

Pursuing Christ

One of my children had hurt one of her sisters. As soon as I was told, I was angry and I immediately sprang to action. I can still hear my thoughts, "Where is she; we are going to deal with this right now!" Perhaps you can remember a similar situation in which you sprang into action in defense of someone who had been hurt or badly mistreated. You felt a rush of anger and the need to respond immediately. You were in *pursuit*.

You may also be able to relate to a time when you were an aggressor in a different way; a time when you were in hot pursuit because you were the victim. You were hurt and angry and wanted to 'right the wrong.'

In either case, *the one who is in pursuit of another* is technically called a 'persecutor.' This was a word that Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount. In His day it was commonly used to describe a hunter *in pursuit of his prey*. As a legal term it described the *prosecutor*. It was also used to describe someone who *avenged* the murder of another.

It is unlikely that any of us think of ourselves as a persecutor, but most of us can, in some way, relate to the idea of being in *hot pursuit*; and it is likely that we felt justified to act the way we did.

A vivid Old Testament example of the hunter and the hunted is seen in 1 Samuel 18-24. These chapters tell a sad story of a jealous king in pursuit of Israel's beloved hero.

In a jealous rage King Saul threw a spear at David in hopes of killing him. King Saul's jealousy stemmed from David's popularity as Israel's beloved warrior. As a result, Saul became David's enemy, and David left Israel. However, King Saul discovered where David was living and took his army to destroy him. King Saul was in *hot pursuit* of David; the hunter and the hunted. This event illustrates the persecution of David at the hand of King Saul.

Jesus taught his followers:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:44-45)

An *enemy* is someone who is hostile toward you. They may not be carrying pitchforks and torches, waving swords, or firing guns; but they are hateful to you, having turned against you.

The one who *persecutes* is a person who chases after you like a hunter in pursuit of his prey. They are in hot pursuit of you and intend to track you down.

We might not think of our *enemies* and those who *persecute* us with such extreme descriptions, yet most of us know someone who fits those descriptions to some degree.

Jesus asks us to do something that is unnatural and difficult. As a result some Christians simply skip His teaching. Some might react:

"Love my enemies!?"

"Pray for those who are in hot pursuit of me!?"

"Absurd! They don't deserve it!"

How can anyone be expected to accomplish this?

If I am right, most of us are able to think of a time when we could have "technically" been described as a persecutor; perhaps like the illustration at the beginning of the article. I would also think that we *believe* that we are justified in our action.

Now, consider this question:

Is it possible that when we have been persecuted, the persecutor merely *believes* they are justified? Even in a fit of jealous rage, it is possible that they just don't understand what they are doing?

These questions are raised, not to imply that an evil person is not responsible for their sin, but to suggest a solution:

And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:33-34)

He put into practice the very words he taught; Jesus, the *Son of God*. And in the same way we will become sons of our Father in heaven. When we stand at the foot of the cross we will have the strength and courage to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Mark Stinnett
Ellisville Church of Christ
Ellisville, Missouri
www.simplychristians.com