

Preparing For Conflict

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Date: 12 February 2023

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[0 : 00] Please turn again with me to that passage we read in Luke chapter 6, as we, along with Jesus and his disciples, prepare for conflict.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Life in the global West is relatively easy for us as Christians. In the UK, the church has legal protections.

We can worship in freedom. There's no law against preaching the gospel. Life in other parts of the world is very different. The church is under great pressure from government.

Christians aren't allowed to meet in public, and the preaching of the gospelism is punishable by imprisonment or even death. In Luke chapter 6, Jesus is preparing his disciples for life in a hostile society.

[1 : 11] The early church to which Luke was writing was under pressure. They were hated. They were excluded. Their prominent leaders had been exiled or executed.

To be a Christian in the first century was not a pathway to respectability. There's a reason why Jesus said, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.

This passage is set in the context of conflict. In Luke 6 verse 11, we read that the religious leaders were furious at Jesus and discussed with one another what they might do to him.

After that, in verse 18, special mention is made of the unclean spirits Jesus casts forth. He has appointed apostles to continue his ministry after he has departed from them.

He, anticipating his death, is facing conflict from the religious leaders of Israel and from the devil himself. And so in this passage, he is preparing his disciples for a life of conflict.

[2 : 24] If we're Christians, we must expect conflict to be the norm, not the exception. Now, on first inspection, Luke 6 verses 20 through 49 bears a striking resemblance to Jesus' sermon on the mount in Matthew 5 verse 7.

But they're not the same for many reasons. But the chief of which is this. Matthew uses Jesus' sermon to declare to his Jewish Christian readership the righteousness of the kingdom of God. But Luke uses Jesus' sermon to declare to the early church how to live in a hostile society. For over 300 years, the church in Scotland has enjoyed special protections.

The day may be coming when we, like the early church and many Christians in other parts of the world today may face the kind of conflict they do.

And we too must meet it with the love, resolve, and humility Jesus did. From these verses, Luke 6, 20 through 26, we want to consider four aspects of this conflict.

[3 : 44] The rest of the chapter details our response in the face of conflict, how we love our enemies, how we forgive those who abuse us, how we show mercy, how we believe.

But from these verses, we see the following four things. The conflict, the sides, the weapons, and the victory. The conflict, the sides, the weapons, and the victory.

The conflict, first of all. What is the nature of this conflict we shall, the disciples shall have to engage in? There are many wars and conflicts over our world today, and while we may think we know what they're about, their true origin lies deeply embedded in historical feuds and ethnic differences.

But the conflict Jesus is preparing his disciples, his apostles, to meet has no such hidden origin. Its cause is found in verse 22. On account of the Son of Man.

On account of the Son of Man. The origin of the conflict is not ethnic. The early church was made up of Jew and Gentile believers, but both groups were subject to the hatred of the society in which they lived.

[5 : 03] The conflict originates in what both groups believe about Jesus. For Christians, Jesus is the Son of Man. The Lord who possesses all the status of Godhood, in whom is salvation for all who believe.

For non-Christians, Jesus is not the Son of Man. He's a good teacher, but he's no more than that. He's a prophet, just like any other.

He's a supernatural being, but not the Son of Man in whom there is salvation. For one group, Jesus is Lord and Savior. For the other, he's of no more significance than the founders of all the other major world religions.

Well, the early church, on account of their devotion to Jesus as the Son of Man, faced persecution and death at the hands of the Romans, because Christians refused to bow down to Caesar and worship him as a god.

The source of the conflict, listen carefully to what I'm saying here. The source of the conflict is not because Christians believe in family values and non-Christians do not.

[6 : 14] Because in all our experiences, we can point to marriages between non-Christians, which are far more committed and far more vibrant than ours. The source of the conflict is not because Christians are morally upright and non-Christians are not.

Because in all our experiences, many non-Christians put us to shame by their selflessness and their sacrifice and their self-giving. The source of the conflict resolves down into one issue, what we believe about Jesus Christ.

And we as the church must be absolutely clear on this. Lest we, as the church, as we have a habit of doing, make it about something else.

Moral values or human sexuality. Most non-Christians, if we're being honest, think the same as we do concerning these issues. The origin of the conflict is about Jesus and Jesus alone.

What do we believe about Jesus and how do we respond to who he is and what he's done by dying on the cross and rising again on the third day? Jesus is calling us here in these verses to be crystal clear that if we believe Jesus is who he says he is, and we have placed our faith in him, we are automatically placing ourselves in the firing line.

[7 : 50] A ministerial friend, Willie Philip in the Tron, always asks new members to his church the question, are you willing to live for Jesus Christ no matter how much opposition you face?

It's a great question. Difficult to answer because it calls us to be clear about where our true loyalties lie. And the question for us is this, where do they lie?

Are we for Jesus or against Jesus? For there is no middle ground.

There's the conflict. Second, the sides. Verse 20 through 22 contain a list of one side of the conflict. Verse 24 through 26, the other side of the conflict.

Now, these lists must be understood in the context of Luke's perspective on Jesus' sermon, which is that the conflict we face as Christians is about our faith in Jesus Christ.

[9 : 04] If we fail to take that into account, we end up with a liberation-type theology where social class and not spiritual convictions confers blessing. Remember also that Luke is writing to the early church.

Which itself was enduring the heat of persecution from Judaism. This understanding naturally leads us to viewing those in the list of the blessed as being first-century Christians.

Who are poor, hungering, weeping, and hated on account of their faith in Jesus Christ. Or rather, more properly, it is because they have faith in Jesus Christ that they have become poor.

And they hunger. And they are weeping. And they are hated. Those in the woe category are those who are doing the persecuting.

The rich. Those who are fool. The laughing. And those of whom everyone speaks well. We're in Luke chapter 6, verses 20 to 26.

[10 : 17] So, on one side of the conflict, we have the blessed list. Because they are Christians, on account of the faith they have in Jesus as Lord and Savior of all, they are poor, they are hungry, they are weeping, and they are hated.

Now, perhaps they were not always this way. Some of them may have been wealthy business people. But because of their faith in Jesus Christ, their Jewish customers stopped doing business with them.

And they went broke. And because of the poverty of other Christians in that community, they themselves gave of their poverty to alleviate the pain of others.

And now, rather than having a table full of food every day, they and their children go hungry. They endured all kinds of hardship as a function of being a Christian.

And it hurts. They weep with the pain of it all. And it's all on account of their faith in Jesus as the Son of Man. You'll notice here that Jesus is talking to the disciples and he says, Blessed are you.

[11 : 29] Blessed are you. This is what you've got to look forward to, Jesus says to his disciples. A life of poverty, hunger, tears, and hatred for no other reason than that you are my followers and you believe in me as Savior and Lord.

Read the rest of the New Testament, the accounts of the early church, and you'll find repeated accounts of the suffering of first century Christians. Imprisoned, exiled, executed like sheep to be slaughtered.

On the other side of the conflict are those in the woe list from verses 24 through 26. They are those who hate Christians on account of their faith in Jesus Christ and are doing the persecuting.

You'll notice that Jesus isn't talking to the disciples here. He's talking about others. Jesus is probably here referring to the elite religious classes in the Israel of his day.

They are rich. They don't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from. Their lives are filled with laughter because everyone speaks well of them. Highly respectable, popular people.

Everyone wants to take a selfie standing beside one of these guys.

[12 : 38] The most prominent persecutors of the early church fell into this category, often growing rich by confiscating the possessions of Christians. They could afford their food.

They never had to worry about being persecuted. Their gatherings were marked by joy, laughter, not by mourning, and they enjoyed a constant round of back slapping. So, we have two sides in this conflict.

One is Christ's poor church, made up of those who are nothing in this world's eyes because they've chosen to follow Jesus as the Son of Man. The other is made up of those who are prominent in this world's eyes.

The contest seems rather imbalanced, does it not? In the red corner is a puny, hungry, weakling featherweight who can hardly stand. In the blue corner is a hulk-like, heavyweight figure with bulging muscles and pure hatred in his eyes.

Here is the scenario the disciples of Jesus will face. A gospel of a crucified man versus the power of the religious establishment of Israel and the strength of the Roman Empire.

[13 : 50] This is the situation the early church faced. This is the situation facing many Christians all over our world today where their love meets with the guns of hate-filled, aggressive governments with the gospel as their only shield.

We have the weak things of the world versus the strong, the foolish things of the world versus the strong, the nothings of this world versus the strong. And the message for us all is this.

We must count the cost of our Christian faith. We must count the cost of our Christian faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a prominent German Christian, that is, until the Nazis took control.

Many church leaders, fearing the consequences of speaking out, fell into line with the Nazis. But Bonhoeffer refused. I was eventually executed for his faith in Jesus on account of the Son of Man.

And in his writings, Bonhoeffer coined the phrase, cheap grace, to describe the kind of Christianity which costs nothing for us, in which we're unwilling to suffer for Jesus.

[15 : 10] You know, as Christians, we must be willing to follow in Bonhoeffer's footsteps, even up to the gallows, lest we cheapen the grace of the Jesus by whose grace we have been saved.

You know, every one of those apostles mentioned in Luke 6, according to church tradition, died for their faith in Jesus. By following him, they were signing their own death warrants, and they carried the cross on their backs.

So here's the sides in this conflict, and if you'll allow me to make only one more application of this point, it is to say, there are only two sides. There's no middle ground stance any one of us can take.

We're either with Jesus or we're against Jesus. We're one or t'other, as they say. We're willing to pay the price or we're not.

Which is it? Third, conflict, the sides, the weapons, the weapons.

[16 : 24] The early Christian church was entirely Jewish. Even today, to be identified as a Jew is very important to Jewish people.

To be Jewish is to be part of a community, and it's that community which gives safety, belonging, and identity in your life. The most powerful weapon used against the early Christians by their

opponents was therefore exclusion from the Jewish community.

We might suppose it was more serious for a Jew to be tortured or imprisoned, but for an ethnic Jew, the harshest punishment that could be inflicted was exclusion from the Jewish community.

that's what Jesus describes in verse 22, when people hate you, when they exclude you, revile you, and spurn your name as evil. I've just finished reading a book about a Jewish girl from Sunderland called Michelle Guinness who became a Christian.

And what she found hardest was that her Jewish family and friends disowned her. She lost her sense of identity and belonging, and she became extremely depressed.

[17 : 43] What Jesus is describing here in verse 22 is exactly what happened to his disciples and what happened to Christians in the early church. Imagine the scene. A Jewish woman becomes a believer in Christ and she's dragged up in front of the leaders of the community in the synagogue.

And her father and her mother stand in front of her and say, you are no longer our daughter. And the community says to her, you are no longer one of us.

Leave and do not return for we who once loved you on account of your faith in this Jesus now hate you. When we talk about the weapons of a Christian in this point, we're thinking more about what keeps us in the fight.

The tools God gives us for strength and persecution, to endure through strength and persecution, that though we may be excluded and persecuted for our faith, we're going to keep on going.

Our Lord does not leave us unarmed. His strength and grace is sufficient for us. In our passage, though we are poor, weak, and puny, we are told that we have three things to keep us in the fight.

[18 : 59] The Bible, God's promise, and the reward. We have the Bible, first of all. It keeps us in the fight. The two sections which make up this passage, verses 20 through 23 and then 24 through 26, both conclude by referring to the prophets of the Old Testament.

In verse 23, Jesus refers to how the faithful prophets of the Old Testament were treated. They too, for their faithfulness to God, were hated and excluded, exiled and executed.

According to church tradition, both Isaiah and Jeremiah were martyred horribly for their faith in God. What true disciples of Jesus Christ are being called to endure is nothing new.

Whether it's Peter, James, and John, or Christians who made up the early church, or Christians in Iran today, we stand in a long line of the faithful who suffer on account of our faith in Christ.

And as we read our Bibles, we hear the voices of these prophets calling out to us over the years.

Elijah cries out, Jeremiah calls out to us over the years through the word of the Bible, they hated the message God gave me to proclaim to them.

[20 : 32] They threw me in a pit and they left me there to die. But if by faith in God I could keep going, so can you. In the Bible we have solid proof that God's grace is sufficient for us to endure.

Second weapon to keep us in the fight, promise, promise. When we're under pressure as Christians it would seem as if the only voices we can hear are the loud accusations of our persecutors.

But more important than their voice is the quiet, more certain voice of the Son of Man upon whom we have staked our life and for whose sake we are suffering.

His voice offers us not merely sustaining grace, it's filled with wholesome and good promises which give us hope. Each of Luke's promises here are accompanied by, Luke's blessings are accompanied by a promise.

to those who have been made poor on account of their faith in Christ, Christ promises the kingdom of heaven is yours with all the resources of God it's yours.

[21 : 46] To those who have been made hungry by their poverty, Christ promises a day is coming when you shall be satisfied. A reference surely to the heavenly banquet of the Lamb at which we shall sit with Him and feast on His infinite pleasures of grace.

to those who weep because they're suffering on account of their faith in Jesus Christ, He promises the day is coming when you shall laugh to those who are excluded because they dare to name Jesus Christ as Lord.

Jesus promises a great heavenly reward. The promises of God overcome and overwhelm the persecutions of man. With eyes fixed on our heavenly reward, the Christian endures the pain knowing that the hunger and the poverty and the tears are worth it.

As the Apostle Paul will later say, this slight and momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. If we're enduring persecution for the name of Christ, we need to keep our eyes fixed not on our persecutors and their instruments of torture, their

thumbscrews, but on the Lord and His reward.

By contrast, there are no such promises of good given to those who are doing the persecuting. The rich will have all they've ever had. The fools shall experience eternal hunger.

[23 : 10] The laughing will weep and mourn. Those of whom everyone speaks well will one day experience the fate of the Old Testament prophets. In other words, all shall be reversed. Jesus will later picture this in Luke 16 with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Where is God when we're suffering for being Christians? He is not silent. He speaks His promises into our hearts assuring us that a great reversal is on its way.

Again, surely this is enough to keep us going even in the darkest days of the fight. Promise. And then the third weapon to keep us in this fight, judgment.

judgment. Judgment. The early Christians knew what it felt to be judged. They were brought before the synagogue. Judgment was passed upon them for their faith in Christ and they were excluded, exiled from the community.

But the judgment of the synagogue pales into insignificance compared to the judgment of God. And according to Jesus, God has already made His judgment.

[24 : 20] His judgment is that those who are poor, weeping, hungry, and persecuted on account of their faith in Jesus are blessed. Outwardly, they're wasting away, but inwardly, they're being renewed day by day.

The world may hate them, but God shines on them with His favor. And if God is on our side, who can be against us? The verdict is already in. Though the courts of this world may condemn us on account of our faith in Jesus, as God has already said, this one here and that one there, these poor, persecuted children of mine suffer an account of the name of Christ, this weeping one.

Blessed. The divine verdict for those the world counts as cursed is already in. They're blessed. The divine verdict for those whom the world counts blessed is also already in.

woe to them. How terrible the situation they find themselves. How awful their fate God has judged them.

These are the weapons which sustain us through the conflict, Christ. These are the weapons God has given us to sustain us through the conflict. Christ has not left us to fight alone.

[25 : 41] He's given us His word, His promises, and His judgment. And now all we need to do is by faith stand firmly upon each one of them. Each one.

And then by faith, despite what horror has thrown against us, we shall stand. And then lastly, the victory.

The conflict, the sides, the weapon, and now lastly and briefly, the victory. Who shall be victorious in this conflict faced by the Christian church? We're so poor, we're so tear-stained, we're so hungry, we're so alone.

How shall we ever prevail against the forces arrayed against us? These twelve uneducated men to whom Christ entrusted the message of the gospel, how shall these twelve apostles turn the world upside down?

This early church to whom Luke is writing, which Luke's writing, so weak, so riven by divisions and false teaching, how shall it change the society in which it lives?

[26 : 50] Brothers and sisters, be assured of this, the victory is ours because it is not so much against us, our enemies fight, as it is on account of the Son of Man on whose account they persecute us.

the real target of their opposition isn't us. It's Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ has triumphed over sin and death by His cross and resurrection.

He is crowned as Lord and is seated at the right hand of God the Father, surrounded by unnumbered hosts of heaven who praise Him continually. The victory is ours because the victory belongs to the Son of Man who has authority over all peoples and all tribes and all nations.

Our God reigns in sovereign majesty and triumphant victory. The conflict, you see, is over before it's begun. All that's left is for the defeated devil to direct his fury at Christ's faithful people.

Those who are weak in the world's eyes but dearly loved by God. What then shall we say to these things? That the victory is assured and that every weapon forged against us will fail.

[28 : 12] What shall we say? Jesus tells us in verse 23, Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, He says. Yes, He says, it may hurt when you're suffering.

But He says, rejoice through it all because the Christ in whom you have believed and whom you serve is victorious and we too along with Him one day will stand as victors. We may be weak, we may be broken, we may be poor, we may be hungry, we may be tearful, we may be persecuted, but we're on the winning side.

Focus on the cross and resurrection of Jesus where the ultimate hatred of all of Christ's enemies was directed, but by which Jesus triumphed. And let us, like the early church, be prepared for conflict, counting the cost of what it may mean in our individual lives as Christians to stand for the name of Jesus.

Let's be ready for it. The gospel of Christ's redeeming love is our best defense and in His victory we shall rejoice.