

The Sermon on the Mount

“The Beatitudes”

Part 8

“Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted for Righteousness’ Sake”

Matthew 5:10-12

Introducing the Text

In Matthew 5:10-12, Jesus proclaims...

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

With these words, Jesus puts the finishing touches on His spectacular masterpiece that portrays a genuine follower of Jesus Christ.

As Jesus completes His portrait of a true Christian’s inward character, He reveals a surprising byproduct – PERSECUTION!

What awaits the Christian who is “poor in spirit”? *Persecution*. What awaits the Christian who “mourns” over their sin? *Persecution*. What awaits the Christian who displays “meekness” when they’re mistreated? *Persecution*. What awaits the Christian who “hungers and thirsts” for holy living? *Persecution*. What awaits the Christian who distributes “mercy” to those living under the pain and suffering of sin? *Persecution*. What awaits the Christian whose heart is “pure” in motive, feelings, plans, actions, and words? *Persecution*. What awaits the Christian who seeks “peace” and reconciliation with all people, not matter how deep the wounds and divisions may run? *Persecution*.

I know...that’s not what you wanted to hear. We’d much prefer peace, happiness, prosperity, and success. In fact, you can easily find that message with the Prosperity Gospel preachers permeating cable television these days. Yet, Jesus promises the Christian committed to living the Beatitudes something radically different. PERSECUTION!

Unfortunately, many Christians have been deceived into believing that if they live out these counter-cultural beatitudes, they will enjoy applause, popularity, and success in this life. And, when the applause of people, popularity among peers, and the success of

the world don't come our way, we act surprised, disappointed, and perplexed as if something strange and unfair were happening.

Such a reaction was commonplace even during the early days of the Church. In the book of 1 Peter, the recipients of the Apostle Peter's letter were discouraged and confused by the persecution they were facing.

In an attempt to encourage his listeners, Peter wrote...

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice..."
(1 Peter 4:12-13a)

According to God's Word, persecution should come as no surprise to disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus warned His beloved disciples...

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as 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 servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of My name, because they do not know Him who sent Me." (John 15:18-21)

When instructing his young protégé Timothy, the Apostle Paul wrote...

"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." (2 Timothy 3:12-13)

The Bible, as well two thousand years of church history, teaches us that a life genuinely redeemed and transformed by Jesus Christ will face various forms of persecution this side of heaven.

In the Old Testament, Moses, Joseph, David, along with the prophets were persecuted for being righteous and holy men. In the New Testament, the disciples and Paul were persecuted for being righteous and holy men. Many lost their lives at the hands of wicked persecutors.

Throughout church history, righteous men and women have been persecuted by means of torture, imprisonment, and execution.

Most significantly, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was persecuted. Jesus was slandered, falsely accused, rejected by family, friends, and the Jews of his day, tortured, and ultimately crucified for being the Righteous Redeemer.

Should we, as 21st Century Christians, expect anything less?

The Question

Thus, the question is not, *“Why am I being persecuted?”* Rather, the better question is, ***“Why am I not being persecuted?”***

George MacLeod, a 20th Century Scottish Pastor, once said...

“The greatest criticism of the Church today is that no one wants to persecute it: because there is nothing very much to persecute it about.”

In his Christian classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas a Kempis wrote...

“Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feast, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for his sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many admire his miracles, but few follow him in the humiliation of the cross.”

Once again, listen carefully to the final beatitude of Jesus, this time making special note of the “cause” of persecution.

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for **righteousness’ sake...**”*

Then again, in verse 11, Jesus says...

*“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on **My account.**”*

Favored and approved by God are men and women who are persecuted for living lives that are consecrated and set apart for the glory of God. Favored and approved by God are men and women who are persecuted because their lives identify with and imitate Christ and His righteousness.

When Christians live holy lives amidst a fallen and sinful world, they will be persecuted. Likewise, when Christians live in such a way that their lives radically identify with Christ

and His cross, rather than the world and its prosperity and materialism, they too will be persecuted.

Notice what Christ promises us as we seek to live holy lives for His glory...

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account.”

According to Jesus, those of us who seek to live righteous lives that imitate Christ and His righteousness will not simply be persecuted; we will be reviled. People, including our peers, coworkers, family members, and sometimes even those professing to know Christ as Savior and Lord, will utter all kinds of evil against us. In fact, if we look closely at the life of Christ, we find that the greatest persecution He faced came from within the ranks of those claiming to be religious – the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Let this be a warning to every true follower of Christ. Do not be surprised when your righteous and holy living produces persecution by those who claim to be Christians but, in reality, are nothing more than modern-day Pharisees. As Jesus promised, if it happened to Him, it will happen to you too.

Think of the Reformers; men like Martin Luther and John Calvin. Their greatest persecution came from within the Roman Catholic Church.

An Indelible Mark of Authentic Christianity

The single greatest truth of the eighth and final beatitude is this:

Persecution is joyous evidence that a Christian is living a holy and righteous life for the glory of Christ.

There is no such thing as holy living that is void of persecution. Jesus promised His disciples and Paul promised Timothy – a righteous and godly life that seeks to exalt Christ will be persecuted. This is a promise from God; a promise meant to prepare the Christian for what will inevitably come.

Is there any persecution in your life?

The eighth beatitude confronts every professing Christian with a sobering question – **“Am I being persecuted?”**

Don't miss this!

Persecution is an indelible mark of authentic Christianity. If you're not being persecuted as a Christian, you should pause and examine what you are seeking, how you are living, and whom you are choosing to identify with. Seeking to imitate Christ and His righteousness will produce persecution. Living a surrendered life to the authority of God's Word & Spirit will produce persecution. Choosing to identify with Jesus Christ and His exclusive claim to being the only Way to Heaven will produce persecution.

D.A. Carson highlights this principle when he writes...

"This basic principle reappears again and again in the New Testament. The Christian lives in a sinful world; therefore, if he exhibits genuine, transparent righteousness he will be rejected by many. Genuine righteousness condemns many people by implication; small wonder that people often lash out in retaliation."

What are you receiving from the world? Are you receiving persecution? Or, are you receiving acceptance and applause?

Listen carefully!

What you are receiving from the world reveals what kind of life you are living.

Trust God's Word! The world will not accept and applaud righteous and holy living. Why? Righteous and holy living convicts and condemns the world of sin and rebellion against the holy God. Righteous living rejects a self-centered, indulgent, comfortable, and sinful lifestyle that exalts man – not Christ.

A Christian Response to Persecution

So, how should we respond when we encounter persecuting, reviling, and all kinds of evil utterances against us?

According to Jesus, we should rejoice. In fact, a more accurate translation of this imperative command would be to "rejoice with exceeding gladness." Why should we rejoice with exceeding gladness?

First and foremost, thru Satan's persecution, God is giving us a wonderful gift – confirmation that we belong to Him and are guaranteed the kingdom of heaven and its great rewards.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones states this truth eloquently when he writes...

“If ever you find yourself persecuted for Christ and for righteousness’ sake, you have in a sense got the final proof of the fact that you are a Christian, that you are a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.”

Later, Lloyd-Jones continues this thought...

“By thus persecuting you the world is just telling you that you do not belong to it, that you are a man apart; you belong to another realm, thus proving the fact that you are going to heaven.”

Let me stop here and specifically address our teenagers.

The culture you live in today is boastfully, if not arrogantly, hostile to Christ and Christian holiness. You must know, and prepare yourself accordingly, if you have any desire to live for the glory of Christ, you will be persecuted. If you desire to bear the cross of Christ and exalt His name in your school, your peers – even some of your Christian peers, will revile you. If you desire to live a holy and pure life, you will encounter all kinds of evil, malicious, and false things said about you – and sometimes those who claim to know Christ as Savior will say these things.

Don’t let such persecution discourage you, defeat you, or lead you down the path of compromise. Understand the gift God is giving you at such a young age. God is giving you the gift of confirmation. God is assuring you that you belong to Christ and have been guaranteed the power and glory of the kingdom of heaven – both now and for all eternity.

Parents, listen carefully. Our children will be persecuted for their faith in Christ and their attempt to live righteously in a hostile world. Your response is critical. How many Christian parents have done their children a great disservice by the way they’ve handled their child’s persecution? Our role as Christian parents is to teach our children to rejoice in persecution - not reject it or retaliate against it.

Recently, I had the opportunity to do just this with my oldest daughter Caroline, who’s in the fifth grade. First, let me say this ladies. You are far meaner than men. Boys will get mad, wrestle and punch each other, and then get up and reconcile and best buddies thirty minutes later. Girls are far more vicious.

A few weeks ago, Caroline came home from school upset. A girl, one who professes to follow Christ, wrote a poem called *The Freak*. When she completed the poem, she gave it to Caroline and told Caroline it was about her. According to the poem, Caroline was a freak for being a “goody two shoes.” Caroline was a freak for being committed to Jesus and His Way.

When Caroline first shared this with me, my insides started to churn. I could feel myself getting upset. Someone was persecuting my daughter for her righteousness' sake. But then, I caught myself. "Wait a minute," I thought. "This is a good thing. My daughter is being persecuted for her imitation of Christ." At that moment, I realized how I responded would teach Caroline how to respond to persecution. I had the joy of teaching Caroline that persecution is a sign of one's genuine faith in Christ. I had the joy of pointing Caroline to God's Word and helping her gain a biblical perspective on the Christian life. I was able to rejoice and celebrate with Caroline as she endured persecution. God was confirming her salvation and heavenly inheritance. Caroline is a Jesus "freak" and she was being persecuted for it. Praise God!

Parent's, teach your children that it's a privilege to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness. When your child is persecuted for imitating Christ and living for Him, help him or her unwrap the glorious gift of "confirmation."

Christian, have you ever considered this glorious truth?

God allows Satan to persecute His children as a glorious confirmation that you belong to Christ and are guaranteed the riches of Heaven. When we understand God's purpose for allowing persecution, we will no longer slide into depression, be gripped with anxiety, cry foul in our prayer life, or retaliate in anger. On the contrary, we will simply rejoice with exceeding gladness, for God is confirming that we are genuine followers of Christ who possess the kingdom of heaven as our reward.

There's another reason we should rejoice with exceeding gladness. Jesus tells the Christian who is persecuted for righteousness' sake that his "reward in heaven is great."

Persecution not only confirms our salvation in Christ, it also holds the promise that our rewards in heaven will be great. In this promise, Jesus reveals the key for enduring persecution and suffering. What's the key? The key to persevering thru the valley of persecution and suffering is to keep a heavenly, eternal perspective.

Is this not what Jesus exhorts us to do?

Each of the blessings associated with persecution are directly linked to heaven – the kingdom of heaven and the rewards of heaven. The Bible promises the Christian that we will all stand before the Bema Judgment Seat of Christ. When we stand at the Bema Seat, Christ will righteously and fairly examine our works and reward us accordingly. For those who were persecuted for their righteous and holy living, their rewards will be great.

Persevering thru various forms of persecution demands that the Christian fix his and her gaze squarely upon Christ and heaven's glory.

Is this not what the author of Hebrews tells us Jesus did? How did Jesus endure the persecution of the cross?

“Let us run with endurance the race set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despised the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

What was the joy set before Christ and His cross? Christ’s joy was heaven’s all-encompassing glory.

Consider Paul’s words of exhortation to the Corinthians...

“So we do not lose heart. Though the outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Cor. 4:16-18)

Consider Peter’s exhortation to persecuted Jewish Christians...

“Rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you....If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name...Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.” (1 Peter 4:13-14, 16, 19)

Jesus, Paul, and Peter all exhort persecuted Christians to fix their gaze upon the glory of heaven, where great rewards await us.

Closing Comments

Persecution is a very real part of the Christian life. In fact, it’s a promise.

Let’s us ask the question one more time – “What are you receiving from the world?” Are you receiving persecution? If so, praise God for confirming your faith and securing great heavenly rewards for you.

If you’re not being persecuted, why not? Are you living a righteous and holy life? Are you seeking to imitate Christ and His righteousness, which has been imputed to you thru saving faith?

It may very well be that so few western Christians experience persecution today because the world does not see the imitation of Christ in our daily living. Does the world see Christ and His holiness in your daily living? If not, the world won't waste her time persecuting you. The world will persecute righteous living. At the same time, the world will applaud worldly living. What are you receiving from the world?

Persecution is one of the most visible marks of an authentic Christian life. May we all live righteous and holy lives that faithfully endure persecution for the glory of Christ – who suffered all things that we might be saved and one day glorified.

Amen!