

November 23, 2025

## The Gospel of John

### **XLV. To Keep You From Falling Away**

### **John 15:18 – 16:4a**

Dr. William P. Seel  
Easley Presbyterian Church  
Easley, South Carolina

In the city of Carthage in North Africa, in the year 202 A.D., there lived a young aristocratic woman whose name was Perpetua. She was married and had a young son; more to the point, she had recently become a Christian. When word of her conversion began to get around, she was taken before the city magistrate and asked if she was indeed a Christian. She answered that she was, and immediately was thrown into prison. She was told that if she would renounce Christ, she could be released. At one point during her confinement, her father came to prison to plead with her to drop this Christian foolishness so that she could come home and resume her real life. She said to her father, *“Do you see that water pot in the corner of my cell? Could it be called by any other name than what it is?”* “No,” he answered. “Well, so too,” she said, *“I cannot be called anything other than what I am. I am a Christian.”* Some weeks later, on the Roman emperor’s birthday, she was led from prison with a number of other Christians into the amphitheater where, to the cheers of the crowd, she and the others were torn apart by wild beasts.<sup>1</sup> *“If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you.”*

In the early days of the Stalinist era in Soviet Russia, the Orthodox church came under severe repression. The Russian Orthodox liturgy of that time required the priest to go to the porch of the church and ring a handbell whenever the Eucharist was to be consecrated and served. The bell announced to the village or neighborhood around the church that the service was beginning. The Communist government made the ringing of these handbells a crime against the state. But thousands upon thousands of Orthodox priests defied that law and continued to ring the handbells. Thousands upon thousands of Orthodox priests were eventually arrested, transported to Siberian labor camps or simply murdered.<sup>2</sup> *“If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own.”*

In June of last year, a radical Hindu group attacked their Christian neighbors in a village in central India. Several of the Christians were badly beaten and had to be hospitalized. The rest were forced to sign a document saying they would convert to Hinduism within ten days or be forced to leave the village. The civil authorities stood by, in silent support of this persecution. None of the Christians converted – they left the village in fear for their lives, but still devoted to Christ. And this is far from an isolated incident in the world today. According to the Open Door 2025 World Watch List, more than 380 million Christians worldwide suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. One in seven Christians are persecuted worldwide, one in five in Africa, two in five in Asia. Nearly five thousand Christians have been killed for their faith this year. Nearly eight thousand churches have been attacked. Nearly five thousand

Christians have gone to prison for their faith.<sup>3</sup> “*Because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*”

Before we say anything more, let us have a moment of silent prayer for these martyrs and their families, and for all our brothers and sisters in Christ today whose faith in Jesus brings them into suffering, discrimination, persecution . . .

One of the things I am thankful for, in this week of Thanksgiving, is that we live in a nation that has enshrined the free exercise of religion in its constitution. I am very thankful that we are able to gather here this morning to worship God without any fear that our participation in this worship service might bring upon us some form of government oppression or public hostility. I am very thankful that never once in my life have I had to experience the hatred of the world because of my faith in Jesus Christ. “*If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.*” I am very thankful that this prophetic word has never yet been confirmed in my own experience as a disciple of Christ.

I am thankful. And yet. “*If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*” And yet, I hear Jesus saying that to me, to us. And somewhere deep down I cannot help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, one small part of why my life is so free of religious persecution – even of something as small as friendly disapproval – is because I have given the world too little reason to hate me. Could it be that one small reason we fare so well as followers of Jesus – why our faith in Jesus seems so rarely to complicate our lives, much less bring them into conflict with the world around us – is because we are not following Jesus quite as faithfully, quite as bravely as we should?

I came across this quote forty years ago in seminary, and it has bothered me ever since. Words from one of the great heroes and great teachers of the early church – a man by the name of John Chrysostom. He is commenting on a very similar passage in Matthew’s gospel where Jesus is warning His disciples of persecution for their faith in Him, and posing the question of why disciples of Christ in his own day were no longer being so openly persecuted for their faith:

*For this cause the very heathens disbelieve the things that we say, since our doings, not our sayings, are the demonstration which they are willing to receive from us; and when they see us building ourselves fine houses, and laying out gardens and baths, and buying fields, they are not willing to believe that we are preparing for another sort of residence [in Heaven] . . .<sup>4</sup>*

“*If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own . . .*” Could it be that the reason it is so easy for us to be Christians these days is not only because of our constitutional freedom, but also because we have given so little evidence of being genuinely different from the world, so little evidence of being formed for the coming world of the Kingdom of God, so little evidence of truly belonging to Jesus in heart, soul, mind, and strength, such that the world around us simply finds no reason to be upset by us?

This, I think, is the challenge we, who have it so easy, are meant to hear in Jesus' words this morning. A challenge to engage in a self-examination of our faith. Are our lives truly marked by our discipleship to Jesus? Is Jesus truly the One who is shaping how we live? Teaching us how to think and what to value? Are we letting Jesus inspire us to do such unworldly things as love for our enemies, forgive those who hurt us and seeking the forgiveness of those whom we have hurt? Such unworldly things as a disinterest in the accumulation of stuff in order to pursue a profound interest in the care of those who have not enough? Such unworldly things as servanthood and self-sacrifice, choosing Sunday worship over Monday work as that which gives form and shape and intention to our week?

*"If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."* In times past and, as we have noted, in many places still today, Christians have faced open hostility, even threats to life and liberty. We don't. For us, in this day and in this place, perhaps the greatest challenge we face comes not from the world's hostility to Christ, but from our own failure to perceive and to pursue the distinction between being in the world, but not of the world. The threat we face is not of being killed for our faith, but of letting our faith slowly diminish as a result of letting the world's ways blind us to the radical nature of the call of Christ, the claim of Christ upon the whole of our lives. Jesus' words challenge us.

But we are missing the point of Jesus' words if that is all that we hear. If all we hear in Jesus' words is a warning, if all we hear in His words this morning is rebuke, then we are missing the key word in Jesus' words. The real point of Jesus' words to us this morning is this: *"I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away."* To keep us from falling away – that is the real point of what Jesus is saying to us here. For with the warning, or even if we hear it as a rebuke, what Jesus' words to us this morning really are is grace – the grace of Him telling us that not only does He not want us to fall away, but also that He has done something, given us something, that will indeed keep us from falling away: *"But when the Helper comes, whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness . . ."* Jesus not only warns us about falling away, Jesus gives us what we need so that we won't fall away – so that we will be able to stay faithful whether we are facing down a Roman sword or simply the pressure to conform to a world not yet redeemed.

*"The Spirit will bear witness about me,"* He promises us. The Holy Spirit will continually prod us away from our conformity to the world around us, continually prod us along the way and the truth and the life of the One who has claimed us as His own. The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the "Comforter," which we hear in terms of consolation when we are sad or troubled. But in older English, that word "Comforter" had a rather different meaning, as evidenced by the famous 11<sup>th</sup> century Bayeaux Tapestry. The tapestry depicts the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 A.D., under the leadership of William the Conqueror. In one scene in the tapestry, a column of Norman soldiers on horseback are depicted as being followed by the Bishop of Bayeaux, Bishop Odo. And Bishop Odo is portrayed as poking the last horseman in line with a large stick to keep him moving, to keep the whole column advancing in battle. And the caption below reads, *"Bishop Odo comforts the soldiers."*<sup>5</sup> That is one way in which the Holy Spirit "comforts" us, says Jesus – by constantly reminding us of to whom we belong, and therefore also what it means to follow Him, to abide in Him. And by giving us the strength, the knowledge, the conviction, the power

and bravery to “*be not conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds in Christ Jesus.*”<sup>6</sup> So that we will not fall away from the demands of Christian discipleship, the Holy Spirit rides behind us constantly poking us with reminders of the words of Christ – empowering us to recognize the challenges to our discipleship when and where they occur, and enabling us to stay faithful, to stay on the path of discipleship.

But not only will the Spirit “comfort” us by continually bearing witness within us as to what Jesus has taught us about how to live, but the Spirit, says Jesus, will also enable us, then, to bear witness to others about the hope we have found in Jesus: “[*The Spirit*] will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness.” We may not be facing down lions in a Roman amphitheater or the Soviet secret police, but with the Spirit prodding us we may indeed stand up for Jesus in this world, stand firm in our faith in a way that does capture the attention of the world – or at least that little part of the world in which we live out our daily lives.

For example, Methodist Bishop Will Willimon tells of a freshman at Duke University who called him first thing on a Monday morning desperate for an appointment. Willimon agreed to meet him at his office right away. Upon arriving, the student immediately burst into tears:

“*It’s terrible. I’ve had the worst night of my life. Last night, after the fraternity meeting, as usual, we had a time when we just sit around and talk about what we did over the weekend. This weekend, during a party we had on Saturday, I went upstairs to get something from a brother’s room and walked in on a couple who were, well, [you know].*

“*I immediately closed the door and went back downstairs, saying nothing. Well, when we came to the time for sharing at the end of the meeting . . . one of the group said, ‘I understand that Mr. Christian got a real eye-full last night.’*

“*With that, they all began to laugh. Not a good, friendly laugh; it was cold, cruel, mean laughter. They were all laughing, all saying things like, ‘You won’t see nothin’ like that in church!’ and ‘Better go confess it to the priest’ . . .*

“*I tried to recover, tried to say something light, but I couldn’t. They hate me! They were serious. I walked out of the meeting and stood outside and wept. I’ve never been treated like that in my life.’*

[Willimon] said something like, “*That’s amazing. And you’re not the greatest Christian in the whole world, are you? And yet, just one person running around loose who can say No! is a threat to everyone else, has to be put down, ridiculed, savaged into silence. This campus may make a Christian out of you, despite yourself!*”<sup>7</sup>

“*[The Spirit] will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness.*”

Or this, another Willimon story from his time at Duke. Another Christian, a young woman, came to see him because she too was having a hard time fitting in with the culture on campus. Like every student – well, like every human being really – she had wanted to make friends, join in, become part of the community. But she had soon discovered that this was going to mean compromising a lot of the Christian principles she had been taught, and in which she believed. But what had turned out to be particularly difficult was the peer pressure placed upon her by others to “lighten up, go along to get along, go with the flow.” Which doesn’t sound only like university life, does it? Sounds like all of life, all the time.

Well, she told Willimon that she had finally come to the decision that sacrificing her Christian beliefs and lifestyle were not worth the price – that she was not at all willing to just “go with the flow.” She decided she wanted to go, always and in every way she could, towards Christ and with Christ, abiding in Christ. And she told Willimon, *“At first I was scared. Nobody wants to look odd, to be a killjoy, a self-righteous [stick in the mud]. But then I finally got the courage to say to myself, ‘This is me. This is the life I want.’ I am learning the joy of being odd.”*<sup>8</sup> The joy of being odd. The joy of being recognized as someone whose way of living has been made different from the world around – made different by faith in Jesus. *“[The Spirit] will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness.”*

*“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”* But not only that, this also: *“I have said all these things to keep you from falling away.”*

---

<sup>1</sup> As told in Joanna M. Adams, “Not for the Faint of Heart,” sermon preached at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago on August 24, 2003. Accessed on-line at [www.fourthchurch.org/%202003/082403sermon.html](http://www.fourthchurch.org/%202003/082403sermon.html).

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, Where Resident Aliens Live (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 40-41.

<sup>3</sup> [Open Doors International · Serving Persecuted Christians Worldwide](http://www.opendoorsinternational.org).

<sup>4</sup> St. John Chrysostom, The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom: Gospel of Matthew, Volume 10 of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Alister E. McGrath, I Believe: Understanding and Applying the Apostle’s Creed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), pp. 112-113.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:2.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, Where Resident Aliens Live (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 27-28.

<sup>8</sup> William H. Willimon, “The Joy of Not Fitting In,” sermon accessed on-line at [www.chapel.duke.edu/sermons/082293.htm](http://www.chapel.duke.edu/sermons/082293.htm).