

## Persecuted for Christ

### Matthew 5:10

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Though we'll divide our study over two Sundays, this morning brings us to the last of the eight Beatitudes. We'll look first at the *cost* of pursuing a godly life, and then we'll follow up next Sunday looking at the *response* to and *reward* for those who are persecuted for Christ. Jesus often asked the crowds that gathered around Him to count the cost of following Him. We see such a call in Luke 14:26-30. Jesus says, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'" The final beatitude is a call to count the cost of following Christ.

Following Christ will cost you the tears of repentance (mourning) as we increasingly grow to learn just how far short we fall of Jesus' command to be perfect, but it will also cost you the blood of persecution as you soon find the world doesn't love your Jesus and they have no interest in putting up with those who seek to walk as He walked (cf. 1 John 2:6). We must remember that Jesus died to take the curse away from us, not to take bearing the cross away from us.<sup>1</sup> Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" Luke 9:23. As believers, we have no charter of being exempt from persecution. As a matter of fact, Jesus told His disciples, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name" John 15:20-21.

At first glance, it may seem strange that Jesus would move right from peacemaking to persecution, from the work of reconciliation to the experience of hostility. Yet, however hard we may try to make peace with some people, they refuse to live at peace with us. This is because they find distasteful the righteousness for which we hunger and thirst, and because they have rejected the Christ we follow.<sup>2</sup> Let's turn our attention to our text for this morning. Matthew, writing the words of Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

*Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for*

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes: An Exposition of Matthew 5:1-10* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 2007), 285.

<sup>2</sup> John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 52.

*they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" Matthew 5:1–12.*

## **I. PERSECUTION IS AN UNAVOIDABLE THEME IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.**

Persecution is the opposite of what we would expect. It's reasonable to expect that men and women who are poor in spirit, mourn for their sin, live lives of gracious meekness, long for God's righteousness, show mercy to others, are pure in heart, and seek peace between God and man would be welcomed with open arms. After all, these are the very men and women the world needs! The world in which we live assumes that it will welcome Christians with open arms – that is until the first time it meets the genuine article.<sup>3</sup> Why is that? It's because a true follower of Christ stands as a living rebuke to the world, an incarnate conscience, a light that exposes darkness (cf. John 3:19-20).

Persecution isn't a possibility; it's assured for those who seek to follow Christ. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will suffer for the righteousness they crave. We should never be surprised when we suffer for the sake of Christ. Peter reminds us, "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. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. *If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you*" 1 Peter 4:12–14. We should not be surprised when persecution comes, but rather, surprised when it doesn't come. Jesus promised, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" John 15:20. In Luke 6:26, Jesus warns us saying, "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you..." If you are always spoken well of, as the false prophets often were, something isn't right.

Paul, who was no stranger to persecution said "We labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; *when persecuted, we endure*" 1 Corinthians 4:12" Later he said, "We are *persecuted*, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" 2 Corinthians 4:9. And then there was the sweeping, all encompassing, statement Paul made to Timothy, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will be persecuted*" 2 Timothy 3:12.

You see, the world esteems people who are good, noble, and courageous. But seek to honor, please, and obey God because of who He is, not just to be a "good citizen", and you will have trouble. You can talk all day about the evils of our age: pornography, family disintegration, lack of values, drinking, drugs, etc., and you will be tolerated, maybe even honored. But the moment you bring the name of Christ into the conversation, exalt the grace of God, assert that Jesus is the

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<sup>3</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1988), pun.

only way to heaven, that outside of Christ people are under God's wrath, and you will certainly suffer some measure of persecution.<sup>4</sup>

## HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND JESUS' TEACHING?

The word persecuted is the Greek word διώκω (*dioko*, *dee-o'-ko*). It carries the idea of "putting to flight", "chasing after with malignity", "harassing", or "seeking to trouble". Jesus tells us in verse 11 that persecution can come in the form of *actions* meant to hurt or *words* meant to hurt. In the New Testament it is mostly used of inflicting suffering on those who hold beliefs that the establishment, or the world at large, frowns upon.

Being righteous or practicing righteousness really means being like Christ. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for being like me." We see this clearly as we look at verse 11. He said, "Blessed are you when you are persecuted...on my account." The world doesn't persecute *good* people. The world persecutes Christ-like people. Why? Because just like Christ, when His followers live righteously, they live in direct contradiction to what the world affirms, esteems, loves, longs for, and worships – we'll talk more about this in a moment. Jesus in John 3:18-20 tells us, "And this is the verdict: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed." The world hates light because light exposes the unrighteousness that darkness tries to hide. Interestingly enough, what does Jesus call Christians in Matthew 5:14? He says, "You are the light of the world." Martyn Lloyd Jones notes, and I agree, that this eighth Beatitude, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," is quite possibly the most searching of all the Beatitudes because it forces us to consider how much resemblance we bear to Christ.

Jesus said, "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" John 15:18–19. We must be careful that our ideas about Christ and the Christian life are not such that the natural man can easily admire or applaud them. The true Christian is like his Lord, and if they didn't praise Christ, they shouldn't praise and applaud our lives either.

Since all the Beatitudes describe what every Christian disciple is intended to be, we should conclude that the condition of being despised and rejected, slandered and persecuted, is a normal mark of Christian discipleship and that every Christian is to expect opposition.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ernie Godshall, *Rejoicing When Rejected*.

<sup>5</sup> John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 53.

## **II. PERSECUTION IS THE CLASH BETWEEN TWO IRRECONCILABLE VALUE SYSTEMS.**

The Christian has been given a new heart and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Nothing about our lives is the same as it was prior to our conversion. We have a new Master and His values, standards, and priorities, which have subsequently become our values, standards, and priorities, stand in direct conflict with the prevailing values of the world. I want you to see that clash in value systems between the world and the believer:

### **THE WORLD VALUES SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

The Christian, on the other hand, who is poor in spirit, is absolutely contrary to the pride of the unbelieving heart. The world reveres those who are strong and self-sufficient, not the poor in spirit who are like spiritual beggars before God. The world scoffs that God exists, let alone that a Christian would bow low before Him in humble submission seeking His mercy, grace, and forgiveness for sin.

### **THE WORLD VALUES SHAMELESSNESS**

The Christian, on the other hand, who is repentant, broken, sorrowful, and mourns over his sin and the sin of the world is a joke to a culture who has deified itself and doesn't recognize its actions sinful and deserving of God's just punishment.

### **THE WORLD VALUES STRENGTH AND PRIDE**

The Christian, on the other hand, who is meek, humble, and refuses to be self-effacing is regarded as weak by those who don't know Christ. Conventional wisdom considers meekness as weakness.

### **THE WORLD VALUES THE IMMEDIATE**

The Christian, on the other hand, who hungers and thirsts for Christ's righteousness is foreign to a world that lusts and longs for only that which it can taste and see.

### **THE WORLD VALUES INDIFFERENCE**

The Christian, on the other hand, who is merciful, who feels compassion for those who are burdened under the weight of sin, who refuses to be vindictive, harbor bitterness, and seeks to quickly forgive the offenses of their offender is out of step with the grudge bearing callousness of our age.

### **THE WORLD VALUES PLEASURE**

The Christian, on the other hand, who seeks to be pure in heart, to maintain a transparent, clean, single-minded focus on God is the antithesis of the "if it feels good", and "If I'm not hurting anyone else" self-focused culture.

## THE WORLD VALUES **STANDING YOUR GROUND**

The Christian, on the other hand, who seeks to be a peacemaker is awkward and discomfoting because he won't settle for a cheaper counterfeit peace and has an embarrassing inclination to seek peace.

The foundational reason the Christian experiences persecution is that he or she longs to be like Christ and live for His values, standards, and priorities. This is Jesus' point in verse 11 when he says, "Blessed are you when you are persecuted...on my account". Everyone who lives like Jesus can expect persecution.<sup>6</sup>

## **PERSECUTION COMES IN VARIOUS FORMS.**

Look forward at verse 11 for a moment. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others *revile* you and *persecute* you and *utter all kinds of evil* against you falsely on my account" Matthew 5:11. Similarly, in Luke's gospel Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people *hate* you and when they *exclude* you and *revile* you and *spurn your name* as evil, on account of the Son of Man" Luke 6:22. We mentioned already that the word "persecuted" in verse 10 has the idea of "pursuing" or "chasing". The "reviling" that we see in verse 11 literally means to "cast in ones teeth," or "hurl insults" at another.

Persecution can most certainly go to physical extremes, as a survey of church history would reveal; but most often it comes in the form verbal assaults. Sometimes it's direct, sometimes it's whispered, and sometimes it's by way of innuendo. Some persecution is more subtle in nature. It may come in the form of the faithful employee of 20 years being passed over for a position because of his uncompromising, God-honoring ethics. It may come to the student who is ostracized because she won't let her friends cheat off of her homework. It may come in the form of the stay at home mom who is considered dull by her neighbors because she doesn't delight in their gossip. It often times is seen in hurtful, slanderous remarks that are made behind a Christians' back. Let me ask you this question friends, "Are you willing to stand alone if necessary for a clear conscious before God and men?"

Some persecution, on the other hand, is severe and painful. Abel was persecuted by his brother Cain; Moses was persecuted not only by Pharaoh, but by his own people; Joseph was persecuted by his brothers; David was persecuted by Saul; The Prophet Jeremiah was persecuted; Daniel was persecuted. Paul was persecuted. As a matter of fact, every apostle, with the exception of John (who died in exile on the island of Patmos), died as a result of persecution. The ultimate example of persecution is the Lord Jesus Himself. There He was in all His utter, absolute perfection. Never was anyone so gentle, meek, and kind, but the world hated Him (His own people didn't receive Him). As we look down the corridors of Christian history, Rome relentlessly tried to extinguish Christianity though fiery trials. Church fathers, the Reformers, and countless missionaries have

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 73-74.

endured unspeakable tortures including being beaten, starved, drowned, and burned at the stake. Why? Because they hungered, thirsted, and lived for the righteousness of Christ. Remember, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will be persecuted*" 2 Timothy 3:12.

### **III. BLESSING ONLY COMES TO THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE.**

We need to be clear about the fact that this Beatitude doesn't just say, "Blessed are the persecuted." Those who would interpret it this way, and there are many, delude themselves into thinking that anytime they experience conflict or hostility they are bearing the reproach of Christ. Jesus' blessing is restricted to those who are "persecuted for righteousness sake." In other words, the believers described in this verse are those who are persecuted because they are determined to live as Jesus lived.

#### **1. Blessing isn't promised to those who are persecuted for being objectionable.**

Joseph Bayley, a Christian author and publisher who passed away in the mid-80's, once wrote a satirical short story called *The Gospel Blimp*. The storyline follows George and Ethel who are concerned about the salvation of their next-door neighbors, but don't know how to reach them with the good news of Jesus Christ. During an evening get-together of George and Ethel's Christian friends, the group is captivated as they see a blimp flying overhead. Why not use a blimp to proclaim the gospel to the unchurched citizens of Middletown they thought? The group incorporates, buys a used blimp, hires a pilot, and commences to evangelize their hometown by towing banners behind the blimp with Bible verses on them. As a means of being more direct with their message, they also dropped tracts, called "gospel bombs" into the backyards of their neighbors. At first, the townspeople put up with the intrusion, but their toleration turned to hostility when the blimps owners installed loudspeakers on their Bible balloon and began inundating the people with gospel broadcasts. The locals were frustrated and the local paper ran this editorial:

*For some weeks now our metropolis has been treated to the spectacle of a blimp with an advertising sign attached at the rear. This sign does not plug cigarettes or a bottled beverage, but the religious beliefs of a particular group in our midst. The people of our city are notably broad-minded, and have good-naturedly submitted to this attempt to proselytize. But last night a new refinement (some would say debasement) was introduced. We refer, of course, to the airborne sound truck, the invader of our privacy, that raucous destroyer of communal peace.*

That night the gospel blimp was sabotaged by some of the people in the city and the Christians saw this as, you guessed it, "persecution".

2. Blessing isn't promised to those who are persecuted for having a martyr spirit.

I am reminded of a gentleman that usually came to the University of Southern Indiana once a year when I was a student and engaged students in spiritual arguments. He antagonized them, called them names, and made them look foolish. He seemed intent on stirring up anger and when students, most of them lost, became aggressive toward him, he called it persecution for the sake of Christ. Not only is this not persecution for the sake of righteousness, but it was a terrible witness for Christ. Many who engaged with him left thinking, "If this is what Christianity is all about, I don't want anything to do with it."

3. Blessing isn't promised to those who are persecuted for being noble or self-sacrificing.

There are certainly many people who have made great sacrifices. Some have given up great careers, some have given up great wealth, and others have sacrificed their own lives for various causes. In general, the world blesses and admires those who are self-sacrificial. We praise those who help others – this makes up a large portion of daytime talk show content. But Jesus' blessing isn't just for the self-sacrificing, it's for the righteous.

## **HOW DOES GOD USE PERSECUTION IN THE LIFE OF A BELIEVER?**

1. Persecution is used to conform us into the image of Christ.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Romans 8:29

2. Persecution develops our character.

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Romans 5:3-4

3. Persecution keeps us from getting too comfortable in this sin-riddled world.

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. You are good and do good; teach me your statutes. Psalm 119:67-68

4. Persecution is often used by God to advance the gospel.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Philippians 1:12-14

5. Persecution brings us into closer fellowship with Christ.

6. Persecution, in a small measure, helps us appreciate the sufferings of Christ.

#### **IV. DO WE HAVE ANY FAMILIARITY WITH PERSECUTION?**

While we are never called to seek out or drum up persecution, we are called to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (cf. Matthew 6:33). If this is the case, you can expect ongoing, various degrees of persecution in your lives. On the other hand, if we are never faced with persecution, it very well may mean that we either resemble very little of Him, or that we don't know Him at all. If a "disciple" of Jesus never experiences any persecution at all, it may fairly be asked if righteousness is being displayed in his life. The brighter our light is the more we set ourselves up to suffer for righteousness sake.

The tragedy of our day isn't that persecution happens to believers, but rather that it's often absent. One reason for this is that many Christians are so cut off from the world that there isn't any opportunity for their values to come into conflict with the prevailing, godless values of the world. As long as the outside world has no reason to believe that we are Christians, at least obedient and righteous Christians, we need not worry about persecution.<sup>7</sup> When we go to churches that are 100 percent Christian, attend Bible studies that are 100 percent Christian, attend Christian schools, exercise with believers, garden with churchgoers, and golf with believers, we effectively seal ourselves off from any contact with the lost world and therefore, from any persecution. My friends, this ought not be.

Another reason that there is so little persecution in, especially in the American Church, is because the church has become so much like the world. Kent Hughes says, "By far the greatest reason there is so little persecution is that the Church has become [so much] like the world. If you want to get along, the formula is simple. Approve of the world's morals and ethics – at least outwardly. Live like the world lives. Laugh at its humor. Immerse yourself in its entertainment. Smile benignly when God is mocked. Act as if all religions converge on the same road. Don't mention Hell. Draw no moral judgments and stand for no moral issues. Above all, don't share your faith. Friends, if you follow this formula it will be smooth sailing."<sup>8</sup> But this isn't the life that Jesus has called us to live. He hasn't bid us to snuggle up with the world. We've been called to live here as aliens and strangers, not residents. Our citizenship is in heaven. To the degree you live other-worldly, to that degree you will face opposition in this world.

Having said that, we should be careful not to condemn ourselves if at the moment we are not undergoing persecution. No one is persecuted all the time. Also, we must be careful not to

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<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 1–7*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 220.

<sup>8</sup> R. Kent Hughes, 76.

imagine persecution in overly dramatic terms. Most of it is mundane, and sometimes even quite "civilized."<sup>9</sup>

## **GREAT IS YOUR REWARD!**

We'll talk more about the response and reward for those who are persecuted next week, but permit me to pique your interest. In verse 12 Jesus says of the persecuted, "Great, *πολύς*, is your reward in heaven." God won't permit what is done for His glory to go unrewarded. Paul reminds us, "This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" 2 Corinthians 4:17. To Timothy he wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" 2 Timothy 4:7-8. James reminds us, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him" James 1:12.

Jim Elliot, missionary to the Auca Indians in Ecuador, who was speared to death seeking to share the gospel with them, once wrote in his journal, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Have you counted the cost brothers and sisters? A determination to follow Jesus means that this life will be fraught with opposition. Stand fast and be of good cheer – the reward is out of this world!

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 75.