

Choosing The Right Battle

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this morning we are continuing our study on John's Gospel and John's Gospel is one of the four gospels that we have in the Bible, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all of which record Jesus's life for us, but all of which are focusing especially on the cross, on Jesus's death and resurrection. And we've been working our way through John's Gospel over the past year or so, and we've come to the second half of chapter 15. Here, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the fact that he is going to be crucified. And we're just in the days running up to the crucifixion here, the final week before the cross, and Jesus is teaching his disciples many important things to prepare them for the fact that he is about to be crucified and to rise again. I want us to read again, verses 18 to 21.

Jesus said to his disciples, if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated me. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. But because you're 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 also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him to sin. Now, I think this is a fascinating and a really important passage for us to look at today, because it's touching on an issue that, to me, seems to be increasing in its prominence in our society and culture today. It's an issue that has been part of civilization, part of human civilization for as long as it's been there.

And it's something that I've seen and experienced my whole life, but it definitely feels like this issue is one that has become more acute, more controversial, and more dominant in our society in recent years. It's maybe one of the most dominant aspects of our culture today. The issue I'm referring to is this, our ever-increasing desire to take sides. And like I say, I've seen this my whole life, even from the playground and school, but I think that we can say that in recent years, there's been an intensification of this desire to take sides, to draw lines, and to put people in opposing camps. And it happens in loads of ways. The obvious example is maybe politics, where you see just an ever-increasing polarization of opinion. We get that a lot in our country. You get it even more in America, where there's just this massive, you are on one side or the other.

But it's in lots of other areas of life. Sport is a great example of what sports we like and don't like.

And then within one sport, what teams we support or don't support. We love to take sides there. An issue like climate change. Some people are pretty dismissive of the whole thing. Other people are so concerned about it, they are actually prepared to be very disruptive to society and to be, to stage very, very public protests. People are taking sides on that issue. Very obvious one at the moment is the conflict between Israel and Gaza. It's just been really interesting over the past couple of months.

You speak to different people and you'll have a conversation with one person and you can see that all their sympathy lies with one side and then you have a conversation with another person and you can see that all their sympathies lie with the other. And that becomes a very, very polarizing topic as well. Thinking back to COVID, you had, remember there was people taking sides about vaccinations. That was a very controversial issue. Different people with different views on that one.

In our broader culture today and in our media, there's questions about sexuality and gender. And again, people take strong sides on that topic. Even what we eat, people can be very, very prominent in terms of campaigning for one type of diet as opposed to another. And then even at a maybe more, less, maybe less significant level, even what we think of celebrities like Harry and Meghan or whoever it might be, people take sides, whether they love them, hate them, whatever it may be. In all these areas and in many, many more, we live in a culture that draws lines and that takes sides. Now that's not necessarily wrong. And at one level, it's a good thing because we absolutely need to have opinions. That's important. But today, it just feels like the stakes are so

much higher. It's so much more intense. The tension is greater, so much so that all of you, I think, can think of examples where if you find yourself on the wrong side of a particular opinion, then it could jeopardize your career. It might ruin your friendships.

[5 : 36] It might leave you isolated and ostracized. So maybe we could say that in terms of our culture today, it's okay to have an opinion. It's just got to be the right opinion. And all of that raises loads of questions, loads of interesting questions about these speech, about what it means to be a tolerant society, and about how we should deal with people that we don't agree with. And there's lots of really interesting and important things to think about there. There's loads that we could say about that. It's definitely the case that we live in a society today that likes to take sides.

What I want us to focus on for a few minutes this morning is the fact that all of this is actually pointing us to a much bigger problem. Today, there is a lot of social pressure to choose the right side on a whole host of issues. But our biggest problem is not whether or not we choose the right side. Our biggest problem is whether or not we choose the right side.

And that's what I want us to think about. And that's our title to do, choosing the right side. And as we do that, we're just going to have two headings, getting the battle right and getting the response right. Getting the battle right, getting the response right.

So let's think about this first of all. I think the first thing we need to say is to say everybody picks battles. And at a basic level, that's actually a good thing. And the reason it's a good thing is because not picking any battles about anything doesn't mean that you are neutral.

It means that you are numb. And I never ever want the day to come when I can turn on the news and see all sorts of awful things happening and just be like, never want that day to come. And all of this makes sense theologically the fact that we do choose battles, it makes sense in terms of what the Bible teaches regarding humanity, because one of the fundamental through the Bible teaches us regarding our nature as humans is that we're made in the image of God. And one of the consequences of that is that we have an instinctive sensitivity towards injustice. And that makes sense because that's what God is like.

[8 : 14] God is highly sensitive to injustice. And we as these image-bearers share that same sense, that same awareness of right or wrong. And that instinct can show itself on a particular issue or question or controversy. We want to fight in that battle. And that's a good thing at a very basic level. The problem is the other thing that the Bible teaches us about our humanity, the fact that yes, we're made in the image of God, but that image has been distorted and damaged by sin. And it means that the capacities and functioning that we should have as image-bearers is now misdirected and misused. And so we take the good skills and capabilities and structures that God gave us and we apply them towards the wrong thing. And it's the easiest biblical truth in the world to prove. You just need to look at the world around you, you just need to look at your own life to see that this is the case. We're capable of wonderful things. We're capable of stupid things. And we're all a mixture of them both. And so this is, this again, it makes sense if you look at the world around us. It shows us that at one level, we are way smarter than sheep. Because if you, you know, look at sheep, they are quite happy just chewing grass year after year after year in a field together, while we are pouring our energy into providing hospitals and schools and all sorts of technological advances. We're leaving the sheep way behind. But at another level, sheep are a lot wiser than us. Because while people are worrying about whether they've got the right hairstyle or whether we are jealous of other people's cars or their phones or their houses, while we fall out over whether the fence is in the right place, sheep are quite happy together and they're eating grass, getting on quite well.

And it's all showing us that humans are unique. We are capable of seeing the causes that are worth fighting for. And we see them in a way that no other part of the universe can see them.

And yet at the same time, we are capable of fighting battles that are conducted in a way that is hugely damaging both to ourselves and others. And this is why, you know, this whole concept of a battle is going to be where you find your greatest triumphs and your greatest joy, whether that's in sports or in education or even when facing illness, you've got a battle you fight and it's an amazing time. But at the same time, our battles will bring our deepest pain and frustration, whether that's friends or colleagues or family that we've fallen out with and a relationship broken or whether it's being eaten up inside because we're jealous of others or whether it's refusing to forgive the person who's hurt us. All those battles are just slowly destroying us.

And, you know, both of these things are definitely true in the history of the church. In the last 500 years in Britain, the Christian church took on the battle to educate everybody.

They took on the battle to abolish slavery. They took on the battle to provide social care. And they won all of those battles. And they are great times.

[12 : 13] But at the same time, the church has also battled over which version of the Bible to use or what we should wear at church or clothes we should wear or how we should respond when people make mistakes. And in all of those, we tended to cause harm. There's two questions I want you to think about. First, I want you to ask yourself, what battles have you chosen? Think about your life. What battles have you chosen? And as you identify them, as you think about them, ask yourself, are these really worth the fight? And some of them will be.

Some of them won't. But the second question is even more important. What is your ultimate battle? In other words, what do you think is the single most important battle of all? And a good way to discover that is to ask yourself, what gets your heart racing, what gets your blood boiling? In other words, what excites you, what frustrates you, what drives you, what derails you, what causes you to dream, what causes you to despair, what is the most important battle of all? And this is such an important thing to think about because the battle that we care most about will become the lens through which we see the world around us.

And that's such an important thing to recognize. Let me give you some examples. If somebody's personal ultimate battle is to prioritize their own race, then they are going to look at anybody with a different skin color and all they will see is an enemy. If someone's ultimate battle is to fulfill their sexual desire, they're going to look at women and all they're going to see is an object.

If someone's ultimate battle is to become wealthy, then they're going to look at everybody else and all they're going to see is a competitor that they've got to beat. And these are incredibly dominant forces in our society today, all of them and many more, and all of them are the wrong battle.

So what should our ultimate battle be? Well, the answer is here in this passage, and it's revealed in the message of the Gospel. And Jesus here is pointing us to the conflict that really matters. And he's showing us that the ultimate battle is that conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil. In other words, it's the battle between ultimate right and wrong, between good and evil. Or to use the language of this passage, it's the battle between following Jesus or following the world. Now, at this point, I need to explain a little bit about that word, world, because it's a word that can catch us out, because we have to make an interpretive decision about how we understand it in this passage, because we all know what it refers to, the world, everything around us. But what we need to make a decision about is the sense in which John is using the word. In other words, is he talking about it in a positive or a negative way? And whenever you have that question, and the way to work it out, you're thinking, how do I understand a particular word in a passage in the Bible?

What you need to do is to look at the context, what comes after it, what comes before it, and the whole of John's Gospel and indeed scripture more widely. And what we'll find when we look at that is that when John uses that word world, generally, he is using it in a negative sense. And so when he uses that word, he's talking about those who are in opposition to Jesus. There's lots of examples here. He talks about the world, the sin of the world in John 1, 29. He talks about the world hating Jesus in chapter seven.

[16 : 57] He talks about the comparison of heaven above and then this world below. He talks about the world being judged. He talks about the ruler of this world, Satan, being cast out. So he's using it in a negative sense. Now, this might seem a wee bit strange to us, but it's actually driving home such an important point. It's telling us that in the ultimate battle between the kingdom of God, between the kingdom of evil, between Jesus and the world, none of us are spectators.

The whole world is bound up in it, either on one side or the other. And that explains why even though this is ultimately a spiritual conflict, our day-to-day experience of it comes in the form of other people. And you see that so powerfully in these verses. Jesus talks again and again about the world and he talks about they. They will persecute you. They, they, they, it's full of they, people opposed to him, people who are going to oppose the disciples. And again, this makes perfect sense theologically. Sin has broken humanity as the image of God. Sin's left us in rebellion against God. It's meant that we so often want to replace God with something else. And the result of that is that some people are active enemies of the gospel. You see that in the Bible, you see that in history, you see that in niceties.

And some people, whilst maybe not being enemies of the gospel, they're definitely not that bothered about being Jesus's friend. And one of the reasons for that is because they've chosen different battles, the tragic things that they've chosen wrong. Again, a couple of things I want you to think about.

First is, do you see that this is the ultimate battle? Do you see that this is the ultimate battle, the battle between the kingdom of God, the kingdom of evil, between life and death?

And this is where we have to stop and think and broaden our perspective and start thinking about what really, really matters. If I do anything for you in this service today, I want to get you to think about what really, really matters. Do you see that this is the ultimate battle?

[19 : 48] The second thing I want to ask is, do you see that every other battle that people pick is actually an inferior shadow of what the gospel offers and of what Jesus came to fight over?

This is so, so important to recognize. The great causes, the things that we are passionate about, they are actually just shadows of the bigger battle that Jesus came to win. Here's some examples. Many, many people today, rightly, are so passionate about our environment and preserving it and protecting it. That's a huge thing and a really important thing. It's just a shadow of what Jesus has come to do. He's come to restore and renew the whole of creation. That's the great promise of the Bible, a whole new creation renewed and restored by Jesus. Today, many people are so passionate about medical research and rightly so, even on the island here. An incredible amount of money is raised to support things like cancer research and other efforts to try to cure illnesses so that people can live longer.

Jesus has come so that people can live forever. And so that death is not defeated for a few more years.

But so that death is defeated forever. Many of us, and I'm the same, we get very, very excited about a victory in sport.

[21 : 44] A victory in sport is a victory. Jesus has come to win a victory in sport.

Jesus's battle is so much bigger, so much better. His mission, the gospel, is everything that we want to fight for. His victory fulfills our deepest, deepest savings. We have got to get our battle. We've also got to get our response right. I just want to say a couple of words about this before we close. Many of you have got the battle right, and that's one of the amazing things to see.

Those of you who love Jesus, those of you who are following Jesus, you have got that battle right, and you've seen how important it is. But in this passage, Jesus is also teaching us, as Christians, about how we should deal with the reality of this battle. In other words, he's teaching that we've got to get our response right. A key part of what Jesus is doing here is that he's preparing his disciples for the fact that they're going to face opposition because they're following him. That's the reality that needs to be recognized. You see in this passage, there are specific examples that Jesus gives. He talks about the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost, that's in Acts chapter 2. He talks about them being thrown out of their synagogues. That was indeed what happened to them again later on in Acts. From those specific examples that Jesus' disciples experience, we can draw broader principles that we're going to face as well. We will face opposition at times. That opposition is hard, but it's a reality.

I want us to just highlight two things. I want to highlight what Jesus says, and I want to highlight what he doesn't say. First of all, in these verses, verses 18 to 21, Jesus is telling us that when we face opposition, when people are hostile towards us, and even when we might feel like people hate us, maybe when they actually do hate us and hate the gospel, Jesus is telling us that we should not be surprised. In other words, he's saying it's going to happen. That happens because, as we said, there is no neutral territory in the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil.

Everybody is either on one side of that or the other. Everyone who is not a believer is captive on the other side. Some of those captives cannot see that they're prisoners, and instead they want to be fighters, and they will attack the gospel. That can happen in lots of ways. They might do it by criticizing you, they might do it by challenging you, they might do it by ignoring you, they might do it by judging you. That's all a very, very difficult thing to experience, and I know that many of you will have experienced that at different stages of your lives. The crucial thing to remember is that any experience that you have of opposition because you are following Jesus, it's telling you that you are now disconnected from the world around you because you are now united to Jesus. You're disconnected from the world around you because you are united to Jesus.

[25 : 37] As Jesus goes on to save, all of it is based on the fact that our connection is now to Jesus. And the reason that we get opposed is because he is opposed, he's been opposed as well.

And that tells you a couple of really important things. It tells you that you are his. And so if you ever are given a hard time for being a Christian, you've got to remember that you're his, safe and secure and loved. And all of this also tells you that he knows what it's like.

Jesus knows exactly what it's like to be judged and criticised, rejected and far, far, far worse. And that means we can talk to him about it. And so that's just a really important thing to happen because if it happened this week, you might be going to work this week, you might be amongst friends or family, and you might have to go to, there might be a work Christmas night out where you have to say that you're prepared to not go as far as everybody else is going to go.

And you might be criticised for that. All of that's because of your connection to Jesus. So you can talk to him, you can lean on him, you must remember that you are his.

And so, you know, we need to remember that all of this is not, should not come as a surprise. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus spoke about the gates of hell not prevailing against this church. And that is absolutely true. The forces of evil will not prevail against the church. But that doesn't mean that they aren't going to try. And there are times when the Christian church is under attack.

[27 : 28] So Jesus is telling us not to be surprised. And that's a really helpful and important lesson. But I think it's even more important to notice what Jesus doesn't say in these verses. And this is so crucial. Because here Jesus is telling us about the reality of that ultimate battle between God and Satan, between good and evil, between life and death, between heaven and hell.

He's telling us about the reality of opposition. He's telling us that if we follow Jesus, some people might even hate us because some people hate him. But do you see what Jesus doesn't say?

He says that the world will hate you. But at no point are we ever told by Jesus to hate them back.

And this is where we see such an astonishing contrast between this passage and what is probably the most famous passage in John's gospel. In John 15 verse 18 verse 23 we are told about a world hating us, hating Jesus, hating God the Father. In John 3 16 we are told about the God who will love us. And right there is the astounding truth that lies at the heart of the gospel.

Sin has left the world hating God. But God does not respond by hating the world. God responds by hating sin and by giving his son to free us from his grasp. And this is where God is so amazing. The Father's response to the world's hate is not hate them back.

[29 : 43] The Father's response is bring them back. And that's the truth that lies at the heart of the gospel that before we ever loved God.

He loved us. And before you ever thought about God, he loved you and sent his son to see you.

The gospel is not sin. God does not hate them back. And right here is where we see the shape of the light that's grounded in the gospel.

Sometimes the world will want to show you that it hates you and that it hates God. Our mission, our mission is to show them that we actually love them and that God loves them too.

And I don't know about you, but that's the battle that I'm in. Amen.