Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Character of a True Christian, Part 2
Scripture: Luke 6:23-26
Code: 42-85

Many people are, of course, fascinated by the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, fascinated by His birth which is, or course, signified in our worldwide Christmas celebrations. Fascinated by His miracles, fascinated by His ability to heal the sick, raise the dead and cast demons out of people, even fascinated by His death, fascinated by His resurrection. Without question the life of the Lord Jesus Christ is marvelous beyond words, unique, compelling.

And yet, it is not His life by which men are saved, it is His teaching. The way He lived, the miracles that He did wouldn't mean anything unless they were explained to us. His life can only be explained in the sense that He is God, that's why He was born of a virgin...that's why He had divine power. That's why He lived a sinless life, died a substitutionary death. That's why He was able to conquer death and rise a third day. He is God.

And that would be taking it a step in the right direction to understand not only the fascination and the amazing miraculous character of His life but to understand that the only explanation of that is that He is God is moving in the right direction, but in the end the only way that His life and His work can be applied to us is to understand His teaching because, after all, it is a matter of believing in the message that Jesus brought that saves. The world is full of people who are fascinated by His life. They might even concede that He was, in fact, God in some form. But in the end it's a question of believing what He said. His message is most critical.

Salvation from sin, escape from judgment and hell, eternal joy, heavenly glory doesn't come to people who are fascinated with Jesus Christ. It doesn't come to people who believe that He is God in human flesh. The devils believe and tremble. It isn't enough to feel sentimental about Jesus, it's not even enough to have respect for Him. Salvation comes to those who believe His message.

And so, as we work our way through the gospel of Luke from fascinating incident to fascinating incident, from powerful divine display to powerful divine display we find ourselves in the most critical of all portions when we come to sections which indicate His teaching. It is the words of Jesus that have life. And so we find ourselves in one of His greatest sermons, often called the Sermon on the Mount in Luke chapter 6. Let's open our Bibles again to Luke 6 and verse 20.

The initial message that Jesus preached was a message about sin. Obviously He hadn't died and He hasn't risen from the dead so He's not preaching the cross and resurrection the way the Apostles did

after those events. He was really preaching the way John the Baptist preached. He was preaching the way the prophets of the Old Testament, the true prophets preached. He was preaching repentance. He was preaching that people were sinners, that they are desperate sinners, that they are incurable sinners, that they are powerless sinners, resourceless sinners and that that sin is catapulting them into eternal judgment. And their sin is defined by the law of God. God gave His law, the prophets articulated it. John the Baptist obviously referred to it, Jesus as well. And sinners are therefore measured against the perfect standard of God's law and they all come short of that and therefore having violated God's law fall under His just and eternal condemnation. That is Jesus' message.

Everybody is a sinner headed for divine judgment which will catapult them into eternal hell where there is outer darkness, fire never quenched, a worm that never dies, weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth in eternal conscious punishment. That was His message. And the remedy for that was to recognize one's sinful condition and helplessness and cry out to God for mercy and forgiveness, realizing that one could make no contribution to that. That was His message. That was the message of John, repent. That was the message of the true prophets of old.

Now this is not a popular message. This wouldn't be a popular message in a pagan culture. This wouldn't be a popular message in an outright agnostic or atheistic culture. And it certainly is not a popular message in a religious culture because religious people convince themselves that their religion makes them good enough.

I was riding the other day, the gentleman who was taking me to a meeting I had and I said to him, "Do you have any particular belief in God?"

He said, "Oh, I believe in God...absolutely I believe in God." And he said, "I've always believed in God." And he said, "I just figure that I'm just a good man, I'm just a good person and there's just no way God could refuse me heaven."

That's a pretty typical, if not always articulated view of a religious person. And that's exactly the way the Jewish people thought. The Judaism of the day of Jesus was literally built on a system by which through your external, superficial morality and your ceremonial religious activity you certainly had offered to God enough to purchase your salvation. And the message of Jesus was, you're all wrong...you're all wrong. And they killed Him for it because that's not a popular message, particularly with religious people.

Jesus came preaching repentance. He came defining sin in absolutely no uncertain terms. His message was so clear that nobody could miss it. And essentially what He was saying to the Jews in His preaching was...You are sinners separated from God, alienated from God, outside the Kingdom, outside the Covenant, outside the promise...even though all of that came to you by His revelation.

They were deeply religious. They were widely moral on a superficial level and thus convinced they needed no repentance because they were pleasing to God.

As John the Baptist had before Him and had Isaiah and the other prophets before them, Jesus then came preaching repentance. In fact, His message was absolutely opposite what was politically correct and conventional wisdom. He called them essentially to overturn their entire self-assessment and to evaluate them the opposite way they were evaluating themselves. Recognize that they were not in the Kingdom of God, they did not know God, they were not His children, they were not headed for heaven but on the other hand, they were in a desperately wicked condition without God, without salvation, separated entirely from Him by sin. And they had covered their truth with their blanket of self-righteousness but the truth was under there, nonetheless. They had all demonstrated, as all people do, the inability to keep the law of God and to break it at one point is to be cursed by all of it. This was His message.

This is not the message they expected from the Messiah when He arrived. They expected the Messiah when He arrived to embrace the nation, to affirm their righteousness, their godliness, their kingdom state. The message that they thought the Messiah would give them was a message of salvation...you are the people, I'm here for the kingdom, the kingdom if yours, here we go, we're going to launch the kingdom and we're going to capture the whole world. That's essentially what they expected.

His message then was shocking. It was unacceptable. It was downright intolerable. And that's why they killed Him. And it's still the same message today only now we know how God can forgive the sinner through the death of Christ and His resurrection.That hadn't happened yet, obviously, when Jesus was preaching. His message was still repentance of confession of sin and crying out to God for mercy and grace to receive salvation, a salvation which is made possible because Jesus bore our sins on the cross and therefore satisfied the justice of God.

But Jesus preached sin. Not a popular subject then and not one now. He devastated the illusion by making it clear, along with the prophets before Him and the Apostles after Him and all faithful preachers throughout all of redemptive history, that it is not religious people who go to heaven, it is not superficially moral people who go to heaven, it is people who are overwhelmed with their sinfulness who go to heaven. It is people who are overwhelmed and oppressed by the reality of their condemnation and inability who reach out and cry out to God for forgiveness and are granted that forgiveness by mercy. Those are the people who go to heaven.

As I said last time, this teaching of Jesus shattered all of man's thinking, literally overturned all of it. And this passage is a classic illustration of that. Let me read verses 20 to 26 and then we'll comment on it.

"Turning His gaze on His disciples," now remember, disciples is a term for that mixed group of people who were the learners, the mathetes, that's the word in the Greek, the learners, the students of Jesus. Some were true disciples, some were false, some were in process one way or another. And He's going to give them the criteria by which they can evaluate the legitimacy and genuineness of their discipleship. So He says to this mixed group of followers, in this case not to be confused with the Apostles who were just identified in the previous passage. They were, of course, true disciples and now messengers, or Apostles. But to the rest of this large crowd of hundreds, if not thousands who followed Him. He says, here's what you need to know.

"Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you and ostracize you and cast insults at you and spurn your name as evil for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day and leap for joy for behold, your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets. But woe to you who are rich for you're receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are well-fed now for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets."

There is in no uncertain terms a very clear contrast and it is backward to the way people thought. Poverty, hunger, sorrow, rejection...a blessing? Riches, satisfaction, happiness and popularity...a curse? And that is precisely the point. What Jesus says is directly opposed to the way they think. That's why they're so intolerant of it.

As we saw back in the synagogue in Nazareth in the fourth chapter, when Jesus went to the Jews in the synagogue and said, "I offer the gospel of forgiveness and salvation to those of you who realize you are poor, prisoners, blind and oppressed," they were so offended that He designated them as poor, prisoners, blind and oppressed, spiritually bankrupt, spiritually imprisoned by their sin and shut up to the judgment of God, spiritually blind to divine truth, spiritually oppressed by their iniquities...they were so angry at that description of them that they took Jesus, and these are His own friends and family and His own town, after He preached that one sermon, out to a cliff and tried to throw Him off. They hate that message, particularly religious people hate that message, self-righteous people.

And here He comes with it again. It's the poor, and the hungry, and the weeping, and the rejected that are blessed. And it's the rich, and the well-fed, and the happy, and the popular that are cursed. These are the paradoxes of blessing and cursing we started into two weeks ago.

Let's remind you the paradoxes of the blessed. The first one is the blessing of poverty, verse 20, "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God." It's not talking about material

poverty, or economic poverty. There's no necessary virtue in that. It's talking about spiritual poverty. Blessed are those who understand their spiritual bankruptcy. Blessed are those who know they have no resources to buy their salvation. They know they can do nothing to please God. They have no ability to gain what is necessary to please God. Blessed are those who know they are spiritually destitute, bankrupt. They are the ones who receive the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is for the sinners who know they can't save themselves.

And then, secondly, came the blessing of hunger. "Blessed are you who hunger now for you shall be satisfied." It's not talking about people who don't have any food. He's talking about people who hunger for righteousness. Blessed are those who feel the emptiness. Blessed are those who know they aren't righteous. They feel it. They are starved for it. They understand their spiritual bankruptcy and they cry out to be fed righteousness from God, even though they are unworthy of it.

And then also we saw the blessing of sorrow, verse 21, "Blessed are you who weep now for you shall laugh." Those whose spiritual condition produces an overwhelming grief, this is brokenness and contriteness of heart which Isaiah spoke. Blessed are those who because they're so spiritually bankrupt, because they have such a profound hunger for righteousness which they know they don't have and can't earn are therefore in grief, those people will receive the riches of the Kingdom. Those people will be eternally satisfied and those people will have eternal joy.

And then the fourth, where we dropped off last time, comes in verse 22. "Blessed are you when men hate you and ostracize you and cast insults at you and spurn your name as evil for the sake of the Son of Man." This is the blessing of rejection to be added to the blessing of poverty, the blessing of hunger, the blessing of sorrow comes this upside-down blessing of rejection. I'm assuming that the people, even including the Apostles, would have assumed...Boy, here's the Messiah, we believe the Messiah, we're not His messengers, we're going to go out and preach this message, isn't it going to be wonderful? We're going to proclaim the message and people are going to hear about the gospel, they're going to hear about forgiveness and certainly their hearts are going to be open and the Messiah is going to establish His Kingdom and it's all going to be wonderful. And Jesus tells them at the very outset, get ready, you're going to be hated, you're going to be ostracized, you're going to be insulted, you're going to be spurned. That's how it's going to be, blessed are you.

The first three deal with how the sinner sees himself as poor, hungry and sorrowful. The fourth one is how the world sees the sinner. They hate him. They alienate him. They ostracize him because he has a true understanding of his sinfulness and a true understanding of his need for grace from God. Four verbs are used there in verse 22...hate, ostracize, cast insults, and spurn, just summing up the vitriol, the hostility that's going to come from a sinful world.

You're going to be hated. You're going to be excluded. You're going to be slandered. You're going to be rejected. This is a sort of sequence of evil attitudes directed at believers. They're going to

spurn your name. What does that mean? John, and Bill, and Saran, and so...? No, your name, Christian...Christian as evil because of the Son of Man. Jesus said, "Because of Me they're going to hate you because this is My message, this is My gospel, this is My salvation, this is really My call to repentance."

I'm not preaching My own call to sinners, I'm just echoing the call of Christ, right? I'm just echoing the Word of God. And so here Jesus has just called His disciples together, those that are going to be Apostles. He's pulled the Twelve out of a larger group of disciples, identified the Twelve. Very soon after that, of course, He come down the mountain, He starts into this sermon called the Sermon on the Mount and right off the bat He says, "I want you to get ready, guys, because if you're going to be identified with Me it's going to be persecution, hostility. They're going to hate the name that you bear because they hate Me."

Turn to Matthew chapter 10, it's worth taking a deeper look at this issue from Matthew's account. In Matthew chapter 10 we have the occasion where Jesus gave power to His Apostles, and we'll come to that in Luke 9, this is a parallel passage to Luke 9. But I want you to notice what Jesus says to them when He gives them instruction...go down to verse 16. You can...they've been given, obviously, the title of Apostle, they have been given the ability to heal the sick, they've been given the ability to cast out the demons so they have power over the physical world and the spiritual world. They might sense that everything is going to fall into place, it's all going to be great. And so He tells them in verse 16, "I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." You're going to go out there and they're going to try to eat you up. Verse 17, He takes it further, "Beware of men, you're going to have to be wily, you're going to have to be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves, be aware of men because they will deliver you up to the courts and they will scourge you in the synagogues." This happened to the Apostle Paul five times, he received 39 lashes from the Jews. They literally whipped him in the synagogue. Talk about church discipline. They whipped him with 39 lashes...whipping and tearing his flesh because of what they viewed as heresy, because he was a Christian.

And Jesus is telling the Twelve, they're going to take you to court over this. And they're also going to lash you in the synagogues. "They're going to bring you, in verse 18, before governors and kings for My sake as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. And when they deliver you up, don't become anxious about how or what you will speak, it will be given you in that hour what you are to speak, for it is not you who speak but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you." And that would still be true, we don't get direct revelation now but when you get in that situation if it happens today, you just speak what the Spirit has spoken in Scripture, you just speak the truth of God's Word.

"Brother...verse 21...will deliver up brother to death. A father will deliver his child to death. Children will rise up against parents, cause them to be put to death," literally killing is going to happen in the family over this identification with Jesus Christ. Verse 22, "You will be hated by all on account of My name." And there is the issue again, that identification with Jesus Christ is so repulsive particularly to

religious sinners that you're going to suffer.

Down in verse 24 He says something I think is very important, "A disciple is not above his teacher, a slave is not above his master." Point being, if I'm your master and they mistreat me and I'm your teacher and they mistreat me, don't expect to get any different treatment. That's how it's going to be. They're going to persecute you the way they persecuted Me.

This is still going on even today. Christians are being persecuted today. I think more are dying, according to the statistics I have today than any time in history, mostly at the hands of radical Muslims. I want you to turn to John chapter 9 because I think we need to understand what the Lord is saying to these Apostles. They might have thought, you know, when they were identified as being the Twelve Apostles, Jesus pulls them out, they might have been sort of congratulating each other on this wonderful honor and then they're immediately hearing about what it's going to cost them, because the message is so contrary to the wicked hearts of people.

In John 9 Jesus healed a blind man and people came to the blind man's parents, you remember, he was born blind so he had congenital blindness, or some blindness that occurred at his birth. And Jesus healed him and he could see. So people came to the parents in verse 22 and they said, verse 21, "You know, can you tell us, you know, what's going on here? How does he see?" They started questioning in verse 19, and there's this little dialogue...his parents said, "Well, we know that this is our son and we know that he was born blind, but if you want to know you can ask him. You ask him why it is that he can see." Verse 22 says, "His parents said this, they deflected the question to the son because they were afraid of the Jews for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Him to be Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue," excommunicated. And in many cases with a whipping at the same time. So his parents for that reason, verse 23 says, "Ask him, he's of age."

Go to chapter 15 of John and again Jesus refers particularly to this kind of hostility. John 15:18, Jesus said, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. Don't be surprised." Verse 19, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own." Boy, that's such a profound truth. "But because you're not of the world but I choose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you." It just goes with the territory that there are all kinds of religion tolerated within the world because they're all a part of the same system. And they all can agree not necessarily on everything, but they can all agree on one thing and that is that they're against Christianity.

Remember this...verse 20 again...he repeats, "A slave is not greater than his master, if they persecuted Me, they'll persecute you. If they kept My word, they'll keep yours also. All these things they will do to you for My namesake because they do not know the One who sent Me." Verse 23, "He who hates Me hates My Father also." They hate you, they hate Me, they hate My Father. That's how it is.

Verse 16 He says, this is in the upper room at the Last Supper, as we call it, when He's had His last night with His disciples. He's getting them ready for what is to come. This is some time much later than the incident in Luke 6, but He's giving them the same message. "I'm telling you these things," He says in verse 1 of 16, "so that you don't stumble when it happens because they're going to make you outcasts from the synagogue. An hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he's offering service to God. And these things will they do because they have not known the Father or Me." So this is to be expected. This is exactly how it's going to be.

By the end of the first century, this was so embedded in Judaism. The early Christians suffered greatly, as you know. I mean, take a look at the Apostle Paul, he was going everywhere breathing out threatenings and slaughterings against the Christians and acting this very thing himself. Then you have the occasion in the seventh chapter of Acts of the stoning of Stephen by those Jews of Jerusalem who killed him because he was a Christian heretic. This is the way it went. By the end of the first century they had developed a way in which they thought they could smoke out any Christian Jews in the synagogues.

There's a series of prayers called the Shemoneh Esreh that developed among the Jews. There are 18 of these prayers. Let me read you the twelfth prayer of these 18. And by the way, these prayers were prayed aloud by the individuals in the synagogue. This is the twelfth prayer. It is a prayer for the renegades, "Let there be no hope and may the arrogant soon be rooted out in our days, the Christians and the heretics perish as in a moment and be blotted from the book of life and with the righteous may they not be inscribed, blessed are You, O Lord, who humble the arrogant." That's the prayer.

So here's a Jewish prayer basically damning Christians to be prayed. And they had them pray it personally in the synagogue so that they could watch to see who stumbled over that prayer. And who stumbled over that prayer could then be determined to be a Christian or a Christian supporter and therefore put out of the synagogue. So that prayer became a test...a curse kind of designed to expose Christians who would stumble trying to pray that prayer if it was not already manifest who they were. Then they would be put out of the synagogue.

So what Jesus was saying was going to happen. And it did happen. Most of the Apostles themselves, as you know in our series on the Apostles, were killed for the proclamation of the truth. And those who named the name of Christ were put out of synagogues, whipped and killed as well. That kind of persecution goes on and goes on and goes on and goes on for the most part at the hands of religious people who do not like the diagnosis of Christianity that the man and the woman without Christ is a doomed, damned sinner, no matter how religious he or she may be. That is the repulsive diagnosis.

Now, go back to Luke 6. So He says you'll be blessed if this happens. You should be among the blessed, you should count yourself among the blessed because that's reality. In fact, when all of this comes upon you because of your name, Christian, and because of the sake of the Son of Man, a title we already discussed earlier in this gospel, here should be your response. Verse 23, "Be glad in that day."

Now let me grab you right there...that day. That isolates the day of persecution. It's not always going to be that way. It's not going to be non-stop persecution for everybody. Be glad in that day...what day? That day. Go back to verse 22, "Blessed are you when men hate you." That "when" is a very important word. When indicates that this not constant, this is occasional. When it happens, and then later, in that day that it happens...so we don't want to set this up so that you expect that your life will be nothing but an act of persecution and you develop some kind of martyr complex.

Look, the early church, according to Acts 2:47, had favor with all the people. Later on in Acts chapter 5 verse 13 it says the people in Jerusalem had great esteem for the Christians. First Timothy chapter 2 says that we're to conduct ourselves in a godly fashion, living a quiet, peaceable, tranquil life so that there will be respect. Peter says you ought to live your lives so that evil people have nothing of which to accuse you. Titus chapter 3 says you're to live your life in a very quiet way, in a gracious way so that you have a testimony as to the transforming power of Christ in your life to reach those who are without Him.

There is that balancing reality that the life of a Christian can be a dramatic testimony to the power of God. And to those who are open to the gospel, it is an important, critical part of evangelism, isn't it? But there will come times when they will hate you and ostracize you and slander you and spurn you. There will come "that day" when such things take place...again emphasizing the occasional nature of this. It's going to come. It has to do generally with how uncompromising and how bold and how faithful you are to say what should be said in a religious environment, or confronting the sinners. If you never say anything, you can escape. If you compromise, you can escape. If you keep your mouth shut you can escape it. You tell the truth, it's pretty hard to avoid in some settings.

But He says, when it happens be glad in that day. In fact, be so glad you leap for joy, start dancing...exuberance, get completely carried away. Now we do that but it isn't usually connected to persecution. We don't, even as Christians, we don't quite get this. If you're being persecuted because of the name of Jesus Christ, if you're being persecuted because of the name of the Son of Man, if you're being persecuted because you're a Christian, if you're being persecuted because you're giving a true diagnosis of a sinner's heart and you're confronting that spiritual poverty, that spiritual bankruptcy there, you're trying to overturn their own sense of self-esteem and self-respect and self-righteousness, if you're attacking that as you must to get the gospel through, if you're faithful in doing that and you come to hostility, even being thrown out of a synagogue, even being whipped,

even having your life threatened or taken away from you, put on your dancing shoes...be exuberant.

Why? "Leap for joy for behold your reward is great where? In heaven." You have to have an other worldly perspective to deal with this. If all you want is comfort here, you're going to miss it. If you understand that your eternal reward is proportionate to your willingness to confront and suffer for the gospel, then you realize that the little suffering here is not worthy, as Paul said, to be compared with the glory there. That's the eternal perspective.

What do I care what hostility comes to me in this life for the truth of the gospel? What do I care what people do to me in this life for preaching the truth when I understand that there is a reward for me in the glory that I will receive and be able to cast at the feet of my Christ for the little suffering here? And I am confident that that eternal reward is something having cast it at the feet of Christ you will yet enjoy its fullness forever and ever.

That's why in Acts 5 when the Apostles were preaching, they...it didn't take them long to see this fulfilled, you know. They started preaching on the day of Pentecost, no sooner did they start preaching then the persecution came, right? Right away, told them not to preach anymore. Chapter 5 of Acts, verse 41, they had...verse 40, they had taken the Apostles in and they...the Jewish authorities flogged them, they gave them those 39 lashes across their backs and they ordered them to stop speaking the name of Jesus and they released them. What is the next verse? "So they went on their way depressed?" No. "They went on their way from the presence of the council rejoicing." Why? "That they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for His name." What a privilege. You have been given a great privilege. We who are not worthy to suffer for the name of Christ, we're not worthy to even be mentioned in the same breath are given the great privilege of suffering for His sake.

Paul said in Colossians 1:24, this great statement, "I fill up in my body the afflictions of Christ." What a statement. In other words, every persecution that comes to me is intended for Christ. He's not here so they get me in place of Him. And he said I rejoice in this, I bear in the body the marks of Christ, he said to the Galatians. What a privilege for an unworthy, wretched sinner to literally be punished in the place of Christ who on the cross was punished for his sake. What a great reality. I'm not even worthy to be taken blows meant for Christ, but what an honor, what a privilege.

He said there's another privilege. Look forward and see your eternal reward and look back and see who you're associated with for in the same way their fathers used to treat...whom?...the prophets. You're in some really good company. You can go through your suffering for your honest presentation of the reality of sin and judgment and the need for mercy, grace and forgiveness and salvation, you can take that hostility with a forward look, that's fine. The sufferings of this world are not worthy to be compared at the glory that shall come. I can take the forward look. I can also spin and take the backward look and say...this puts me in pretty good company.

This is familiar Old Testament history. In the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets. You study the Old Testament and study the story of Israel, see what they did to the true prophets. Turn to Matthew 21, this will be a glimpse of it without going through the Old Testament. Matthew...I'm sorry, 22, there's a parable at the end of Matthew 21 that gives a description of how they treated the prophets in a parable. You remember the Lord told about a man who had a vineyard and he hired people to run it. And they came back to check on it, sent servants back, they killed the servants, beat the servants. Finally he sent his son, they killed his son. That's a picture of Israel, God's vineyard. He sent the prophets, they killed the prophets. He sent His Son, they killed His Son.

Then in chapter 22...let's go to chapter 23, I want to get done. Chapter 23 verse 31, "Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, He says." This is..this chapter 23 is a blast against the religious leaders of Israel. It starts out in verse 1 being directed at scribes and Pharisees. In verse 31, "Consequently you bear witness against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers." You're going to murder Me, you're going to murder those who name My name, you're going to murder My Apostles, you're just the sons of your fathers who murdered the prophets. And that is a strong statement of condemnation. It couldn't be stronger.

Then you see the sort of pathos of it in verse 37 where Jesus says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem." How does He define Jerusalem? "Who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. This is Jerusalem." So when they persecute you, you're in good company. You're in some good company. It was Israel, not just any religious group but it was Israel that killed the true prophets of God. In James he...James writes his epistle to encourage suffering believers. And in chapter 5 verse 10 he says as an example of suffering and endurance, "Take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."

You want a good illustration of those who endured persecution, look at the prophets all through history, folks, those people who preached the truth have been vilified and persecuted. Why? Because the message that man is a wretched sinner heading for eternal judgment and has nothing good in himself to remedy it but must cast himself on the grace and mercy of God is repulsive to the sinner. He wants to believe in his own self-esteem, his own self-righteousness. And so they killed the prophets then, they killed the prophets at the time of Jesus. They're still killing those who name the name of Christ even today and persecution is a way of life. There are some places they can't kill us because the law doesn't allow it. In places where the law does allow it, they do it.

So we hear about the blessed...the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful and the rejected, they're the blessed because they're identified with the true prophets of the ages and because their reward is great in heaven. Now let's look at the cursed and then we'll close. And this will unfold by contrast without a lot of comment.

The contrast comes...the paradoxes of the cursed, verses 24 to 26. "On the other hand, woe to you who are rich for you're receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are well-fed now for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets."

What a contrast. First of all, the curse of riches. Verse 24, "Woe to you who are rich for you are receiving your comfort in full." It's not talking about material riches, not talking about economics here. Abraham was rich and Job was rich and Deuteronomy says it's God who gives you the power to get wealth. We're not talking about the physical world, the economics. We're talking about the spiritual realm. Woe to those of you who think you have enough spiritual riches to buy your salvation. Woe to those of you who think you have by your own acts of righteousness both moral and religious earned your way into the Kingdom of God. Woe to you Pharisees, like Luke 18, who go to the temple and say, "I thank You that I'm not like other men, like this terrible sinner over here, I fast and I tithe, and I give alms," etc., etc., etc. "Aren't you happy with my achievements?" Woe to you. Woe to you religious people.

Later on, of course, He calls them hypocrites. Woe to you who don't know you're the poor, prisoners, blind and oppressed. Woe to you who don't know that you are the poor and you are the hungry and you are the sad and thus you are the rejected.

Why is a woe pronounced on them? Why? What's the curse. You're receiving your comfort in full. Wow. This is it. Enjoy it. This is it. This is it. Full payment on earth.

Well what about after this? Oh, after this? You're not going to have any comfort. You're going to hell, Jesus said, repeatedly. And hell is a place of outer darkness, never light. It's a place of a fire that's never quenched and a worm that never dies. Horrible discomfort, eternal discomfort characterizes this place.

Then there's the curse of satisfaction. In verse 25, "Woe to you who are well-fed now for you'll be hungry." Woe to those of you who think you have satisfied everything. You're full of yourself. You're full of your self-righteousness, full of your pompous hypocrisy. You don't feel the need for anything. You don't feel the hunger that the sinner feels because you don't think you're the sinner. Woe to you for you're going to be hungry forever. At least four times alone in Matthew's gospel Jesus says forever you're going to be gnashing your teeth, wanting something to satisfy your gnawing heart and never finding it. A never-ending gnawing hunger in the pit of your tormented soul.

Then there's the curse of happiness. In verse 25, "Woe to you who laugh now for you shall mourn and weep." And what is hell? It is a place, Jesus said over and over, at least four times in Matthew, where there is weeping and wailing. Woe to you who are happy with your religious achievement.

Woe to you who are smugly content with your religion. Woe to you that are happy with your morality. Woe to you...woe, woe to you. Why? Because you're going to weep forever. Hell is a place of infinite, ever-lasting, unrelented grief. The tears never stop falling.

And then the fourth is the curse of popularity. In verse 26, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets." And Scripture is pretty clear what happens to false prophets, and those who join with them and affirm them. Oh, you want everybody to speak well of you, huh? You...you've designed a religion that causes people to speak well of you. That's a sign of being cursed. When everybody likes your approach to religion, you're in serious trouble. When you can invent a kind of religion that offends nobody, that's a serious indicator you're not in the Kingdom.

When everybody likes you and everybody likes your approach to religion because it's not offensive, you need to be grouped with false prophets because that's what false prophets do. They seek popularity. The wider the popularity the better because they're in it for the money, filthy lucre, greed.

Illustration, turn to Jeremiah and we'll wrap it up at this point. Jeremiah 6, in the day of Jeremiah in Israel the prophet was warning everybody about judgment and along with that...poor Jeremiah. Nobody listened to Jeremiah, he was the one sort of true voice at the end of Judah's day. And there were so many false prophets all over the place telling lies and the lies were popular because the false prophets said things that people like to hear, as they always do. That's how they get rich. And Jeremiah was getting poorer and poorer by the day because he was saying what nobody wanted to hear...the truth about sin and judgment.

But in Jeremiah 6:13 we read, "For from the least of them even to the greatest of them everyone is greedy for gain and from the prophet even to the priest everyone deals falsely." But you've got greedy, profit, motive driving prophets and priests and that's why they tell their lies so that the land is literally rampant with them. Over in chapter 8 verse 10, "Everybody again...verse 10 says...is greedy for gain, the prophet, the priest who practices deceit." Again bringing up the same issue, false prophets in it for the money, telling lies, collecting money from the people who love the lies.

Chapter 14 verse 14, "The Lord says, 'The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name.'" And that's what galls the Lord when they do it in His name as if this is His Word. "I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them. They are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds." I didn't send them and they're speaking for Me and I didn't give them that message. Twenty three, chapter 23 verse 1, "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture, declares the Lord. Woe to those shepherds." Pretty clear, the Old Testament is, about what happens to false prophets. Judgment is coming upon them.

Down in verse 9, "As for the prophets, my heart is broken within me, all my bones tremble, I've become like a drunken man, even like a man overcome with wine because of the Lord and because of His holy words." He's literally shaking under the threat of judgment that's going to come down on the heads of the false prophets and everybody who follows them. It's so devastating that it causes Jeremiah to just reel under the weight of that coming doom. Verse 15, "Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets, I'm going to feed them wormwood and make them drink poisonous water for from the prophets of Jerusalem pollution has gone forth into the all the land." The Lord is going to destroy them. And there's more and more in this, all through Jeremiah.

But I want you to go back to chapter 5, here's the key. Chapter 5 verses 30 and 31, "An appalling and horrible thing has happened, the prophets prophesy falsely, the priests rule on their own authority...here's the key line, you can underline it...and My people...what?...love it," they love it. Love it.

This is the way of their fathers, Jesus said. They're going to treat you this way. They're going to hate the truth and love lies and they're going to love false prophets, just like you who are willing to be persecuted for My name are like the prophets of old. The people who hate you are like the people of old who loved the false prophets. False prophets were popular, are popular, will be popular. And the people who follow them along with them will all be doomed. You must preach the truth, He's telling His disciples. You must believe it. If you believe it there's a price to pay, you're going to be persecuted. And I know that that day there were some who owned that message, embraced Christ as their Messiah, saw themselves as sinners, repented and cried out for mercy and there were some who no doubt began to turn the other direction.

Are you the spiritually poor, hungry, sorrowful and rejected, crying out to God for mercy through the sacrifice of Christ to whom God has given eternal riches, eternal satisfaction, eternal joy and eternal acceptance and reward? Or are you the spiritually full, rich, happy, popular to whom God promises eternal poverty, eternal emptiness, eternal sorrow and eternal rejection? Only two categories.

In response to being on television the other day I received a lot of e-mail and a lot of letters. Sat down in my office and opened one this morning when I came in that shook me up. This was a letter that's filled with filthy words that I wouldn't repeat, I could barely even bring myself to reading them, every foul, dirty, filthy word imaginable and unimaginable. And the letter went on to vilify me and condemn me and damn me as grandiose terms as this person was capable of writing. Just one line after another condemning me because he saw me on television and there I was proclaiming the gospel of sin and death and salvation only in Jesus Christ. And he was so furious.

He said at the end of the letter, I can't remember the exact quote, "I'm not going to kill you," but something like, "I'm just going to hope you're removed, get out of the way so we can have world

peace," or something like that. But the intent was, if he could, to kill me. What was so shocking about the letter was, somewhere about a third into it he said in 1976 I baptized him in this church. Well obviously he was not a Christian. One line I do remember, he said, "I'm falling and I love it more and more all the time."

What's the problem? Is there some big apologetic thing that needs to happen to convince him of the truth? No, this is a person who loves sin and hates the messenger who exposes it. But that's what we do, isn't it? That's what we do. And that's where you have to come to an honest assessment of your own sin. Then you're going to run to Christ, then you're going to run to Christ. You're not going to be asking all kinds of questions about this and that and who is He and what about this and what about that, you're going to be crying to God for mercy and a redeemer.

So the message in the gospel is always the message of sin, it's the bad news that creates the demand for the good news. And that's the way Jesus preached. There's more to come in this message, but that's the way it began.

Father, please take this truth to the hearts of all of us here and work Your mighty saving work in every life. Break those barriers down so that sinners can see their true condition and cry out to you, a God of love and grace and mercy who weeps to save sinners. Do it, Lord, for Your glory. Amen.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2014 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).