father. The Apostle Peter wrote to believers who were experiencing the animosity which Jesus had described, urging them to live as foreigners and aliens in this world—

*Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written:*

*“Be holy, because I am holy.”*

*Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. . . . For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. (1 PETER 1.13-17, 23)*

- ❖ Throughout his ministry, Jesus has drawn a clear distinction between the values of the prevailing culture (as did the apostles) and the values of the kingdom of God.

*“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. (LUKE 13.24)*

He has emphatically stated that the values of the kingdom of God are neither inclusive nor self-affirming (Luke 14.26-27). Whether conservative or liberal, inclusionary or nationalistic, whenever the values of a society (or a segment thereof) become the defining standard for being a follower of Jesus, we have lost our way. We are called to be “other-worldly” just as Jesus was and the Father whose truth he presented (cf. John 1.18; 8.23; 16.28; 17.14, 16; 18.36).

- ❖ If we are truly in Christ, the True Vine, his life and likeness will be revealed in us; if it is authentic, it will absolutely be at odds with this world and its values.

# The Heart of Offensiveness

*They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.*

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*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*

ACTS 5.41

❖ On this night, the disciples would succumb to fear and abysmally fail in their loyalty to Jesus. Peter, who had declared his superior fidelity, would curse and renounce any association with Jesus. Just a couple of months later, however, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples will be empowered to declare—

*“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. . . . As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”* (ACTS 4.12, 20)

- ❖ In their own ability, the disciples failed; filled with the Spirit of Christ, the disciples boldly asserted the impossibility to *not* witness to the name of Jesus. It was as Jesus will momentarily say: *“And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning”* (15.27). Filled with the *“Spirit of testimony”* (15.26; see also Revelation 19.10), they could no more remain silent in the face of animosity than could Jesus.
- ❖ To this day, it remains the same: the heart of offensiveness, the root of animosity is the name of Jesus. There is tolerance and even acceptability if he is presented as a prophet or a good teacher. But when he is proclaimed as the narrow way and the singular truth, it is offensive. And yet, to not represent him in this way is to betray him and deceive those whose souls are at stake.

*Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross.*

*God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”* (ACTS 5.29-32)

❖ Jesus needs his disciples, and us, to understand that this willingness to speak, coupled with the resulting animosity, is true evidence that one is deeply abiding in Christ, is not of this world, and has a viable and authentic witness. Many years later, the Apostle Peter who this night will deny over and over any knowledge of Jesus, will, out of many subsequent years of finding joy in being “counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name,” write—

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. (1 PETER 3.12-18)*

May the same perspective, testimony, and authenticity be true of us.

## Final Thoughts—

For many of us, these truths are more hypothetical than experiential. We haven't been in circumstances like the apostles or many of our brothers and sisters around the world. We don't actually know what it is to suffer for the sake and name of Jesus. Nevertheless, there are important truths here for us to take to heart.

- (1) We should be encouraged by the fact that we have been given the same Spirit of testimony. All of the power and sufficiency of the Holy Spirit is given to every believer. "Greater is he who is in us, than he who is in the world" (1 John 4.4).

(2) Before Jesus spoke of persecution, he taught his disciples the foundational importance of abiding. It matters very much that we cultivate a day-by-day connection with Jesus, our source of life — spending time in the Word and in prayer; discerning what is best (Philippians 1.10) and experiencing the developing fruit of righteousness (Philippians 1.11) and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5.22-23) in our lives; learning to deeply and sacrificially love one another as Christ has loved us.

(3) Jesus taught that faithfulness begins with “little things.” We first learn to be an overcomer in small matters, such as “putting to death the misdeeds of the body” through the Spirit’s power (Romans 8.13), and overcoming personal temptations or spiritual laziness (Matthew 26.40-41). Small victories lead to bigger victories; small defeats inevitably mean defeat when more is at stake. Whether it is standing firm under pressure or “bearing much fruit to the Father’s glory” it all begins with the little things.