

JOHN — WEEK 21

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Jesus challenges His disciples to martyrdom. They will be subject to strange persecution, just because they are not of this world. They get to be more than mere servants—they will be trusted friends—but they will be hated insanely.

Whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.

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1 John 15:12–13

“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.”

This is the challenge that launched the Church. It’s a clear call to martyrdom.

That implication should be obvious to Jesus’s disciples, given how many times He has talked about dying. But after the cross, there’s no escaping the calling *to lay down one’s life for his friends*. Given the many warnings Jesus gave them about coming trials, this adds a chilling element.

The disciples took this chilling command to heart—and obeyed it. That’s how they *“turned the world upside down.”* — Acts 17:6b

But notice one other twist. We often think of Christian sacrifice as being for all people, especially for widows and orphans. That’s true, but that’s not the command in this passage. This is a call to sacrifice for each other—for other Christians.

There’s a curious analogy from the animal kingdom. A tiger will defeat a lion one-on-one. Tigers are bigger. But five lions will defeat five tigers because lions work together, and tigers don’t. The lions will attack one tiger at a time.

The disciples must hang together like a band of brothers or, to paraphrase Ben Franklin, they will all hang separately. However, unlike the American Revolution, most of them were destined to be martyred anyway.

In the kingdom of heaven, that’s winning.

This commandment still stands. We are called to do the same level of commitment. Martyrdom may not be likely, but major commitment is still possible.

Specifically, this is a call to a high level of commitment within the body. That comes first.

Christians tend to get so passionate about evangelism, charity, and other outreach ministries that we let the needs inside the church languish.

This is curious because it can be almost the perfect opposite of martyrdom. The challenge with many church tasks is that they’re boring.

What a curious way to make sacrifices for the Lord—to do things that aren’t hard and aren’t dangerous. They aren’t even that much of a sacrifice. It’s just that they get you no praise. No one will notice, much less be impressed.

But make no mistake, these things are important to the kingdom—and to its king.

2 John 15:14–17

“You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another.”

This passage is often misinterpreted, or at least over-applied. It doesn't say they aren't servants. If there's any doubt about that, verse seventeen clears it up. It's a command. You don't give commands to friends.

Here, Jesus shocks His servants by telling them that they can **also** be His friends. It's a radical departure from the norms at that time.

Master-servant relationships are common in the Bible, as they were in society back then. Any kingdom is a land of servanthood; everyone is subservient to the king. Jesus is the ultimate king—Lord of all creation. The disciples' relationship with Jesus is, and will always be, one of servanthood.

But their master-servant relationship has a unique twist—knowledge. *A servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.* Jesus has imparted knowledge to them directly by teaching them *all things that I heard from My Father.*

But, in the context of previous verses, we see another element of this—the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught them directly, but He augments that with the Holy Spirit.

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.” — John 14:26

That's how He promotes His servants to servant-friends.

The problem is that we forget the servant bit. It's all way too buddy-buddy in our eyes.

This is nuts. He's **God**, for crying out loud. What kind of relationship would you expect?

Maybe it's better to just focus on the special nature of the knowledge He imparts and not on the label “friend.” Actually, the primary definition of the Greek word translated here as friends (philous – φίλους) is “beloved.” It's a nice term, but the buddy-buddy feeling isn't really there. “Beloved servants” might be closer than “servant-friends.”

The point is that we're worth giving knowledge to. We're not mindless servants that just need to be told what to do. We have the ability to use knowledge to creatively solve problems as they arise. It's thrilling to know that we're much more than a simple go-fer.

But thinking of ourselves as being on the same plane as the Lord is ridiculous.

3 John 15:18–20

“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet 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 servant 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.”

This is cold. The disciples are going to be hated.

Jesus has encountered opposition, but His followers haven’t gotten any push-back.

Yet.

Jesus is the target while Jesus is around, but that’s about to end. Things are going to get rough.

But that’s not an entirely new lesson; they’ve been warned about this before. What’s new here is the nature of the hatred. They won’t be hated because of who they followed; they’ll be hated because of something a bit like racism. Call it “worldism.”

If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. You simply aren’t one of “them.”

And this isn’t by birth, but because Jesus *chose you out of the world*.

What a curious way to say it—*chose you out*. Sounds like they were picked from a lineup.

Which isn’t that far off. Jesus chose His disciples rather abruptly. He said, “*Follow Me*,” and they did.

It’s how they got in.

It’s how everyone gets in.

From our point of view this feels rather arbitrary. Some are chosen; some are not.

That’s true in a sense, but it ignores the planning involved. We are more than just chosen; we were created by the chooser for His purposes. It’s all by design.

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. — 2 Timothy 2:20

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? — Romans 9:19–21

Remember, everything is about God’s glory. That’s the key to this system.

4 John 15:21–25 (ESV)

But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘They hated me without a cause.’”

When Jesus says, “*they would not be guilty of sin,*” He’s not saying they would have led sinless lives, just that the specific sin of rejecting Him would not have been on their rap sheet.

But this sin is uniquely bad. Jesus had *done among them the works that no one else did*. Those works should convince anyone. Rejecting them takes real conviction.

That’s telling.

Behold! Verse 25 is another one of those purpose constructions.

Wait. What? How can the fulfillment of, “*They hated me without a cause,*” (from Psalm 69:4 and Psalm 35:19) be important enough to be the **purpose** of something this horrible?

I’m not sure there’s an answer we can comprehend, but there’s no question that this is what the verse says. It’s reminiscent of this passage from Isaiah:

*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” And he said, “Go, and say to this people:
“‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’
Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.” — Isaiah 6:8–10 (ESV)*

It’s all a perfect example of God’s priorities not being on our wavelength. Something’s going on in these passages that’s important in the grand scheme of things, but it’s above me.

I suppose that’s the point.

It’s above us.

5 John 15:26–16:4a

“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.

“These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.”

As rough as this “boot camp for disciples” has been so far, Jesus manages to crank it up a notch. Things aren’t just going to get rough; they’re going to get creepy.

“The time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.”

The coming persecution will be so extreme it’ll almost seem impossible. It won’t be normal human evil.

And, yet again, we see a purpose construction in the Greek. *“But these things I have told you, [for the purpose] that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.”*

Absent such a clear warning, the bizarre actions of their persecutors would be even more terrifying. Imagine how confused the disciples would be when this kind of insane persecution hit. It’s one thing to deal with attacks that are vicious, but they will deal with attacks that don’t even make sense.

Welcome to spiritual warfare.

Spiritual warfare is rarely taught, because it’s so creepy that folks don’t even want to think about it.

But spiritual warfare is too important to be ignored. Today people are aware of scams, cyber-security, and other modern dangers, but we ignore the ancient danger of spiritual warfare at our peril.

Our spiritual enemies are much older than we are, smarter than we are, and more powerful than we are. The latest, most clever scams are nothing compared to what these guys cook up. They can trick people into almost anything. We are pawns in their eyes.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the point. We are pawns. The disciples were pawns too.

We must always act appropriately—act like pawns. That means being dependent on the one who is competent and able to overcome these enemies. That dependency generally takes the form of prayer.

This is not easy. Being dependent, and praying dependently, means admitting weakness and relinquishing control. That doesn’t come naturally. I don’t even like turning my luggage over to baggage handlers.

But when dealing with spiritual warfare, clinging to control is failure in a can.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What mundane jobs have you felt called to?
2. How do we overrate our relationship with the Lord?
3. Have you encountered hatred purely because of your faith?
4. Has your faith been molded by witnessing a miracle?
5. Have you detected spiritual warfare recently?

Items for prayer: