

Hey, good morning. Did. Did anyone get up at 2am this morning to turn your clock back? I didn't either, but I dreamed about it, which is so stupid. I don't know why it's like that.

Anyway, it's almost lunchtime, right? So, hey, you're going to think I'm a bit of a magician this morning, but that's really not what. What's going on. But I do want you to remember a number. Okay?

It's just a number, but it's a number that I think can be really helpful to us. And I'll tell you the number just a little bit later. Okay? The Bible's full of numbers. In fact, there's a book of the Bible called Numbers, and guess what it has in it.

Lots of numbers. And I did a little bit of research about numbers in the Bible. Guess which number shows up the most in the Bible. Any guesses? Seven.

Did anybody say seven? It shows up about 700 times. There's another number. And of course, seven is a number of completeness and perfection related to God's nature. There's another number that shows up a lot in the Bible, and It's the number 40.

And 40 shows up about 140 times. And the number 40 is really interesting to me because it's associated with trials and temptations and maybe even judgment and purging. But it's all about preparation for what's next. And so it rains for 40 days and 40 nights as God floods the earth. When Moses was 40, he commits murder.

And then he runs into the wilderness, the desert, and he waits for 40 years. Later, Moses is on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights before he receives the Ten Commandments. The faithless Israelites wander the wilderness for 40 years. The giant Goliath taunts and terrorizes the Israelites for 40 days. Jonah preaches in Nineveh for 40 days.

Jesus, still wet from his baptism, is immediately led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to be tested and tempted for 40 days and 40 nights. So the number 40 is really a big deal. But that's not the number I want you to remember. It's close, but not quite okay. Today we conclude our series of sermons about the Beatitudes, the blessed life.

And the word beatitude is a Latin word that simply means blessed are blessed are you. And so Jesus is speaking to his followers, and I think he's speaking to others as well, and he's speaking to us. And he says, listen, this is how I'm going to tell you how to have A blessed life. A life that's characterized by peace and joy and confidence in what's next. No matter what happens to you, no matter where you are in life, no matter where you're starting from, this is the way to recognize that you can have a blessed life.

And honestly, Jesus says some things that are really surprising about this and really radical, and today is no exception. But the words that Jesus speaks today, this final beatitude, or I think, are vital to living well and enjoying life. So what he says in Matthew 5:10, 12 is this.

God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you, because you are my followers. Be happy about it. Be very glad, for a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.

So what do you think about that?

Be happy and feel blessed in persecution. Be very glad when people mock you and make fun of you and lie about you and demonize you. Be happy and glad about that. It doesn't seem like a blessing to me. So I guess I just need to rethink a little bit what Jesus is saying and try to understand what he means.

And so I start with the word persecution, and I love words. And so if you start with that word and you trace the English word back to its Latin origins, and then you keep on going back to the very word Jesus uses here in the Greek, you get quite a picture. It's really almost a personification of this word. And it's the idea of persecution is the idea of something running and chasing and pursuing, hunting something down, hunting you down with the desire to hurt and harm you. There's hostility involved.

I want to take you down. I want to do something to you. So I like to think of persecution in that way, and I like to think of it in two ways, two different levels. And I'm going to say that there is uppercase persecution and lowercase persecution. And I believe Jesus talks about both of them when we talk about uppercase persecution.

This is what Antipas experienced. You're saying, who's Antipas? Well, Antipas shows up in Revelation 2, and Jesus is dictating letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, Western Turkey today. And these churches are being uppercase persecuted. And so he writes to the church in Pergamum, which is again in Western Turkey.

And this is what he says in Revelation 2:13. I know that you live in the city where Satan has his throne, yet you have remained loyal to me. You refused to deny me even when Antipas, my faithful witness, was martyred among you there in Satan's city. So if you do a little research, it doesn't take much. You find out that Antipas was persecuted to death for taking a stand to follow Jesus no matter what.

So in the late first century, Christianity has migrated way over west and it's predominantly in what we would call Western Turkey today. And the Christians were being persecuted, they were being hunted down with hostility, and they were being put to death because they refused to pledge allegiance to the Roman Empire. And so Pergamum. And you can go there today and see it. It was the center of all kinds of pagan worship, including emperor worship.

And so there was what's called the Emperor cult. And people would actually worship the Roman emperor. Well, the emperor at the time, in the late first century is Domitian. He rules from 81 to 96, and he takes it to a new level. He demands that people call him Lord God.

Domitian. Well, you can imagine how Christians who claim that Jesus is Lord and God exclusively, we're getting sideways with the empire because Domitian was saying, you got to worship me as Lord God. And they were saying, we're not going to. And so this is where the persecution comes from. They're being killed.

Uppercase persecution. And tradition says that Antipas was killed by being burned alive inside a brass bull. It was a hollow bull shaped device used specifically for the execution of Christians. Just unimaginably cruel. I have to believe that the words of our Beatitude, blessed are you when you're persecuted, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

I have to believe that Antipas took those words in as he faced his death and faced it with confidence. I really like the book of Revelation. I know it freaks people out, but I really like the book of Revelation because it's written to people facing upper. Uppercase persecution. And it has a powerful message for all of us.

And so Jesus says in Revelation 2, 10, he says, do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for 10 days, which is 10 number of completeness. You're really going to get persecuted, he's saying. But this is what he says. Be faithful, be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you life as the victor's crown or the crown of life.

Isn't this another way of saying you are blessed even in death? Because the kingdom of heaven is yours. There's just so many encouraging words in Revelation that gives us perspective in uppercase persecution and lowercase persecution. Toward the end of Revelation, John, he has this vision where he sees the end of everything, sees our future. And as he does, I imagine that he sees people coming to the end of their life, being persecuted to death with tears in their eyes.

And so he provides this wonderful promise. He says, God. God will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow

or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever. Earlier, in Revelation, John trying to reassure those people who are being persecuted to death, he says, listen, I want to give you some encouragement.

I want to tell you where they are. I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been martyred for the word of God and for being faithful in their testimony. He's saying, listen, they're in the very presence of God. It's going to be okay. So the book of Revelation provides a wonderful ending, promises a wonderful ending for those who are facing uppercase persecution.

I don't know about you, but I haven't been threatened with death because I follow Christ. Now, that's not true in a lot of places in the world, but it's not really our experience. So the persecution that we face is more likely lowercase persecution. It's the kind Jesus mentions here. He says, when you're insulted, when you're being mocked, when you're being lied about, he says, that's a form of persecution.

Have you experienced that? My guess is you have.

Many years ago, I went through some things where all those things happened to me, and it did not feel like a blessing, not even close.

It was so hard. And I know it's hard. If you've been through it, you know this. It's hard to feel blessed in lowercase persecution when people insult you and lie about you. And sometimes I think it would be easier just to face uppercase persecution.

One of my favorite preachers over the years is Fred Craddock, who died a couple years ago, I think, but he was quite influential through his books for me. And he loved to tell stories. And he has this story or illustration that he tells. It's a little bit outdated about uppercase and lowercase persecution. He says, to give my life for Christ appears glorious.

To pour myself out for others, to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom. I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. And he says, we think about giving our all to the Lord. It's like taking \$1,000 bill, which they don't make anymore, but it's like taking \$1,000 bill and putting it down, laying it on the table and saying, here's my life, Lord, I'm giving it all.

And then he says, but the reality for most of us is the Lord sends us back to the bank and has us cash in the thousand dollar bill for quarters.

And he wants us to go through Life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. And so the point is, yes, we're called to give our entire

life for Jesus. Be faithful to the point of death, Die if you have to, without compromise. If you face that ultimate persecution. This is a clear message of Jesus, clear message of the New Testament.

But here's the thing that really is a challenge for me and probably a challenge for you. But Jesus is also calling us to be faithful in the quarter situations, in the lower case, garden variety, day to day persecutions where people mock you and people make fun of me and people lie about us because we follow the ways of Jesus.

I think it's really hard to be faithful in those situations because we're kind of conditioned through the culture not to be. So if you insult me and mock me, what am I likely to do? I can sling it right back at you. But Jesus is saying, no, that's not my way. It's not my way.

It's easier to retaliate and respond back with an insult or something similar. And social media makes it so, so easy. And you've heard me say this before. I believe when we engage in insults and mockings and provocative generalizations, how can anybody be so stupid? When we engage in half truths, we're not following the way of Jesus.

In fact, I think we heard his cause. And so, Lord, help me to be faithful in those 25 cent situations that I face every day.

Of course, we always look at Jesus and we say, well, how did Jesus deal with persecution? He had both kinds. He had the uppercase persecution. Ultimately he dies for his faith. Yes, he had faith and he dies for our faith.

But before that, Jesus faces lowercase persecutions. That's our crazy brother. We don't know. I think he's the devil. Yeah, how can he gotta be from Satan?

So he's facing all these insults and mockings from people and how does he deal with that? Well, Peter, when he's writing to uppercase and lowercase persecuted people during the 60s when Nero's on the throne, he talks to them about how to deal with this and he points to Jesus, he says, when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. Did you catch that?

And the key here is trust, which is the essence of faith. And so Jesus entrusts himself to the Father. He knew that on the other side of suffering when it was complete, that there would be relief and there would be justice. And he knew on the other side of death there is life. And so he could handle and endure the temporary time of testing.

He knew what was next to me. This provides a great perspective in how to deal with stuff that happens to me and happens to you. And we get

even more perspective on kind of real life situations from the Apostle Paul. Do you remember what he says in 2 Corinthians 12 where he talks about this unidentifiable thorn in the flesh? We don't know what it is.

Some people think it is vision. And so he goes to the Lord and says, hey, can you please take this away from me? I don't need it. I don't want it. Would you please remove this from me?

And the Lord says, no, Lord, I don't think you understand. I really would be much better off without this. Will you please take it away? No. I'm gonna ask you one more time, Lord, Will you please take this away from me?

And the Lord says, no. My grace is all you need. My grace is sufficient for you. Because my power is made perfect in weakness. My power works best in weakness.

And so Paul hears this, and he responds in this way. He says, so now I'm glad to boast about my weaknesses so that the power of Christ can work through me. Listen to what he says. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses. I take pleasure in insults, in hardships, persecutions, and the troubles that I suffer for Christ for.

When I'm weak, then I'm strong. And I just wonder if this couldn't be what this beatitude means, this last beatitude, that the idea of uppercase and lowercase persecution suffered and endured, it lines us up. It lines us up with the suffering servant Jesus, the one who brings the kingdom of heaven to earth. And so when we align with him and embrace him, we begin to experience the kingdom of heaven. Now it's ours, but later, and this is the promise, we will experience it fully and totally.

And when we do, there'll be no more death, no more mourning, no more suffering, no more pain, no more persecution. All those things will be gone forever.

How can we remember this because it's so easy if somebody cuts me off in traffic or stays in the left lane when they should be in the right lane. So persecuted, Right? But I just want to say something. I want to be mean or whatever. How can we remember to be faithful in those 25 cent situations, those 50 cent situations?

How can we avoid the spirit of retaliation and revenge? Or how can we avoid, when somebody insults us on social media to just not fire back and say, well, you're an idiot. How can we remember? Well, how about we remember a number, Remember? And I'm going to say that the number we want to remember is 41.

41. And so why do you remember the 41? It rains for 40 days and 40

nights, but the rain stops on day 41. Moses hides in the wilderness for 40 years and God shows up in year 41. Moses is on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights, and on day 41 he receives the Ten Commandments.

The faithless Israelites wander the wilderness for 40 years, and in the year 41 they walk into the promised land. Goliath taunts and terrorizes the Israelites for 40 days, but on day 41, he gets stoned, so to speak, and loses his head. Jonah preaches in Nineveh for 40 days, and on day 41 they repent. Jesus is tempted and tested for 40 days and 40 nights. And on day 41, he begins changing the world.

And so the promise of this number 41 is that suffering, testing, trying, all forms of persecution all come to an end at some point. Ultimately, we receive the crown of life by entrusting ourselves to the One who can save us. We can endure uppercase and lowercase persecution all the way to that point and be blessed by it. So don't quit. Don't give in, don't give up.

The rain will stop, the giant will fall, the tests and trials will end, the lies will stop, the mockings will be no more, and we can walk into the promised land. Don't give up at 40, not 40 seconds, not 40 minutes, not 40 days, not 40 years. But entrust yourself to the One who can bring you to 41. He is faithful to prepare our hearts and minds to receive communion. I want to go back to Peter's words in 1st Peter 2.

The fuller passage says this in verse 21 through 25. To this you were called because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth when they hurled their insults at him. He did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats.

Instead. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed, for you were like sheep going astray. But now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

Let me pray.

Father, it's so hard at times to be faithful in those small, quote, unquote persecutions. And sometimes we really are persecuted, called narrow, called old fashioned, called all kinds of things for following you. Help us to be faithful in those times and to remember the life of Jesus and how he acted and how he dealt with those things. He died for us so that we could die to sin. He lives for us so that we can live for righteousness.

Help us to be faithful in those things. And Father, as we take communion this morning, help us to celebrate what he has done for us

and the example and the model he provides. And forgive us for those times where we've been guilty of wanting to seek revenge and retaliate when we should have just been quiet and trusted you. So give us a strong faith, a spirit of discernment, to know what to do and when to do it. We thank you in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

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