

Someone Will Mistreat You; What Are You Going to Do
Romans 12:17-19
#61 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans
Faith Community Church – March 18, 2007

Introduction

The following Associated Press article ran in hundreds of papers around the US on Wednesday this week:

Here's a tip for the guy who beat up a 101-year-old woman in a walker and took off with her purse: Get out of New York.

The vicious mugging, caught on surveillance tape, has sparked outrage in a city where people are accustomed to hearing about strange and violent crimes. Police have launched an all-out manhunt, but it's not just the cops who want the villain's head.

"I could hold him, and let the woman beat him up," said Joe Sarju, 59, who lives in the Queens neighborhood where the attack occurred. "I'd love to beat him, but then they would lock me up."¹

I first heard about this story on my way back from a pastor's conference on Wednesday afternoon. I was listening to KYW and they related the details of the story and then the responses of friends and neighbors – most of whom wanted a few minutes alone with the man who had attacked Rose Morat.

If I showed you the video of this attack – in which the victim was brutally punched three times – you might be tempted to have the same “just give the guy to us – we'll take care of him” spirit that apparently a lot of Rose's neighbors have.

Suppose some kind of gross mistreatment happened to your mother? Suppose it happened to *you*? And let's take it a step further: Suppose something like this happened to you because of your faith in Christ. Do you know how to respond, and why?

It is a fact of human life that people are mistreated. There are all kinds of reasons – excuses – for why people find it easy to mistreat others. In Romans 12, Paul is

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<http://www.wilmingtonstar.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070314/NEWS/703140403/-1/State>

talking about a specific situation in which people are mistreated because they are Christians. The Bible calls this being persecuted.

In many places around our world, Christians are persecuted for their faith. I read this week's report from the Voice of the Martyrs website (an organization that tracks the persecution of Christians around the world). Let me share a few examples with you.²

In our culture, Christians may be physically harmed because of their faith, but more often than not mistreatment because of being a Christian takes on other forms. Christians can – as individuals and as a group – be made fun of, picked on, put down, passed by for promotion or advancement. They can be denied what seem to be the same rights that others have, and subjected to different forms of disrespect and ill-will. All because of being followers of Christ.

When that happens – when your child is excluded from a social gathering because he or she is a Christian, or when you are the object of smirks and wisecracks at the office because you are uncomfortable with the kinds of things that are being talked about – when these things happen, do you know *why* they happen? And furthermore, do you understand how you are called to respond?

We need to know the answers to these questions, so I want to talk about the reasons for persecution (or mistreatment) this morning, and next week we will look at how we are to respond when people mistreat us.

Why Are Christians Mistreated for Being Christians?

Let me suggest that we can identify two main reasons why Christians experience mistreatment because they are Christians: We are offensive, and the Gospel is offensive.

In 1 Peter 4:12-16, Peter addresses the problem that occurs when we as Christians are offensive. Note that Peter tells us that we are not to feel justified when we suffer because we have done wrong, AND we're not to feel justified when our behavior, while perhaps not morally wrong, is nevertheless socially offensive or unacceptable.

If you are not a follower of Christ, it may puzzle you at times why people who profess to be Christians act the way that they do. Please understand that before you stands a Christian who also feels puzzled at some of the things people do in the name of Jesus. Sometimes it seems that Christians go out of the

² www.persecution.net/pnp1.htm (dated March 14, 2007)

way to be offensive or make trouble. I have often cringed when I've heard or read the responses of Christians to people with whom they disagree. There is no valid reason for holding up signs that say, "God hates fags," as some have done in the name of Christ. Nor is there a valid reason for protesting the witches and goblins theme of Halloween by sending your child to public school dressed like Jesus, as happened in our own area some months back. Such behavior is at best misguided and at worst quite obnoxious. There are better and more winsome ways to communicate our values without being mean spirited or acting in a way that – whether intended or not – comes across as being morally superior.

What happens when individual Christians do these kinds of things is that the whole church gets a black eye. I was driving behind a woman the other day whose bumper sticker read, "Keep our theocracy out of our democracy." Theocracy is government by God. I sat behind her at a stop sign and frankly, wished I had had the opportunity to get out of the car and talk to her. Because I would have apologized. I would have said that I am sorry that there are some Christians who mean well, but confuse the mission of the church in society and as a result give the impression that we want to legislate Christianity upon America. I would have said that I was very sorry that she equated conservative politics with the message of Christ and that if she wanted to talk about what Jesus' message was, I'd be more than happy to talk to her if she would call me or email me.

She might have blown me off. She might have suggested that there were some places I could go or things that I should do to myself. But I wish I had that opportunity back. Because I'm weary of seeing the view that our world has of us because of what we have identified as Christianity, while at the same time seeing those who are identified as Christian leaders fall into the same sins we so easily condemn in non-Christians, or while we show ourselves to be hypocrites by defending people who do what we've criticized the "other side" for doing.³

This is something that Jesus spoke about:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that

³ http://www.falwell.com/fc_newt.php. It is my *personal* opinion that, while being glad for Mr. Gingrich's confession of his sin, his past opposition to the Clintons makes him an unwise choice to speak at a Christian college, without perhaps first issuing a public apology to Mr. Clinton.

they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”
(Matthew 5:14-16, ESV)

Paul says something similar to the Philippian church:

Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. (Philippians 2:14-16, ESV)

And Peter addresses it as well:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:11-12, ESV)

Does that mean that we should not be involved in social issues, that we should not speak to our culture? Of course not. But we need to be very, very careful, because like it or not, in people’s minds, conservative politics and morality has overshadowed the Gospel in people’s understanding of Christianity.

So there are times when Christians are mistreated because we are offensive. And we should not feel that Christians who are offensive are being persecuted because they are righteous. But there are times when Christians are mistreated because the Gospel message is itself offensive.

Christians have worked hard not to make it offensive. We’ve adopted the Mary Poppins approach to the message of Christ – “just a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down, in a most delightful way” and built huge churches centered around positive thinking, affirming people, finding your purpose and your best life now.

And yet think about the Gospel:

- *God created you.* Right away we have a problem, because to admit that there is a God who made me is to admit to the fact that I am accountable to him.
- *We are born sinners and willingly rebel against this holy and just God, and as a result stand separated from him and under condemnation.* How well

does that go over in society brought up to think that we determine what is right and wrong and that there is no one standard of conduct.

- *God, because of his great love, sent Jesus to die, taking on himself the penalty for our sins, for salvation is found only in Christ.* How narrow! How self-righteous for us Christians to think that they have the only way!
- *Your only hope for forgiveness is to repent of your sin and confess faith in Christ and follow Him.* What about the God who accepts me as I am? Who are you to tell me that I need to repent of my sin? What right do you have to tell me how to live?

That is the biblical Gospel. It is not the gospel that you often hear on TV and radio. It is not a matter of simply acknowledging that God wants you to have purpose and meaning in life and so you need to admit that you've made some mistakes and invite him to come in and change your life. The early Christians were never put to death because of that kind of Gospel. They were killed because of the true Gospel.

Paul told Timothy that, ". . . all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." It may be on rare occasion or it may be with regularity, it may be in small ways or it may be in large ways. One way or another, if we follow Christ, it is going to cost us at some point.

Why? Listen to what John wrote in his Gospel, (3:16-20) "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

That, then, is the fact of it. Christians will be mistreated because people hate the truth.

Responding to God's Word

What are we to do? How are we called to respond? That is the heart of the rest of this chapter and the heart of what we will look at next week. But let me suggest some ways of responding to what we have learned today.

First, if you are not a Christian and you have been put off by the offensive behavior of Christian people, please at least accept this pastor's apology and let me encourage you to be sure that your understanding of the message of Jesus is based on what the Bible says, not on what some Christian people may have mistakenly portrayed. At the same time, there is no way to candy-coat the words of Jesus. So I would urge you to consider who God is, your relationship to him, and seek forgiveness by turning from your sin and trusting in Christ.

Second, as Christians, we need to be sure that we are Gospel-centered and Gospel-focused. We need to, as one person said, "Keep the main thing the main thing." The main thing for Christians is always and only Jesus and faith in him. Let's be sure – no matter how valid some of our cultural concerns may be – that we don't confuse the Gospel with political positions or parties.

Finally, Peter tells us, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12). Let's pray that God will help us – and we will look at what Paul says about this next week – live in a way that speaks well of the Gospel.