

Sermon Series: “Good News for Life”
“Two Connections (Often) Forgotten”
Pastor Norwood N. “Woody” Hingle III, Ph.D.
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Connections are important. We learn that at an early stage of our lives. E.g., if we want to get good grades in school, we have to study; in fact, I recall my high school basketball coach telling us, we have to listen in class— he said if we listen in class that will take the majority of our effort to get good grades. E.g., if we want a good marriage, I have often read, communication is key to that happening-- we cannot come home from work and sit in front of the television all evening if we want a happy marriage. Connections in life abound-- whether we are in school, the business world, or our marriages. And we need to make a connection in our faith that is often missed, so that we are better prepared disciples of Jesus.

READ John 15:18-16:4a (p. 110)

CONTEXT: Jesus has just told His disciples that He is the true vine, and His Father is the vinegrower. His disciples are to bear fruit, and to love one another as He has loved them. Now He gives them words of warning about following Him, because often following Him involves a connection to a response we often don't anticipate.

READ vv 18-20, 16:1-4. "Connection # 1: Jesus comforted and warned His disciples— if the world hates them it is because the world hated Him first. Cf. Mark 13:9-13; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-20. Please notice in what is one of the earliest non-Christian references to antagonism toward Christians, the Roman historian Tacitus in his *Annals of Imperial Rome* 15.44 (ca. 116 AD) stated that during Nero's reign (54-68 AD) Christians were 'notoriously depraved', part of 'degraded and shameful practices', and deserving of 'ruthless punishment'." Have you ever experienced when people found out you are a Christian that people avoid you or not get in contact with you as they did in the past? E.g., I recall talking with a couple who were co-habiting about their upcoming wedding and shared that I could not conduct their wedding unless they separated their living situation, and they said they wouldn't, and thereafter whenever they saw me they avoided me. But our feeling of being avoided or made fun of as Christians is not nearly as intense as what our brothers and sisters in other countries experience. We see people who at times believe that killing others, especially Christians, is doing God's will— such as the 9/11 terrorists crashing planes into buildings in New York City and Washington D.C. In other countries, such as China, Christians are arrested for what we would consider non-controversial things having to do with our faith. E.g., I read recently in China there was a man who was put in prison for publishing Bibles without the government's permission and experienced in prison terrible food and sleeping on a wood board with a filthy blanket. In other story a woman was put in prison for teaching children the Christian faith, and she was left

in prison for three years, and had to take showers in cold water— even in the winter. Sometimes we forget and we think people actually just don't like us, but that is untrue. They actually don't like Jesus, and they don't want His authority challenging theirs.

READ 21-25. “Connection # 2: Jesus pointed out that this rejection the world has of Him is deeply rooted in their hatred for the Father and is ultimately unreasonable.” It is an interesting quote Jesus has from the Psalms — either 35:19 or 69:4— that people hated God without cause. Have you ever seen that? E.g., in our Addressing the Skeptics group we are reading a book by an atheistic philosopher Thomas Nagel, who I am told is well-known as a philosopher. In his book *Mind and Cosmos*, he tries in a very honest effort to come to terms with our having minds with consciousness that are reasons and state moral values as real and objective in light of the explanation from a worldview that says we are ultimately from a random, unguided materialistic evolutionary process— evolution without a designer or God. He seems to bend over backwards to explain our having minds, because he realizes that saying simply the mind is a product of the material brain does not explain such things as our having a consciousness that is aware of our place in the universe, or a reasoning ability that submits to the law of reason and self-evaluate itself, and moral values which are far more than simply personal opinion or a society's opinion. Yet what is interesting is Thomas Nagel's repeated expressions of wanting to avoid the conclusion that a Designer put this world and ourselves together and will search for anything else to explain this. E.g., atheist chemistry professor from Oxford University Peter Atkins was asked in a debate once with Professor John Lennox what piece of evidence would lead him to acknowledge God's existence, and he said nothing— and questions such as who am I and why am I here and where am I going are nonsense questions that are not worthy of being contemplated. We live in a world filled with many mockers of God, as seen especially in blogs on the internet, people who really don't care

about getting to the answers but rather of belittling the side of those who believe in God. E.g., in his book *Letter to a Christian Nation*, atheist neurologist Sam Harris states, “There is, in fact, no worldview more reprehensible in its arrogance than that of a religious believer” (p. 74). What is his reason? He expresses the message of Christianity in a twisted, mocking way: “. . . *the creator of the universe takes an interest in me, approves me, loves me, and will reward me after death; my current beliefs, drawn from scripture, will remain the best statement of the truth until the end of the world; everyone who disagrees with me will spend eternity in hell. . .*” (ibid.). The Christian can agree with a lot of what Harris has said— it is truly Good News that God loves us and is concerned about us, but the final part contorts the message of the gospel— people’s eternal destiny has nothing with people disagreeing with me— it has everything with them being reconciled to God and acknowledging their need for Him to forgive them and save them. E.g., another example is when he tries to belittle one of the strongest arguments for a Creator— the fine tuning of the universe. Harris states, “When we look at the natural world, we see extraordinary complexity, but we do not see optimal design. We see redundancy, regressions, and unnecessary complications; we see bewildering inefficiencies that result in suffering and death” (p. 75). I get the sense that if Harris had seen a child’s drawing of a horse with the neck and tail in the wrong proportion to the body and he would have been forced to conclude that the picture came about purely on its own, with no intelligence behind it is not of “optimal design”. But Harris is a mocker, which means he does not seek to understand, he just seeks for others to understand him. He criticizes Christianity by making Christian positions into straw men that he can topple. But we are not called to mock such mockers, but rather to pray for them. Jesus did not mock them. He just acknowledged that in this world there are people who hate Him because they hate God— they don’t want Him to exist, and I think they don’t want Him to exist because they don’t like the implications for their lives if He does.—

their independence is threatened, accountability to Someone for their lives will exist. Thankfully, not all skeptics are like this. E.g., Antony Flew was a well-known philosopher in Great Britain who wrote a textbook for philosophy classes, and was a well-known atheist who would debate Christian scholars such as Gary Habermas on things like the resurrection— and before Flew died he came to believe in God’s existence because of the evidence from DNA, but it unclear if he became a Christian before he died. But he was someone who was seeking to understand. The worldview that negates God is ultimately unreasonable— people who hold this worldview don’t want the truth because of what it will mean for them. And, as Jesus said in quoting from the Psalms, they hate God without cause.

READ vv 26-27. “Nevertheless, Jesus has left two witnesses to the world: the Spirit of truth and His disciples. Cf. Matthew 10:19-20; Acts 5:30-32.” Jesus comforted His disciples that through the help of the Holy Spirit they would be able to speak to those counsels and synagogues who arrest them, from Matthew 10:19-20. The early disciples experienced this after Jesus’ death and resurrection; READ Acts 5:30-32. Even though much of the world has hated Jesus and God, we are to bear witness to what the Holy Spirit has done in our lives and the Holy Spirit is doing His work. E.g., I think of a girl in college named Christine who became a Christian, and invited Elena to a Bible study and she started to follow Jesus— and how the Holy Spirit had been preparing them both all along for a relationship with Him, and both Christine and Elena are walking with the Lord. God is still working, and we are to bear witness to others as to what He has done in our lives.

“How should this affect us as we leave worship today?” At least two ways: first, let us not think when people reject the gospel or belittle us, it is really all about us— it is Jesus and God they are rejecting; and second, we are still, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to bear witness to Christ’s work in our lives, and we are to

pray that the Holy Spirit will nudge others to Him— as C.S. Lewis called Him in one of his writings, the Hound of Heaven.