

March 17, 2019

A slave is not greater than the master

John 15:18-16:4

The most popular Bible verse on social media is NOT John 3:16 (*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*). It has been eclipsed by the hope and promise of prosperity in Jeremiah 29:11: *"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*¹

Dr. Peter Phillips (University of Durham), comments, *"People don't want to put a verse about Jesus's death upon the cross on social media ... We find millennials tend to share therapeutic messages."* That sounds wonderful.

But does Jeremiah 29:11 say what we think it says? In context, it's part of a letter. A letter from Jeremiah to exiles in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:1). It is written to people who are suffering for their faith, and will be for 70+ years, several generations. Jeremiah 29:11 is a promise of a future a long way off – longer than most of the people who originally received this letter will live. They will never see this prophecy fulfilled. In the meantime they are slaves with no rights and no status, enduring hardship and ridicule.

So Jeremiah 29:11 **is NOT** God's promise that today or in the near future you will be wealthy, healthy, and successful. It **is** God's promise that one day, some day, you will be with the Lord and all will be good. In the meantime, get on with life – life in exile. It may be hard. Life may be challenging. Life may be difficult. God will get you through.

That's not quite so "therapeutic" is it?

Jesus is not always therapeutic either

The vine (John 15:1-8) seems like such a peaceful picture of the Christian life. It sounds as if we are to spend our days ripening against a sun-drenched wall in a beautiful garden, producing the fruit of Christian character that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23). Bringing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control to the world sounds a rewarding and even glamorous activity, quite literally a "plum" job!

If that is what the disciples thought, they must have experienced a shock when Jesus changes tone: *"If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you. Do you remember what I*

¹ Laura Fitzpatrick, "Top bible quote changes with times," *Vancouver Sun*, February 5, 2019

told you? 'A slave is not greater than the master.' Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you ... in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.' (15:18-20, 16:2).

It sounds a lot like we're in exile, too. It sounds a lot like Jesus expects us to be in "Babylon" rather than Jerusalem. What do we do? Hold that thought ...

"The world"

The phrase "the world" is common in John's Gospel. When you read "the world" in Scripture don't only think of the earth itself. Think also of the world of people, the social and economic relationships that link them together. The "world" in John's Gospel usually means the whole social/cultural/political world around us.

This "world" has two faces. One side reflects God's love. Ours is a world that God has shaped, loved, touched, entered, and illuminated. The world was made through Jesus (1:10). God loves the world (3:16). Jesus comes to be the Light of the world (8:12). The world is meant to be a realm of beauty and blessing.

The other face of the world is harsher and uglier. There is much evil, pain, and suffering. There are people who despise Jesus and cannot bear the thought that others love him (15:18-19). People reacted negatively to Jesus then; they still do so today.

Persecution and struggle have always been part of the church's story. Christians were persecuted immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus, both by the Jews and the Romans (see Acts 4:27).

- the religious leaders imprisoned Peter and John for preaching.
- James, the brother of John, was put to death with the sword (Acts 12:2)
- Paul, who persecuted Christians before his conversion (Acts 9), was imprisoned on several occasions; eventually he was beheaded.
- *"Antipas, my faithful witness,"* was put to death for his faith (Revelation 2:12-13).
- According to tradition, all of Jesus' 12 disciples were martyred except John.
- After Nero, there was violent persecution under Decius (third century), and even more serious persecution under Diocletian (fourth century).

Throughout the centuries, Christians have suffered in different parts of the world. The 20th century saw widespread persecution of Christians under Communist regimes in the Soviet Union, China and Southeast Asia.

The 21st Century has seen Christians brutally persecuted in Iraq, Syria, and many other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as China and south Asia. According to research by the charity OpenDoors, North Korea, Afghanistan and Pakistan remain in the top five places where it is hardest to be a Christian. The rise in attacks by Hindu

extremists in India and tough new laws in China have seen believers in those countries face “extreme” and “very high” levels of persecution respectively. 245 million Christians experience high levels of persecution in 73 countries around the world.

Why?

Think about Jesus. He preached love, peace, hope, forgiveness, mercy, and joy. His own people killed Him. Why? People don't always like us. Why not? After all, we are people who teach about God's love, peace, hope, forgiveness, mercy, and joy as well. We try to live by maxims like, *"Love your neighbour as yourself"*? We do good works. We care for people. We try to bring healing. We are (I hope) non-judgmental and love everyone. Are we not loveable people?

The reality is that in “the world,” true self-giving love is not a popular theme. Our economic system is not built on helping others out, but on each person acquiring as much as possible for themselves. The world is built on personal profit, power, and political clout. Let's be honest the real heroes of our world are the Donald Trumps, Warren Buffets, and Kanye Wests.

Loyalty to a higher power and love that seeks to bring Jesus' values – values like justice, equality, peace, forgiveness, compassion, and mercy – scrape like nails on the chalkboard of culture. Out of obedience to another Lord, to care about the oppressed, poor, and marginalized seems disloyal and counterintuitive; after all, what can they give us in return? Jesus challenges those in power by saying to the 1% with over 50% of the world's resources, *"Guess what? You get to help out the less fortunate."*

According to Statistics Canada, fewer Canadians are making charitable donations every year (less than 20% of Canadian tax filers); those who do are giving less and less (the average Canadian gives about \$300/per year, about 0.5% of their income). Less than 10% of Canadians give more than \$750/year to charitable groups (1.25%). The number of high-income families (earning more than \$150K) is increasing, but these families saw the greatest decline in average donations. People are earning more but giving less. Our human “default” is to hold on to as much as possible.

Historically, Christians have bucked this cultural trend. The kingdom of God introduces a radical reordering of society where those blessed with wealth and power intentionally choose to “give up” some of their privilege to empower the poor and powerless. So, inspired and empowered by the Spirit, Christians sacrificially fought to end slavery, child labour, introduce universal education and healthcare, cared for the needy and disadvantaged, championed gender equality, defended minority rights, and much, much more – all of which were very unpopular with many people. All of which cost money, time, and energy. They gave sacrificially, in the name of Jesus. That is what Jesus calls us to do (*"Teach those who are rich in this world ... not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need ... Tell them*

to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others"(1 Timothy 6:17-18)).

Today as we care for the poor (soup kitchen, food banks, homeless shelter), advocate for peace in our world, seek to ensure justice for all, care for God's creation, and give to the church, we can still be unpopular with some people. We follow Jesus first. His is our first loyalty. Jesus and His way challenges the world's priorities and people don't like it. As followers of Jesus, we may live us "out of sync" with our culture (we **should** live out of sync with a non-Christian culture or we're doing something wrong).

So if the Christian vision is so good, why doesn't everyone get on board? Someone once asked Billy Graham, *"If Christianity is true, why is there still so much evil in the world?"* He replied, *"With so much soap, why are so many dirty people in the world? Christianity, like soap, must be personally applied if it is to make a difference in our lives."* We live in a world in which a lot of people refuse soap. "The world" today, as in Jesus' day, prefers the way of selfishness, greed, power, pride, and control.

The Spirit helps us see God's way is actually the best way. He guides us. God honours our perseverance and commitment. But it may be challenging. *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world,"* Jesus says (John 16:33). Despite the struggles, we still live for Jesus because it's the right thing to do.

What do we do?

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." In the meantime, what are they to do? Jeremiah writes, *"Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren ... Work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare"* (Jeremiah 29:5-7). Get on with life. Bloom where you're planted!

One day, some day Jeremiah 29:11 will be true. In the meantime, we live in a two-faced world. We need to find ways of loving it, even when it does not love us in return. We are called to live for Jesus and *"love our neighbour."* How can we do that courageously?

The good news is *"the Spirit of truth will come to you from the Father"*(15:26) – Jesus will be with us through His Holy Spirit. We are not in this alone. That does not mean all will be sunshine and roses. It does mean God will always get us through.