

Persecution for Believers

Matthew 5:10-12

(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh in 1983)

1. Blessed Are Those Who Have Been Persecuted
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The Beatitudes are descriptive of the character of believers in Jesus Christ and describe the blessings they experience because they are the followers of Christ. It is assumed that those who are truly His followers are manifesting His character in their lives.

1. Blessed Are Those Who Have Been Persecuted

In Matthew 5:10, Jesus has one additional Beatitude to deliver. It seems there is purpose in the order of the Beatitudes. Given the description of believers in the previous Beatitudes, it seems only natural that those who have believed in Christ and are manifesting His character through their lives will be the objects of persecution. In fact, such persecution of believers is an assumed fact. In the Beatitudes, suffering is given as a factual description of believers. **"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"** (Matt. 5:10). Those who manifest God's character in this world will suffer persecution.

In his last letter, written shortly before his own execution for his testimony of Christ, Paul said to Timothy, **"But you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance"** (2 Tim. 3:10). Paul was patterning his life after the way Jesus Christ taught and lived, he manifested God's character. Paul continued to describe his life as he spoke of **"persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord delivered me!"** (v.11). Now notice the factual statement following in verse 12: **"And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."** Paul is saying the same thing Jesus said in the Beatitudes: Those who manifest the character of God will be persecuted as a reaction against that character. Such will be the reaction against righteousness. That is the kind of persecution both Jesus and Paul are addressing.

Persecution per se is not the subject of blessing. Jesus is speaking of those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Millions of people are being persecuted today who do not come under the blessing of this Beatitude. Some are being persecuted for their personal religious convictions and some for their political convictions. Some are being

persecuted for doing wrong things while others are persecuted for doing right things. But the blessing of Matthew 5:10 is pronounced upon those who are suffering because they manifest God's righteous character and proclaim His righteousness in the world. Many believers suffer persecution but are not included under this blessing. Some suffer persecution because they are obnoxious. Others suffer persecution because they perform poorly on their jobs. Still others suffer persecution because they have no tact and are lacking even common sense courtesy. All of these things may result in persecution, but this persecution has nothing to do with the blessing Jesus is addressing in this Beatitude. Rather, this blessing comes when the persecution is the result of God's character being seen in the life of the believer.

In presenting the gospel, people may antagonize others with the gospel and end up being persecuted; however, not all of them come under this blessing. It is important to examine carefully why the persecution comes. Many people who are undergoing persecution take comfort from this Beatitude, yet its blessings are not theirs since they are not being persecuted because God's righteous character is being displayed in their lives or because of their faithfulness to the gospel of Christ. They are being persecuted for other reasons.

2. The Basis For Persecution

Jesus gives the basis for this kind of persecution in John 15. **"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you"** (vs.18,19). The cause of persecution in this case is hatred. Believers have been chosen out of the world by Jesus Christ and they belong to Him. Because the world hated Jesus Christ, it hates believers now because they are no longer part of the world.

A striking example of this kind of persecution was reported recently in one of our national news magazines. Individuals in some European countries are now the subject of direct persecution because they have come from other countries and are, thus, considered foreigners. They are the recipients of persecution because they are foreign to the country in which they now reside. Even though their persecution is related to national origin rather than to spiritual concepts, it provides a good example.

What a clear illustration this should be for believers. John 15 says that believers have been chosen out of the world. The world loves its own, but believers are no longer of the world, therefore the world hates them. This hatred and persecution is a result of being chosen by Christ for Himself.

Jesus continued in verse 20, **"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also."** Do not overlook how close the identification with Jesus Christ is. Just as individuals rejected the character and teaching of Christ, so they will reject your character and teaching if you are manifesting the character of Christ. Jesus said, **"He who hates Me hates My Father also"** (v.23).

The attitude of the world toward God is manifested in its attitude toward His Son, Jesus

Christ. Its attitude toward God and His Son is revealed in its attitude toward those who are the sons of God, followers of Jesus Christ. True followers can expect to be treated no differently and have no different attitude manifested toward them than Jesus Christ experienced. If believers clearly manifest the righteousness of God in the midst of unrighteousness, as Christ did, that will result in friction and antagonism. People do not like such a manifestation of the character of Christ.

If you want to avoid persecution and hatred for the cause of Christ, there are two things you must do. One, you must play down the righteous character of God. Two, you must play down your presentation of the truth concerning the righteousness of God. The more you can mellow the message and the less distinct you can be in its presentation, the less persecution you can expect. If you mute the message in this way, the world will not hate you as a person because they will find you no different from anyone else in the world. But when you present the message clearly, they will find you are a different person and have a different message. Such difference is unacceptable to the world.

The danger believers face is that they want to blend in. It is natural to want to go along and just be one of the crowd. In some circumstances, their character is not making any impact. Their testimony for Christ is so bland that it blends in with the rest of the world and makes no impact at all.

3. Paul Faced Persecution

Jesus Christ was the object of severe persecution because He clearly manifested the righteousness of God everywhere He went. The Apostle Paul underwent tremendous trials and persecutions because of the same thing -- everywhere he went he declared the righteousness of God and salvation through Christ. At the end of his second letter to the Corinthians, he says he has made Jesus Christ known in every place, both by the way he lived and by what he said. Such actions antagonized people everywhere he went and resulted in his persecution. As a result, Paul can list the places where he was stoned, beaten and imprisoned. His life was patterned after the life of Jesus Christ which resulted in his suffering persecution everywhere he went. But blessing is pronounced upon those of such character.

This does not mean that one should go around courting persecution. "Oh, if I could only be persecuted. I hope somebody really gets on my case." Some people seem to take this approach, then they go away proud of being persecuted. But that is not the proper approach. Being persecuted because we have been antagonizing people in the energy of the flesh does not fall within the guidelines of being blessed as a result of persecution for righteousness.

As believers, we must desire to manifest God's character as clearly as we can. Then we must be as bold as possible with the truth concerning Christ. The product of that will be persecution, but our desire is not to arouse animosity. Our desire is to see men and women come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior. The burden of our hearts must be for them to experience His salvation.

Such was the burden of the Apostle Paul. A desire to suffer was not what drove him on. When he related his burden for Israel in Romans 10, he said it was the burden of his heart

that they might experience God's salvation. He indicated that he would even be willing to go to hell for them if they could be saved. He was motivated by a desire for their salvation. That desire caused him to make Jesus Christ known wherever he was.

Paul indicated in Philippians 1:29 two privileges every believer has: **"For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."** As Paul viewed it, our first privilege is to believe in Jesus Christ. Our second privilege is that we can suffer for Him. Notice that this suffering is **"for Christ's sake"** (v.29). Jesus also referred to suffering in this context in John 15.

No wonder Paul could endure what he did. He put the privilege to be identified with Jesus Christ and to suffer on His behalf on the same level with his salvation. He said believers are honored to be able to believe in Jesus Christ and also to suffer for Him.

Paul wrote of suffering in 1 Thessalonians 3 and sent Timothy to Thessalonica to strengthen the believers, **"so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know"** (vs.3,4). Paul was saying that when he manifested God's character and proclaimed His righteousness, a by-product of that would be suffering.

4. Peter Focused on Persecution

Peter's purpose is to write to believers in the context of suffering as he opens his letter: **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"** (1 Peter 1:3).

At the very beginning of his book, Peter wants to focus the attention on the suffering the believers will be called on to experience because of the living hope which is theirs. Peter says God has caused these believers **"to be born again . . . to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials"** (vs.3-6). Peter says we are to rejoice in the hope we have in Jesus Christ even though life may now be a flood of trials. But that is all right because the glory is not intended for me now. God has stored up the glory for me in His presence for a future time, and after all, that is what really matters. But when I pull my eyes down and begin to look at this life, if what you think of me becomes more important than my testimony for Christ and my approval by Him, then I begin to mute my testimony, and the impact of my life and words is diminished. As a result, my life becomes turmoil and confusion.

Since believers have been made ambassadors for Christ, we can assume that we have also been destined to suffer persecution for Him. That is a by-product of the ministry He has entrusted to us as believers.

The context of 1 Peter 3 is suffering for the sake of righteousness. Peter says in verse 14,

"But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed." He has mentioned being zealous for good in verse 13. The driving force in the life of the believer is the righteous character of God. So if you do suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. He continues in verse 14, **"And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled."**

A question which is always raised when a believer is suffering for Christ is, "What is wrong?" Some people think that since they are suffering, maybe they are out of the will of God; they see this as something unique in their lives. But that is not Peter's answer. He wrote, **"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you"** (1 Peter 4:12). Peter said that such suffering should not be considered strange or unordinary. He added, **"but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation"** (v.13). Keep this verse in mind as we move on in chapter 5 of Matthew.

Peter continues with the same emphasis as Christ in the Beatitudes as he writes, **"If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you"** (1 Peter 4:14). Peter is saying that those who suffer have a special privilege. God's glory and His Spirit are being manifested in your life when you are suffering for Him. That is an evidence that a believer is taking his stand for righteousness. In succeeding verses Peter goes on to warn believers about suffering for the wrong things. Believers ought to be suffering for righteousness.

The world has not changed. Neither has the character of the unbeliever. Righteousness is no more acceptable today than it was in the days of Christ, Paul and Peter. If Jesus Christ stood on earth today and proclaimed His message, He would be no more acceptable today than He was two thousand years ago. What a travesty that in the name of Christ we have found a little spot that makes us so acceptable. Such an approach is out of step with what a believer really ought to be. Jesus says that living with a clear testimony for Him involves persecution.

We sometimes think we do not suffer persecution in our country because we do not have martyrs. On the other hand, some Christians are parading for causes today, suffering and going to jail for them, and their causes have nothing to do with what Jesus Christ is talking about here. They are not being persecuted for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. The persecution comes from crusading for their causes, and their causes have nothing whatsoever to do with the righteousness Jesus is talking about in Matthew 5.

5. Jesus Elaborates on Persecution

This Beatitude, which is stated in Matthew 5:10, receives further elaboration from Jesus in verse 11: **"Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me."** Perhaps the reason He elaborates on this Beatitude is because it is the most difficult to appreciate. It is easy to understand His blessing on the spiritually poor, those who mourn, the gentle and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. But it is hard to grapple with the thought of inner happiness and spiritual prosperity for those who are persecuted. Persecution is foreign to what we really desire. We

think it is even foreign to our happiness. Yet Jesus says there is special inner happiness and blessing for those who are persecuted.

The way this Beatitude is stated in verse 11 emphasizes its personal nature. Up to this point Jesus has spoken in the third person, "**Blessed are those . . . , for they**" But now He zeros in personally and says, "**Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me**" (v.11). The last phrase of that verse, "**on account of Me,**" and the phrase in verse 10, "**for the sake of righteousness,**" are referring to the same thing. When you are being persecuted for the sake of righteousness, you are being persecuted on account of Jesus Christ. These statements narrow the issue down to the real cause of the persecution -- identification with Jesus Christ. When you take your stand for Him, men will revile you, persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you.

Notice how much of this persecution centers on what people say about us. It is not just the bodily persecution that some believers are undergoing in various parts of the world that Jesus is referring to. Paul himself underwent bodily persecution. But it also has to do with what people say about us. We are all afraid of that. Many of us probably came in contact with many unbelievers this week to whom we never spoke about Jesus Christ and salvation in Him. One reason we fail to speak to them about Christ is because we are intimidated -- we are afraid of what they will think of us, so we too often solve the problem by muting the message. We fail to raise the issue.

Sometimes we go around piously praying, "Lord, if you want me to say something, open the door." When we pray this way, we are telling the Lord that we want the unbeliever to ask us how to be saved. The unbeliever is not even aware he needs to be saved. Few people have come running up to me saying, "Oh, Gil, would you tell me how to be saved?" The reason they don't is because they do not even know they are lost. But often we do not tell them because we are afraid of what they will say.

According to this passage a significant part of the persecution is what people say about us. "They won't invite me over any more if I raise the issue of sin and salvation," we fear. "What will they say about me the next time they get together without me if I raise the issue of salvation?" Do not miss the point of these verses. Verbal slander is a key part of the persecution that believers will undergo. Therefore, we should not think that we will be excluded from persecution since we have the freedom to preach the Word and study the Bible together.

People in Russia, China and other countries receive physical persecution for their testimony about Christ. But we fear persecution just as much in the form of slander and people speaking evil things against us. We do not like for people to run us down or make fun of us. But that kind of persecution is at the heart of what Jesus is saying in this verse.

6. Commands About Persecution

Jesus continues with two present imperatives in verse 12: "**Rejoice, and be glad.**" Since I am the one who has experienced spiritual prosperity from God because of my identification with Christ and my faith in Him, I am commanded (imperative mood) to be continually

rejoicing (present tense) and being glad.

We should take that command seriously. We often think that when we get persecuted, we will be "down in the mouth." We expect to be discouraged and depressed. We may begin to wonder, "Lord, what am I doing wrong? None of my friends like me anymore?" But the Lord *commands* us to rejoice. He tells us that we are blessed of Him because of our persecution. We should be less concerned with what our friends think of us and more concerned with what God thinks of us. We should rejoice and be glad at all times.

There are two reasons why we should rejoice. The first reason is, **"for your reward in heaven is great"** (v.12). We need to focus our attention on what really matters. We are not looking for rewards in this life, but in heaven. The second reason we are to rejoice is, **"for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"** (vs.12). That means that if we are suffering persecution for the sake of our testimony for Christ, we are in good company. The prophets who went before us also suffered persecution for righteousness.

Acts 5 describes how the disciples were called on to suffer, **"and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus, and then released them"** (Acts 5:40). The disciples manifested God's character, they preached the message of Christ, and they suffered for it by receiving a flogging. Then notice their response: **"So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name"** (v.41). These men were rejoicing. Jesus told us in Matthew 5:12 to rejoice! The disciples left after their beating in Acts 5 and went on their way rejoicing. Why? Because they liked to be beaten? No! Not at all. They were rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ. **"And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ"** (v.42). What a tremendous example! The early disciples proclaimed Christ and suffered for it, yet they kept on rejoicing.

7. The Holy Spirit and Persecution

As believers live under the control of the Spirit and proclaim the message of Christ by His power, conflict will result. When Jesus promised the coming of the Spirit in John 16, He also told what the ministry of the Spirit would be: **"But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment"** (vs. 7,8). Do you think the world wants to be brought under the conviction by the Spirit? When you are living your life righteously before the world and boldly presenting the truth concerning Jesus Christ and the sinfulness of man, that either results in people being brought to salvation in Christ or it results in their being antagonized. The world will hate *you* for that!

As you live for Christ and present His salvation to men, the convicting power of the Holy Spirit will continue to convict men of their sin. Many of those will rebel because they are antagonized by the gospel. They hate the gospel so they hate you because you are the visible object of the Holy Spirit's ministry. The Holy Spirit working in and through you is bringing about the conviction. The Holy Spirit works in the context of the Word of God, but God

uses earthen vessels, us as His children, to present this truth.

When we present the truth, empowered and controlled by the Spirit, we ask the Lord to take the truth and apply it to their hearts. One result of that will be that they are aroused and antagonized by its presentation. Then we wonder, "What went wrong?" But that is a tremendous testimony that something went right! The convicting ministry of the Spirit was felt in the lives of the unbelievers, and His power was at work in their hearts. When that happens and you face persecution, Jesus said, **"Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great"** (Matt. 5:12).

It is extremely important for you to keep your eyes fixed on the right thing. You cannot stand for Jesus Christ if it is super-important for you to be accepted by people and to be held in esteem by them, because they will not accept you if you stand up for Him. If it is important for you to be invited to their functions and to be spoken well of by them, then you cannot stand for Jesus Christ. He was not accepted or well liked and neither will you be. But if you want to receive a reward in heaven, then you will need to be willing to stand up for Him and be identified with Him by your life and by your words.

The Apostle Paul was not especially popular in his day. It seems that there is something tremendously wrong with the celebrity status Christianity has today. Paul wrote in Romans 8:18, **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."** Paul says the sufferings of this present time cannot even be compared with the glory that will be revealed to us. Jesus said your reward in heaven is great.

Which are you looking for? People who will think well of you, who will honor you and invite you to their next social event? Or are you looking for a great reward in heaven? We can take the sufferings if we measure them in light of the glory of eternity.

8. The Ultimate in Persecution

The writer of the Book of Hebrews gives a list in chapter 11 of many of the people in the Old Testament who were faithful to God and His Word. Chapter 12 begins, **"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us . . ."** (12:1), referring to those who have just been presented in chapter 11 as having testified with their lives and their sufferings. This is similar to Jesus' statement, **"for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"** (Matt.5:12). Then the writer of Hebrews continues, **" . . . let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God"** (12:1,2).

Jesus despised the shame just as we will, but for the joy that was set before Him He endured it. That is the pattern we are to follow as well. Jesus looked beyond the sufferings and the persecution of this life. **"For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart"** (Heb. 12:3). It is easy for me to preach to you about persecution. That is not hard. The hard thing is to endure the persecution. In order to endure it, I must consider Him, fix my attention on Him, lest I grow

weary and lose heart.

Sometimes we think we have suffered too much. But we are reminded in Hebrews 12:4, **"You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin."** Not one of us has died yet for our testimony for Christ. Yet we so easily bemoan our suffering. We think of how we have been rejected by our families and how the people we work with talk about us. We often think, "Poor me!" But we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. Nobody has killed us yet for our testimony for Christ. That is the emphasis the writer to the Hebrews is giving. None of us have yet given the ultimate sacrifice.

Stephen was on trial for his life in Acts 7. This would seem to be the perfect time for him to be practical and take a gentler approach. It might be a little better for his own good if he were to approach the leaders who were in disagreement with him saying, "Look, we have a disagreement; we see things a little differently. You have your interpretation and I have mine." Not Stephen!

Stephen went directly to the point: **"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become"** (Acts 7:51,52). They persecuted the prophets because the Holy Spirit had proclaimed God's truth through them. Their resistance to the Holy Spirit was manifested in their attitude toward and persecution of the prophets. Stephen reminded them that they were stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears just like their ancestors. He was proclaiming God's righteousness and their sinfulness, and they could not stand it. The power of the Holy Spirit working through Stephen was so strong that these men were convicted. They had to do something to get rid of Stephen in order to silence the Holy Spirit who was convicting them! They did not want to be exposed to His message and truth.

9. Persecution Today

Today believers living in the United States are basically an unpersecuted people. But I fear that our lack of persecution is because we are not standing and boldly proclaiming the truth. I am not saying that you should run out at dinner today and grab somebody by the tie saying, "You foul sinner, you are on your way to hell!" But I am saying that we ought to let them know that they are sinners on their way to hell. We must speak the truth in love.

Some Christians say they 'shared' with a friend. However, when they get through, all they shared was so blasé and bland that the friend could not possibly understand anything about salvation. If you talk about God and tell people they need Him in their lives, such an approach is acceptable to everyone. But the point that brings resistance is when you let them know that they personally are sinners, and that God's Son, Jesus Christ, died for them. They must know that without Him there is no hope. You must share the gospel with them out of a burden for their salvation, but you *must* tell them. If you do not tell them, who will?

We want everyone to speak well of us. But Luke records a list of woes, the last of which is in Luke 6:26: **"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their**

fathers used to treat the false prophets." If you compare the two types of prophets alluded to in this verse, you will see that the true prophets of God were persecuted, hated and reviled. The people loved the false prophets. They spoke well of them and held them in high esteem. But Jesus said, **"Woe to you when all men speak well of you."** When everybody thinks you are wonderful, you are not in the line of the true prophets. Rather, you are in the line of the false prophets, those who are proclaiming the message the world wants to hear, a message devoid of power and impact, a message in and through which the Holy Spirit is not working.

Jesus said, **"Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"** (Matt. 5:11,12). Is that the testimony of your life? Are you glad, not because you are suffering, but because you are counted worthy to be identified with Jesus Christ? When your husband or wife rejects you because of the gospel, when your closest friend slanders you, when your parents ridicule you, will you come back to Matthew 5 and rejoice and be glad? You should rejoice, not because they hate you, but because you are privileged to be an instrument in the hand of God. You are privileged to have the Holy Spirit of God carry on His convicting ministry through you. Ask God to save them in spite of themselves. Ask Him to give you an overwhelming burden for their salvation so you will love them and be merciful to them.

When you are being persecuted, do not lose sight of the reward which is to come. Persecution sometimes arouses bitterness and resentment. But in spite of the persecution, you want the unbeliever to know that if he believes in God's Son, Jesus Christ, the grace of God is sufficient to cleanse and forgive his sins and give him the joy in Christ that you have experienced.