

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? *For righteousness and acceptance of Jesus.*

What are the blessings associated with this Beatitude? *The kingdom of heaven and rewards in heaven.*

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? *It provides an assurance of salvation—we are being persecuted for real faith, not fake faith.*

What historical allusion does Jesus use that points to this connection? *They persecuted the prophets whose prophetic words came true despite the rejection of their message and the personal persecution they endured.*

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? *They experienced great victories and also great suffering.*

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**? *To follow their example and live victoriously for God. Looking to Jesus as our ultimate example of enduring suffering for the joy of the reward that is to come.*

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? *Any persecution we endure is simply to our physical being and is temporary. It is strengthening our spiritual being and preparing us for eternity.*

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? *He is addressing the heart attitude – anger is the root of 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? *Because man is the image of God, therefore set above all other life on earth. It only applies to humanity. As a normal part of their lives—they were created to live temporarily.*



What are the two judgements listed in **Matthew 5:22**? How do these two judgements differ? *One is the council – the civil authority, the other is God (in danger of hell fire). One is based upon civil law—slander in this case, the other is a spiritual judgement. Civil authorities have the right to judge us for crimes, but the judgements of God are much more powerful and enduring.*

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**? *They are to keep the peace, including punishing crime, and collecting taxes—to pay for their areas of responsibility.*

Our pride gets us in a world of trouble. How does **Proverbs 11:2** describe the result of pride in our lives? *It brings shame and a lack of wisdom.*

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**? *Be reconciled as promptly as possible. Leave your offering there and take care of it before worshiping God. Do not even attempt to worship God if there is a hint that you have treated someone wrong.*

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**. *God is not honored when we try to hide our sin from Him. Reverent means fear of God. We must remember God knows everything (Psalm 139), so we will only find happiness in confessing our sin and making it right. There is also the danger that we become hardened to the sin which can lead to serious problems as we fall further into even more deadly sin. We should never approach God in worship with unconfessed sin (Isaiah 6:5) and true worship will reveal our sin to us.*

How does an interpersonal problem hamper our relationship with God? (**1 John 4:20-21**) *God commands us to love our brother therefore we cannot love God if we do not love our others. There is also the reality that we physically interact with other Christians but only spiritually with God. If we cannot be obedient with those we can see and touch, how can we be obedient with Him who we cannot see?*

In **Matthew 5:25-26**, we see a conflict that has widened in scope. What is at stake in this situation? *This is a personal conflict that has become so entrenched that it requires legal authorities to get involved. In today's world this could include conflicts that require police involvement or disputes where someone ends up suing for damages.*



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? *Paul tells them to accept wrong and just let themselves be cheated rather than insisting upon taking the case to court. Jesus essentially says the same thing—just do whatever you have to do to clear up the issue and get out of it.*

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? *They all come down to our pride and refusal to sacrifice it for the good of others. We allow the heart issue to blind us to the reality of the harm we are doing to our relationships with others and to our testimony as a Christian. Rather than see the needs of others, we become focused upon our own self-interest. The problem becomes that the longer we hold onto our pride, the harder it becomes to give it up.*

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? *A cultural problem because there is no mention of a deeper heart attitude like we saw in anger.*

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? *He asked why they did not respond to the content of His speech instead of insulting Him.*

How does His personal response match His teaching in **Matthew 5:39**? *He responded with logic not in anger or retribution in order to avoid upsetting them further. Notice in verse 24 that it worked. They quit questioning Him and sent Him to someone else.*

In **Acts 23:1-3**, we see an example in the life of Paul. How does Paul defend himself? *He points to the uneven application of the law. They were using the law to judge him while breaking the law by slapping him.*

What can we learn from these examples? *It is okay to defend ourselves, but we should not simply strike back in an attempt to insult or demean them like they have done to us. There may be times when we need to resort to civil authorities for judicial retribution. It is best to avoid conflict with evil people whenever possible, and it is always in our best interest to de-escalate the situation. The Bible is infinitely practical and full of wisdom for the everyday situations we find ourselves in.*



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? *Offer them you cloak also.*

What did **Exodus 22:26** say regarding a cloak? What is the implication of this? *It had to be returned by sunset. In this instance, it would make the seriousness of their behavior obvious to your adversary. It might shake them up enough to allow them to ease off. But if not, it speaks to the importance of simply trying to remove yourself from the situation with this person by offering more than they were asking for. It again shows a quick way of de-escalating a situation.*

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**? *This was a method for the Romans to insult and demean the conquered enemy. Rather than acting conquered or like you even recognized the implication, doing it cheerfully took away the joy the soldier had in imposing it upon you. Heaping coals on their head.*

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? *Generosity and grace. Lending to someone who is always begging, carrying a heavy load cheerfully even if it is difficult and giving even when we don't want to, giving up more in a court case than we are required to. They all point to a generosity of spirit towards someone who is not seeking our best interest. We are to be better than they are.*

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).

