

Victory

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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. Matthew 5:10-12 (NIV)

In the famous O. Henry story, “The Gift of the Magi,” a poor young couple each chooses to sell their only personal treasure in order to purchase a Christmas gift for the other. She sells her beautiful knee-length hair, and he sells his gold pocket watch. They are surprised when they realize that each has purchased a gift to be used with their special possessions. He gave her a set of jeweled combs to wear in her long hair, and she bought him a chain for the pocket watch he no longer owns. Out of their love for each other, they had been willing to sacrifice their most valuable possession.

The final condition of the heart that Jesus describes in the Beatitudes is that of sacrifice. Sacrifice is an integral part of love because it is impossible to want the good of others without it. We see this in the marriage vows where each person is called to love in sickness and in health, in poverty and in wealth. No matter what comes our way in marriage, we are to be committed to the good of our spouse, even at our own expense.

Sacrificing for the one we love is something most of us can comprehend. It makes sense. But sacrificing for someone who has treated us badly, accepting slander and mistreatment? That is hard to stomach. And yet, it is the very representation of what Jesus did for us. *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).* This is the ultimate act of love.

What makes this so difficult for us is that it represents the part of our humanity we cling to the most desperately. Our dignity. To allow others to steal from us our value, our worth as humans is degrading and humiliating. This is what makes some crimes so much crueler than others—rape, kidnapping, torture, and murder all devalue the victim.

There is an important caveat within this Beatitude, however. Jesus says, when you are mistreated “because of Me.” Being persecuted for political reasons, tribal reasons, or even in response to our own bad behavior is not the same. This speaks of the motivation of our heart to stand against others. It’s often fascinating that some are quick to stand up for political feelings and yet slow to witness or proclaim the gospel. We’re often quick to stand up against personal slights or push back when we don’t get our own way yet fail to defend the truth of God’s Word.

The Disciples and early Christians lived the reality of these verses as they stood for the truth of the Gospel against the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman emperors. They refused to stop preaching in Christ’s name and to worship anyone besides God. In response, they found themselves physically persecuted, slandered, and isolated from their communities. Yet, in their willingness to sacrifice their dignity for the cause of Christ, they became powerful witnesses of Him. Christianity spread and eventually overcame the pagan religions of the Roman Empire.

We love others when we are willing to sacrifice so that they can come to Christ. We find joy in knowing that our sacrifice is not in vain.



The Joy of Sacrifice

"We will abandon it all for the sake of the call. No other reason at all for the sake of the call. Wholly devoted to live or to die for the sake of the call." Stephen Curtis Chapman

Giving Our All

What are we willing to give up to follow Jesus? In this final Beatitude Jesus explains the cost of discipleship. It includes being rejected, scorned, slandered, and persecuted. In **Matthew 5:10-12**, what are the two reasons we will be persecuted?

What are the blessings associated with this Beatitude?

The blessing for the poor in spirit is also receiving the kingdom of heaven. What is the connection between becoming part of the kingdom of heaven through salvation and being persecuted for our salvation?

What historical allusion does Jesus use that points to this connection?

Hebrews 11:32-38 gives us a look at the lives of these heroes of the faith. What two sides do we see to the stories of their lives?

The author goes on to use the examples of great faith from Hebrews 11 to encourage us to do what in **Hebrews 12:1-2**?

Jesus shows us in this Beatitude the truth of following Him. Great victories come at the cost of great suffering. What perspective does **2 Corinthians 4:16-18** give us?

Sacrifice our Pride

Read **Matthew 5:21-22**. We see in the first verse the pattern Jesus sets that indicates He is refining their understanding of a traditional teaching, *"you have heard that it was said."* In this instance, was there a problem in the cultural understanding of murder or was this addressing the heart attitude that drove murder?

The consequences for murder were set out long before the giving of the Mosaic Law. Why did God institute the death penalty in **Genesis 9:1-6**? To what kind of life did it apply? How does God view animal death?



What are the two judgements listed in **Matthew 5:22**? How do these two judgements differ?

Equating *spiritual teachings* with *civil law* has created many of the areas of confusion we see today in politics. These arguments are often used against Christians as a way to neuter our ability to defend our beliefs and cultural values. Spiritual teachings are directed at individuals and churches. They describe our responsibilities before God and inform how we should live as citizens in a society. Every person is ultimately responsible to God for their response to these teachings.

Civil laws vary widely depending on the government but do generally include certain universal values taught in the Bible. However, when God instituted government, He endowed it with certain rights and responsibilities. What are those according to **Romans 13:1-7**?

Our pride gets us in a world of trouble. How does **Proverbs 11:2** describe the result of pride in our lives?

After pointing out that the heart attitude of anger was the root cause of murder, Jesus turns to how we should respond to the inevitable fall-out in our lives when we have allowed anger to harm our relationship with someone. What are we to do according to **Matthew 5:23-24**?

Remember that offering sacrifices to God at the altar for the cleansing of sin was a regular act of worship before Jesus' final sacrifice on the cross. How does this help us understand the importance of being prepared to worship God? See **Proverbs 28:13-14**.

How does an interpersonal problem hamper our relationship with God? (**1 John 4:20-21**)

In **Matthew 5:25-26**, we see a conflict that has widened in scope. What is at stake in this situation?



Paul wrote about the issue of taking each other to court in **1 Corinthians 6:6-8**. How does his advice line up with Jesus' teaching here?

We all have our personal heart issues that trip us up more than others. For some it is our desire to be proved right no matter what, for others it is a desire to get our money's worth out of everything. How do these sins lead us down the path of conflict and away from a sacrificial love of others?

Sacrifice our Need for Justice

Another heart-felt issue that many struggle to let go of is a need for justice. Jesus turned to this in **Matthew 5:38-39** with a very familiar phrase, "*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*". This was a statement of the Law of Retribution (Lex Talionis) which was taught in the Mosaic Law. Its main purpose was to restrict the judiciary to a fair and equitable application of punishment by making sure that the punishment fit the crime but did not devalue the life of the perpetrator. (Deuteronomy 19).

Once again Jesus uses the familiar pattern to begin this teaching, "*You have heard that it was said...*". In this instance is this a cultural problem or a heart attitude?

It seems that in Jesus' day, this teaching had drifted out of the courts and into everyday practice with people embracing an attitude of retaliation against the smallest slight. Jesus illustrated this with the idea of a slap on the cheek which was a cultural way of insulting someone's honor. An example of this is seen in **John 18:22-24**. How does Jesus respond?

How does His personal response match His teaching in **Matthew 5:39**?

In **Acts 23:1-3**, we see an example in the life of Paul. How does Paul defend himself?

What can we learn from these examples?



In **Matthew 5:40-42**, Jesus speaks of those who try to take advantage of us. One example He uses is of being sued for the very clothes off your back. Yet, rather than retaliate, what does Jesus suggest?

What did **Exodus 22:26** say regarding a cloak? What is the implication of this?

Another example of taking advantage was one that was especially hated by the Jews. By law, a Roman soldier could compel a man to carry his equipment (between 60 to 100 pounds) for one mile. Consider that our saying “go the extra mile” comes from this teaching. How can we experience victory in this way according to **Proverbs 25:21-22**?

Then Jesus speaks of those who ask to borrow from us. The implication seems to be those that continually do so in a way that takes advantage. What heart attitude do we see expressed in the way we are to react?

Sacrifice is never easy. But what we do see in Jesus’ teachings is that while there a cost to our pride or sense of justice; there is also an immensely practical side to it. When we are being harassed or persecuted for our beliefs, an arrogant, entitled attitude will only make our situation worse. It will also remove our ability to witness to this person. Recognizing that each person, no matter how hard or extreme they seem, is a potential convert to Christ should be our motivation for sacrifice. They don’t have the hope and joy that we do and they need it.

This isn’t theory. This can actually be seen in the life of Stephen the deacon in Acts 7:57-60. As he lay dying from the stoning he was receiving as a result of preaching Christ, he prayed “*Lord do not charge them with this sin.*” This powerful testimony of sacrifice in the face of persecution was witnessed by the greatest foe of the early church, Saul. And its effect on him was so profound that eventually he found himself kneeling before Jesus and saying, “*Lord, what do You want me to do?*”(Acts 9:6). Saul, the enemy of the church, became Paul, the greatest apostle of the early church.

