

## **Persecution**

Matthew 5:10-12

Today, in 2023, I could give you a long list of situations in which true Christian believers are being persecuted, our brothers and sisters around the world suffering even unto death for the sake of the gospel. The nation of North Korea would likely be at the top of that list, a nation that has sought to eradicate any remnant of Christianity. There many horror stories coming out of Afghanistan in the last two years. You can also learn about much persecution with reference to Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, and Eritrea. The list goes on. The point is necessary for us to realize, that in our own comfort and security, the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world are in danger every day because of persecution that we scarcely even imagine. And that is the context for Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount,

v.10

So let's begin with,

### **I. THE REALITY OF PERSECUTION.**

Interesting, isn't it, that this comes immediately after the blessing given to the peacemakers. Obviously, many will fail despite their best attempts. You cannot make others be at peace with you. And so not only are the peacemakers blessed, so are the persecuted! It seems like an anti-climax to the beattitudes, doesn't it? It is the reversal of what you might expect. And actually, you would think a person who lived according to these beattitudes would well-liked and respected. Someone who is humble and meek, pure in heart and merciful, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness is someone you would expect to be able to live in peace and get along well with others. They certainly are the sort of people the world desperately needs.

But the reality is that those who love the Lord and live for his glory will face persecution. I'll begin with the only real sort of persecution that most of us will ever experience, and though it is generally not life-threatening, it is very real.

#### **A. As a Christian, you may become the object of evil, verbal attacks.**

There is, of course, the temptation to retaliate. We are often defensive, or proud. Angry. Or we feel the impulse to become bitter or resentful. To nurse a grudge or keep a record of wrongs. All of those things, of course, do away with the promised blessing.

But the call of our Lord Jesus is not simply to restrain your temper or to control your tongue, but actually to rejoice! You are familiar with,

James 1:2 "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience."

Perseverance might be a better translation. Similarly,

1 Peter 1:6 "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, 8 whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, 9 receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls."

So this beattitude is directed to the very inner core of your heart and soul, just like all the others. In fact, the persecution serves to reveal what is in your heart. And the ordinary reality is that as a Christian, you will have that opportunity. Because despite your best efforts, the world will hate you.

John 15:18 "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me

before it hated you. 19 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. 20 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.”

And that persecution may become violent, even life threatening. That is the reality of this age.

**B. As a Christian, you may become the victim of evil, violent attacks.**

v.10

And that persecution is nothing new.

v.12

For us, this is mostly theoretical. Persecution doesn't threaten us. It is something to be endured in foreign countries. And for that reason, we often treat it lightly. For us, it is sanitized. We read about it a little bit, we hear about it just a little bit, and we go on with our comfortable, protected lives. But at the very least this afternoon, allow your heart to grasp this reality. Though it may not come to us in very severe forms, our brothers and sisters around the world are suffering terribly. Despite the fact that our politically correct American press does not report it to us, Christians are severely and savagely persecuted in country after country around the world. In many places, it is the norm. It is the ordinary. It is unescapable. The blood of the martyrs continues to be shed.

With that realization, however, note well,

**II. THE CAUSE OF PERSECUTION.**

Verse 10 is pretty clear. The blessing is not promised to the

one who suffers because of his own sin. Nor because he is particularly offensive and obnoxious. Blessed are those who are persecuted...

**A. “...for righteousness' sake.”**

In other words, God's approbations goes only to those who suffer despite their good conduct! There is no virtue in suffering, per se. Suffering, in itself, has no inherent benefit. When when you suffer for doing good, when you suffer or are persecuted because of the righteousness of your own life, that is a different story altogether.

Peter says the very same thing.

1 Peter 3:14 “But even if you should suffer for righteousness 'sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, 16 having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.”

Likewise

1 Peter 2:19 “For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”

So the blessing is to those who suffer unjustly. Or, as Jesus puts it,

**B. "...falsely on my account."**

v.11

Again, back in 1 Peter,

1 Peter 4:12 "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. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name."

The point is that suffering because of Jesus is opportunity to glorify God in your body, and therein is the blessing. If you suffer because you are a meddler, a busybody, well, you get what you deserve. If you suffer as the consequences of your own sin, that you receive the just reward for your behavior. But blessed are you, blessed are you beloved, when you live for Jesus and the world hates you for it! Blessed are you when it is the name of Jesus that is the cause of your suffering. And it is in that situation, under those circumstances, that you are able to receive and enjoy,

**III. THE REWARD OF PERSECUTION.**

This seems contradictory as well, because the very nature of persecution seems to imply the absence of reward. Persecution seems to be a penalty, depriving you of any sense of advantage. But no, says Jesus, just the opposite. The reward is yours. Blessed are you...

Specifically, like so many of the other beatitudes, the reward

is nothing less than eternal life itself.

**A. Persecution is a mark of those who will inherit the kingdom of heaven.**

v.10 "...theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

To the martyrs go the riches of eternal life. To those who suffer for righteousness' sake go the kingdom of heaven.

Paul puts it this way in,

Phil. 3:10 "...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

You see, sharing in the sufferings of Jesus, becoming like him in his death, is the path by which we gain eternal life. The mark of persecution is the mark of a Christian. Scriptures joins the two together, inseparably. To be a Christian is to be persecuted. To be persecuted for Christ's sake is to have life.

2 Tim. 3:12 "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

Phil. 1:29 "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake."

1 Peter 2:21 "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps."

We read this fascinating account of Paul preaching in, Acts 14:19 "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him

out of the city, supposing that he was dead. 20 But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. 21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

Did you catch that? “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” So John, near the end of his life, would write to the seven churches with these words,

Rev. 1:9 “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

Thus his encouragement to the church at Smyrna was simple, Rev. 2:9 “I know your tribulation and your poverty ( but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”

And so the picture of the saints in heaven is the gathering of the martyrs, described first in,

Rev. 7:9 “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before

the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!...13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? 14 I said to him, Sir, you know. And he said to me, These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

That’s the fulfillment of this beattitude,  
v.10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

But in a sense, it even gets better. There is a promised reward. That’s pretty plain in,

#### **B. Persecution is a mark of those who will be rewarded in heaven.**

v.12

Not just salvation, but reward. And that is where the fullness of joy comes into play. Rejoice, knowing that the reward shall be yours. In Hebrews 11 we are told to look to the faith of Moses for our encouragement.

Heb. 11:24 “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.”

But most of all, we are encouraged to look unto Jesus.

Heb. 12:1 “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the

sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Jesus looked forward to the reward of joy, the joy of triumph. And so he endured the cross, he suffered the worst possible persecution. And I can’t end a sermon on the subject of persecution without reinforcing this idea that,

**C. Persecution is a mark of your union with Jesus Christ.**

And that’s the encouragement, even as Hebrews 12 continues,

Heb. 12:3 “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

Your reward, ultimately, is to be with him. And your identity as one of his followers is established and secured by the experiences of persecution, being united with him in his persecution; in his death. So when you are persecuted, even unto death, you are most intimately united to Jesus himself. As you read of those martyrs who died for their faith, that is their joy. That is their encouragement. That is their strength. They are marked, in their flesh and with their very lives, marked with Jesus. And they who are marked with Jesus will be united with him in his resurrection.

Rom. 6:5 “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Therefore this experience of persecution is to be the characteristic of our lives, after which we will enjoy the blessings of eternal glory. In the words of Peter,

1 Peter 5:10 “But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. 11 To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

v.10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”