

June 7, 2020
Sermon on the Mount (9)
The Blessing No One Wants
Matthew 5:10-12
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This morning we are going to focus on the 8th beatitude in which Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* (5:10) Today’s beatitude may sound a bit odd because Jesus says people who are persecuted are blessed people, fortunate people, and *“makarios”* people. Three times Jesus uses the word “persecuted,” which means: Harassed, opposed, or ill-treated. Jesus says, “If you pursue Christian life, this is what will happen to you. You should expect it. The world will not thank you for being a Christian. The world will not love the church.” Jesus is saying, “don’t expect to be thanked for living a godly life in business, industry, school or education. Sinners will be suspicious of us for living a godly life – at best, and hostile towards us for living a godly life – at worst.”

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to this reality as the “extra-ordinariness” of the Christian life. He said, “With every beatitude the gulf is widened between the disciples and the people, and their call to come forth from the people becomes increasingly manifest.” People don’t like people who “come forth.” They resist people who live counter-culturally. So, if we live the Christian life, we may expect some form of persecution. It is a reality and it’s going to happen.

Jesus repeatedly told His followers that they could expect hardship and difficulty. In John 15:20 Jesus says, *“If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”* In John 16:33 Jesus says, *“In this world you will have trouble.”* In Matthew 24:9 Jesus says, *“You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death and you will be hated by all nations because of Me.”* And then, in 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul sums it all up by saying, *“everyone who lives a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”*

Let us think about individual people in the Bible. Persecution for righteousness’ sake began in the first family. Adam and Eve had just two boys: Cain and Abel. Adam and Eve hoped that they would get along and be great friends. But Cain persecuted his own brother, and then he murdered him. Why did Cain kill him? The Bible says, because *“his own actions were evil and his brother’s righteous”* (1 John 3:12). Abel set the pattern for those who were to come. This pattern of opposition, harassment and suffering runs throughout human history, to our experience around the world today. Joseph was persecuted by his brothers, and in Egypt he was cast into prison for righteousness’ sake. Moses was reviled again and again, Samuel was rejected, Elijah was despised and persecuted, and Nehemiah was oppressed and defamed. Stephen was stoned, Peter and John were cast into prison, James was beheaded, and the entire course of Paul’s Christian life and ministry was one long series of bitter and relentless persecutions.

It is possible to suffer “persecution” for the wrong reasons. Some Christians are rude and intolerable. Some believers are self-righteous. Their evangelistic methods are disrespectful. Some disciples live in sin. Their difficulty and their “persecution” by the result of the wrong reasons aren’t God’s fault. It’s theirs. They sinned and chose to disobey God. In this beatitude Jesus is not saying that people who suffer for any of these wrong reasons are blessed. Jesus is saying that people who suffer for righteousness’ sake,

people who live out the principles of the beatitudes, and people who suffer because they identify themselves with our Lord are blessed. Jesus is saying, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the right reason, people who suffer because by God's grace they are determined to live as I live." Jesus is talking about the persecution that comes as a result of our professing to be followers of Jesus Christ, the persecution that comes when we go against the flow of this fallen world of ours. When we stand up and graciously say, "I don't believe that is right," we are going to face resistance, persecution, and rebuke.

As long as we go with the flow, we will have no problem. But the moment we go against the flow persecution will come. If we go with the flow and say that Christians should focus on church matter and striving for spiritual growth in the church and in the Christian community, we'll not have any problems. But when the moment we say, "As Christians we should fight against all kinds of evil and injustice in our lives such as racism, poverty, environment, etc., and we should lift our voices for these matters and act for justice in the streets and the public places," we go against the flow. We will be reviled. Have you ever risked speaking out for what you knew was right? Have you ever identified yourself as a Christ-follower? In fact, how many people even know you are a Christian?

Once John Piper told that America is one of the hardest places in the world to be a true Christian. The blessings of freedom in the U.S. have led us to an expectation of a comfortable life. A comfortable life produces laziness of spirit, and that's why fasting and giving and serving and risking are so important to our spiritual health. COVID-19 becomes a new and big challenge in our ordinary and faith lives. It has caused us to limit our activities of life and pushed us to find new ways of life. It has been shaking the foundation of our life and faith. It is a challenging time for us, but it is a time to reset and prioritize our life and faith.

If God allows us to suffer for our faith as we have not known before, we should pray that He will use it as a means of reviving His church. The Beatitudes show how this works. When persecution comes, we realize that we don't have what it takes and we are cast back on the Lord. And, we need to go back to the beginning which is being poor in Spirit. When we face challenges, such as COVID-19, racism, cancer, or accidents in life, we begin to see and to mourn the compromises of our lives. And, we need to submit ourselves meekly to the will of God. We find ourselves longing to honor Christ through the difficulties we are facing.

Jesus tells us what our response to persecution should be. In verse 12 He says "*Rejoice and be glad!*" How can Jesus say this? How can He say, "When you are insulted and slandered and even forced to face death because you follow me, rejoice!"? There are several reasons to rejoice in times of persecution. First, it often shows we are on the right side! Persecution for righteous living is like a litmus test that shows we are walking down the right path and the narrow path! Being persecuted in a godless world is like a thermometer. It shows us how much we are being like Jesus.

And we can be glad in the midst of persecution because we will get the eternal reward. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to people who are persecuted for righteousness, "*because great is your reward in heaven!*" (12). Our persecution won't last long, but our eternal reward will last forever. And it will be more than give back for our suffering. If we are suffering for the right reasons, we need to count ourselves fortunate, because it means we're on the right side. We need to be glad, because God might use our response to lead someone to faith. We can rejoice, because when we get to heaven, we'll get eternal reward. This morning Jesus says, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (10).