

Blessed Are The Persecuted

Matt. 5:10-12

One of the outstanding qualities of Jesus was His sheer honesty. He never left men any doubt what would happen if they followed Him. We have come to the last beatitude.

The general statement is made in *verse 10*, *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

This statement is followed by an application in *verses 11 & 12*, *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

Charles Allen tells of a friend of his who went to a large church to preach at a special Good Friday service. The weather was extremely bad and only a few people came. Apologetically, the host pastor said to the visiting pastor, "If it had not been for the bad weather, we would have had a large crowd to hear you tonight." At first, it angered the visiting preacher, but quickly his anger turned to pity and contempt.

Looking at his host, he said, *"Do You Realize What You Have Just Said? If the weather had not been bad, a larger crowd would have come to this Good Friday service. Jesus died on Good Friday, but his followers did not come to the service because the weather was bad."*

This Beatitude has possibly been the Most Misunderstood and Misapplied. The key to understanding this verse is the phrase, *"Because Of Righteousness."*

Let's look first at what it is not.

NEGATIVE INTERPRETATION

1. "Blessed Are Those Who Are Having A Hard Time In Their Christian Life."

They suffer mild persecution because of their own actions or temperament.

2. "Blessed Are The Persecuted Because They Are Fanatical."

"Fanatics for Jesus" – on the surface they sounds like an admirable description. But when it demands radical actions and blind loyalty to a leader instead of Christ, it usually leads to a destructive end for the participants and zero impact on the lost.

3. "Blessed Are They That Are Persecuted For A Cause."

Many people their political opinions carry the weight of spiritual principles but there is a difference. Be careful to blindly support a politician or cause because you may be manipulated.

4. "Blessed Are They That Are Persecuted For Being Good Or Noble, Or Self-Sacrificing."

Doubtful that the world would persecute but many have made great sacrifices for the wrong reason-

Albert Schweitzer was a great humanitarian and helped thousands medically but his liberal theology did not recognize Jesus as the Savior.

A young man from South Africa approached a minister who had just completed a lecture at a university seminar. The young man introduced himself by saying, *"I am from South Africa, and I would like to ask you what for me is a very important question."*

The young man told the speaker of his experiences in South Africa. *"I have lived in a land where my family and I have been persecuted, starved and tortured," he said. "My people have been oppressed for many years. We have seen times when we didn't know if other family members were alive or dead.*

Poverty was for us a way of life. Children died for lack of food. I was imprisoned for no apparent reason and tortured. Later I escaped, and with the help of several courageous people, I came here to America. My Question Is This. Please understand that I am not asking it to put you down, but to discover the answer. "How can you, a rich Christian from America who has never experienced any of these things, say to me, a man from South Africa, 'Jesus loves you?'"

The Minister Thought for A Moment Before He Responded. *"You are, of course, right," he told the young man. "I have never lived in any land where I have been persecuted. I have always had food to eat. I don't honestly know by experience the meaning of hunger. My family has never been tortured or murdered. I don't honestly know how I would respond if they were."*

Then he answered the man's question, "I have experienced the love and intervention of Jesus Christ in my life. I share with you what God has done for me. And I hope, I pray, that even though the words may sound hollow, that when you hear me say, 'Jesus loves you' that you also see that Jesus loves you through my actions and my faith."

The words of the speaker would have been hollow if he could not have shown this student the love of Jesus In His Own Life. Sad but true, there are people who profess to be christians who literally hate anyone who does not live or look exactly as they do. Some day they will be in for a surprise.

POSITIVE INTERPRETATION - Being like Jesus

Slide "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. John 15:18-20

The Beatitudes End with the Sure and Certain Promise That the Result of Keeping These Beatitudes Will Be PERSECUTION.

It has been from the beginning. Tacitus, In His Account Of Nero's Persecution About 65 A.D., tells of some of the things the first Christians faced: *"Besides being put to death, they were made to serve as objects of amusement: they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the darkness of the night."*

The Book The Martyrdom Of Polycarp Records That In 155 A.D., when Christian leader Polycarp was brought to the stadium, the Proconsul urged the old man to curse Christ, but Polycarp answered,

"Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king, who saved me?" The Proconsul threatened him with wild beasts and then with fire.

Polycarp answered, "You threaten with the fire that burns for an hour and in a little while is quenched; for you do not know of the fire of the judgment to come, the fire of the eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why delay? Bring what you will."

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

It still happens to Christians in our time. There are Christian martyrs dying for the cause of Christ even now.

Most of us would like to go through life loving and being loved. But of that goal, Jesus said, ***"Woe to you, when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets"*** (Luke 6:26).

And so Jesus made the peculiar observation that being harassed for the sake of your faith is a sign of God's favor.

Today – Voice of the Martyrs (www.persecution.com)

Several years ago when I preached a series on the Beatitudes, I made this statement. *"People are not openly persecuted in this country for being Christian."*

THAT STATEMENT IS NO LONGER TRUE!

Christians Are Being Persecuted For Standing Up For The Right To Life And The Freedom Of Religion.

They Are Called Far Right And Judgmental.

They Are Persecuted For Standing Up For The Biblical Interpretation Of Marriage.

They Are Called Homophobic.

They Are Persecuted For Expressing The Biblical View That Salvation Is Only Through Jesus Christ.

They Are Called Islamophobic.

Perhaps the persecution you have experience is more subtle.

For example, in an Academic Setting, we can be free to discuss Sigmund Freud or Karl Marx, but try to have an open discussion of Christ and his teachings in a classroom in America and you will be labeled as narrow minded or ignorant.

The "Persecution" is subtle, and so we can drift away from our willingness to witness to what we believe. Many of us work places where we have to show financial profit for our work. Seldom will someone say you cannot ask questions of ethics about how the money is made, but questions of Christian ethics usually remain in our mind without passing over our lips.

"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

But the threat of scorn from colleagues and reviling looks of peers hardly feels BLESSED. Not only is that, simply to suffer not enough.

As AUGUSTINE said, *"The Cause, Not The Pain, Makes The Martyr."*

Being injured for its own sake is not a virtue. There were times when Jesus was physically threatened but left to avoid being injured (**Mark 8:27**).

When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane knowing he faced the cross, he asked to be delivered from Physical Suffering: ***"Father, if it be possible, let this cup (of suffering) pass from me"*** (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus accepted suffering when it was forced upon him, but he never sought or desired it.

When we try to be the best Christians we can, but find ourselves being reviled and persecuted, having all kinds of evil uttered against us falsely, we can say it is not fair, which it is not. If our concern is our immediate reward, we will pity ourselves for the injustice done us.

However, if our concern is to do what we do for Jesus' sake, then the things that happen to us are seen in the larger context of these beatitudes. In fact, the normal and healthy response to being reviled and persecuted and having all kinds of evil spoken against us falsely is not GLADNESS and JOY.

It is like the conversation between a parent and child at the checkout line at the grocery store. As the child considers the immediate delight of the candy displayed before him, the parent talks about how fortunate they are to have fresh spinach in their garden at home.

We can hardly expect the child to be overjoyed at the long-term health benefits of spinach while looking at the pleasure immediately available on the candy rack. That is why parents will spend time explaining this benefit and explaining it again and explaining it all over again.

It would be strange for a child to rush past the candy and potato chips to get to the health food section, though it would be wonderful. In the same way, it would be a strange and wonderful thing for people to find joy and gladness in the midst of persecution for the sake of their faith.

But that has long been a unique characteristic of Christians. We are able to look through the words of this Beatitude and understand the persecution in the light of God's will, and way through eternity, and the final promise that god's kingdom will come.

One night after the porch of his home was bombed, Martin Luther King wrote, *"To our most bitter opponents we say ... 'Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you ... throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you ... one day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your hearts and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.'"*

The Beatitudes end with the sure and certain promise that we will receive the kingdom of heaven. We may have only a glimmer of it here and now, but most certainly we will see it fully hereafter. These Beatitudes conclude by returning to the promise of the first beatitude, the promise that those who faithfully cling to these Beatitudes will receive the Kingdom of God.