



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 14 Issue 41

November 18, 2015

An Exposé of a Wicked Man

The world hates God and His people. From the very beginning, this animosity was predicted and anticipated. After Adam rebelled against God at the instigation of the serpent, God told Satan:

Genesis 3:15, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed..."

From this we conclude that this world will be anything but peaceful for the child of God! We will be persecuted! Paul wrote:

Galatians 4:28-29, "And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him *who was born* according to the Spirit, so it is now also."

Again, we will be persecuted. Yet what makes this all the more difficult is the realization that much of the persecution will arise from the visible people of God. To explain why Timothy was having such a difficult go of it in his ministry, Paul reminded him:

2 Timothy 2:20, "Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor."

In other words, there are men and women in the body of Christ who aren't saved. They are sham believers who at times will resort to persecution to get their way! This was the experience of those Christians in Thessalonica. When Paul came to Thessalonica, the city was steeped in idolatry. Thessalonica truly was the idol capital of the ancient world on account of its close proximity to Mount Olympus. Yet the Spirit of God rested heavily upon Paul's ministry there such that a group of idolaters "...turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9)! It was so amazing that the entire Christian world was abuzz with talk of their conversion (1 Thessalonians 1:8).

Yet it wasn't very long before persecution set in and that of a severe kind.

1 Thessalonians 1:6, "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation..."

1 Thessalonians 2 presents an exposé of the persecutors in Thessalonica. Paul sets his heart to describe these individuals in order to comfort the Thessalonian believers.

John 16:33b, "...in the world you have tribulation..."

So yes we are going to be the special object of attack. Therefore, what the Thessalonians were experiencing was NOT a surprise. Yet they must understand that someday there would be justice!

Romans 12:19b, "...it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

1 Thessalonians 2 amounts to a description of how God will repay the wicked of this earth! Notice first the identity of the wicked man.

1 Thessalonians 2:14-15, "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they *did* from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God..."

Who is the “they” of this passage?

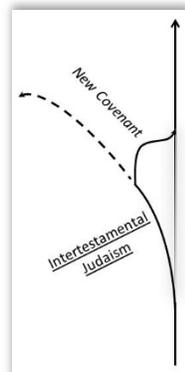
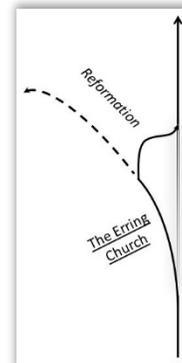
You say, that’s an easy one, based on the context it is the Jews! The Jews and the Jewish people represent the wicked man of this text! This may sound a little shocking to you, but that was the thinking of many of the Crusaders who mercilessly killed all the Jews they came across as they made their way to Jerusalem to free the Promised Land from the Muslim infidel! If that is your thought, you are wrong.

At this time in Redemptive History, the identifiable people of God were BOTH Jews and Christians. In fact consider, for the first couple years of the New Testament era, the first couple years of church history found a CHURCH made up exclusively of Jewish people. Gentiles came later! That is why it is so ludicrous when preachers or theologians today say that there are two distinct peoples of God, those of the church and those of Judaism. Christ did not come to create a new religion, but to complete/perfect the old (cf. Matthew 5:17)! As such New Testament Christianity does NOT represent a new religion, BUT the continuation of the redemptive plan which God began in Genesis!

And thus we read even AFTER the resurrection of Christ:

Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

At this time in Redemptive History the visible people of God were the Jews AND all grafted in through faith in Christ! Consider the pictures. What took place during the Reformation? On account of the numerous corruptions in the church, many theologians protested and brought God’s Redemptive work back to a more pure form. The Reformation was NOT the creation of a new religion, BUT a purification of the old!



What took place during the era of the New Testament? On account of the many corruptions in Judaism, God protested and so brought His Redemptive work back to what He intended it to be. Accordingly, the New Testament was NOT the creation of a new religion, BUT a perfecting of the old! That is why until 70 AD, when Judaism was historically rendered by God a false religion (cf. Luke 19:41-44), the gospel continued to be for “the Jew first and then the Greek!” Christ Himself said it, “...salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22)!

So at this time in Redemptive History, the visible people of God were both Jews and those converted to Christ! Clearly there was an overlap!

In this regard then, who is to blame for the death of “the Lord Jesus,” the execution of the “Old Testament prophets,” and the attack that “Paul” and “the Thessalonians” frequently

experienced”? NOT the Jews per se, BUT a segment of the people of God who in their rebellion against the Lord went headlong into their sin! In fact, throughout Redemptive History they have almost always been there. Speaking of those genuine servants of God who on account of their faith suffered severe persecution at the hands of their own countrymen, the identifiable people of God:

Hebrews 11:35b-38, “...others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (*men* of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.”

All of this persecution came from men and women who were part of the people of God! Stephen spoke about them in Acts 7, when he spoke to the Sanhedrin!

Acts 7:51-52, “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become.”

The Biblical label given to such rebellious people of God is “wicked.”

Ezekiel 33:7-8a, “God told Ezekiel, “Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth, and give them warning from Me. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die’...” - recently when we looked at the OT Prophetic Books, we saw that the word “wicked” primarily refers NOT to the pagan who gives himself to sin, BUT to the child of God who will not give up his sin!

Isaiah wrote speaking of the people of God:

Isaiah 32:7, “As for a rogue, his weapons are evil; he devises wicked schemes to destroy *the* afflicted with slander, even though *the* needy one speaks what is right.”

Later on the call would be given by Isaiah to his countrymen:

Isaiah 55:6-7, “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked [~ any and all amongst the people of God who had given themselves to sin] forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly

pardon.”

Jeremiah 5:26-28, “For wicked men are found among My people, they watch like fowlers lying in wait; they set a trap, they catch men. Like a cage full of birds, so their houses are full of deceit; therefore they have become great and rich. They are fat, they are sleek, they also excel in deeds of wickedness; they do not plead the cause, the cause of the orphan, that they may prosper; and they do not defend the rights of the poor.”

Much more could be referenced, but I hope you get the point. Who are the “they” of this text? The persecutors of our text are NOT simply Jews, BUT any and all amongst the people of God who have given themselves to sin. These are the “wicked” which, in our text, Paul has set out to describe!¹ These are the wicked that have been amongst God’s people from the start and remain with us even today! Gordon Fee summarizing this position wrote this:

Paul’s point would then be that the same community that killed Jesus and had persecuted the early followers of Jesus is now simply carrying on what their forebears had done as well, in which case ‘the Jews’ is a much more generic, than case-specific, designation. That is, they are in the same lineage with those who before them had killed the prophets. (Fee, 2009, p. 97)

The passage before us is indeed an exposé of a wicked man. But you must see that that “Wicked Man” is none other than the child of God who has given himself to sin and so self. We are NOT talking here about regenerate individuals, BUT those in the visible body of Christ, who would identify themselves as a child of God, who use religion as a vehicle of self-fulfillment and/or pleasure. We are talking here of those who

1. Play with religion in order to feel better.
2. Use the worship of God in order to be moved or to be inspired.
3. Take the Bible as nothing more than a moral guide book on life.

Now don’t misunderstand what is being taught here. RELIGION (which by definition is “the fear of the Lord”) is a most glorious thing when accompanied by a heart submissive to the Lord. But in the hands of a reprobate or a self-pleaser, it can be the platform for some of the most heinous sins imaginable, as Paul Himself witnessed first-hand. Frederick Douglass, a former slave, wrote in 1845 this assessment:

I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, a justifier of the most appalling barbarity, a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all

slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. (Douglass, 1995, p. 46)

Child of God, guard your heart in this respect. If your religion is about you, self-fulfillment, being happy, or just simply living the right way, you are at risk of a grave error. You may indeed be the “wicked” of this text. Paul wrote:

2 Corinthians 2:17, “For we are not like MANY, peddling the word of God...”

Do you know what a *Christ-Merchant* is? Paul just made mention of them here! Unlike a businessman who might use food to make money and so benefit themselves as in a restaurant; or a taxicab driver who drives to make money; or a day laborer who uses his skill to make a living; a Christ-Merchant is one who uses the things of the Lord, the word of God, the gospel, religious activity in order to make money and/or benefit themselves. It is a most heinous sin. The gospel was NOT given that we might make money or bolster ourselves; it was given to reconcile man to God!

However, the church is filled with such people. Christianity is their drug. For them it is NOT about dying to self and living to God, BUT using religion as a vehicle to promote self. These are The Wicked of our passage! With that, notice the fruit of the wicked man.

Paul speaking of the Jews referenced in 1 Thessalonians 2:15c wrote:

1 Thessalonians 2:14, “Who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out...”

Paul references here actually four peoples.

1. The Lord Jesus- believe it or not, Paul has managed here to place “the Lord” AND “Jesus” in the emphatic position which means that both names receive the emphasis.² Truly, Paul remained shocked that when the Messiah came to the people of God, the wicked in their midst killed Him! Leon Morris put it quite plainly:

When he says that they killed the Lord Jesus, by an unusual word order he manages to emphasize both Lord and Jesus. The One whom they killed was the Lord, with all that that means in terms of heavenly glory; and he was Jesus, fully man, and their fellow-countryman. (Morris, 1959, p. 64)

2. The Prophets- this most likely references the Old Testament prophets of God, but it could refer to many unknown prophets of the New Testament era (cf. Matthew 23:34-36).

3. US- which would include both the Thessalonians and
4. Paul himself.

Looking at these four groups, what do they all have in common? They all were genuine servants of God who loved the Lord and so lived their lives unto His purpose and glory!

With these people in mind, what is the first fruit of the wicked in this passage, a fruit that has been reaped time and time again *ad infinitum* throughout Redemptive History? The persecution of the genuine servant of God!

Notice the word for “drove us out” - ἐκδιώκω (*ekdiōkō*). It is an intensified form of the word for persecute (διώκω [*diōkō*]) which speaks of an untiring, dogged pursuit, like a lion pursuing its prey. Accordingly, it is NOT just a hatred toward a person which results in a physical or verbal attack. Rather, it is an extreme hatred toward a person which results in brutal attacks against their person.

Such is the fruit oft-times of those who play with religion in order to promote themselves, the Wicked! They feel threatened by genuine servants of God, and so they hyper-react with vicious attacks. It began very early in Redemptive History. Even after receiving a warning from the Lord that he was flirting with disaster on account of his self-directed worship, Cain turned on his brother:

Genesis 4:8b, “And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.”

Why would Cain do that? Because he was threatened by the righteousness of Abel! Abel possessed what Cain desired outside of God! This always angers the unrighteous in the body of Christ! They want what we’ve got, yet not on God’s terms! And so they attack! Some of the cruelest persecution that one will suffer as a Christian will come from people who call themselves a follower of Christ! And so it has and continues to be throughout Redemptive History.

John 3:19-20a, “...the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light...”

Truly, it is NOT that the wicked feel threatened by the genuine servant of God. It is that they feel threatened by God; they hate Him. And so they attack the child of God in their hatred of Christ.

John 15:18-21, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are 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 slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake [that tells us that some of the persecutors here are from amongst the people of God; what they do, they do in the name of Christ], because they do not know the One who sent Me."

In fact, listen to Christ speaking of the wicked amongst us:

John 16:2-3, "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. And these things they will do, because they have not known the Father, or Me."

Understand! If you would be a genuine servant of God, those in the body of Christ who want a religion void of Christ will despise you! And thus Christ said, speaking of the religious leaders of His day:

Matthew 23:33-35, "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell? Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, that upon you may fall *the guilt of* all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar."

The first fruit of a wicked man is the persecution and so hatred of the genuine child of God! Christ was on the receiving end of this hatred, as were the prophets, Paul, the Thessalonians, and the believers in Judea! And if you would seek to serve the Lord on His terms, you too will be persecuted by those in the body!

As "*every heretic has his verse*," so every persecutor in the church has his religious cause. As one man put it: "The problem of religion is that everyone thinks that God is on their side!" So how do you know if you are in the right? There are a variety of ways to discern it even though, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

- a) First of course we want to look at our cause. Is it Biblical?
- b) Second, is it a calling placed on all children of God?
- c) Third, do I feel as proportionally strong about it as it is presented in the Bible? Yet our hearts/minds can deceive us on these points.
- d) Fourth, How do we go about our "cause"? We're going to focus on this as we close.

Years ago, J. C. Ryle wrote the book, *Holiness*. It was written when the Keswick holiness movement had taken off and was ruling the day. J. C. Ryle was one of the first to criticize

publically the theology at the time. And boy did he ever pay for it. He received, verbal abuse, accusations, and anger which at times verged on violence! Listen to an observation he made at the height of this movement:

I must enter my protest against the sneering, taunting, contemptuous language which has been frequently used of late by some of the advocates of what I must call the Arminian view of the Seventh of Romans, in speaking of the opinions of their opponents. To say the least, such language is unfitting, and only defeats its own end. A cause which is defended by such language is deservedly suspicious. Truth needs no such weapons. (Ryle, 2013, p. xxii)

From this I gather a very simple test of the credibility of a person's position: when challenged to what do they resort? If it is fleshly- sneering, taunting, contemptuous language; if it involves lies and deceit, anger and/or threats; you can be sure that person is in the wrong and their position self-serving! Always remember the deeds of the flesh involve these things:

Galatians 5:20, 21, "...enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying..."

In the context of the ministry, more than any other tool, I have found this to be quite helpful when it comes to persecution from amongst the people of God.

Everyone is going to claim a verse... everyone is going to think God is on their side. But the man or woman who goes about the service of God in a gracious, humble, edifying way, one which reflects the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), demonstrates that the God they are serving is the true God of the Bible. Any deviation in character demonstrates at that moment, the person is in the service of another god! J. C. Ryle further wrote, "There is no surer mark of backsliding and falling off in grace than an increasing disposition to find fault, pick holes, and see weak points in others." (Ryle, 2013, p. 87)

If in this study you have been troubled at the thought that you might be "the wicked" of this passage, it is not too late to repent! Indeed, go to God this day, be humble before Him, and beg for His forgiveness. Go on a spiritual death-march to self, and cling to Christ!

Bibliography

Douglass, F. (1995). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Dover: Dover Publications.

Fee, G. (2009). *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Morris, L. (1959). *1 and 2 Thessalonians (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*. Chicago:

Intersivity Academic.
Ryle, j. C. (2013). *Holiness*. Create Space.

End Note(s)

¹ It was the Romans who actually killed Jesus, but Paul's point is that it was at the instigation of the Jews (cf. John 18:30–31, 35; 19:10–15).

² The text literally reads, “who the Lord killing Jesus” (τῶν καὶ τὸν κύριον ἀποκτεινάντων Ἰησοῦν).