



Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted

Because the Kingdom of Heaven is Theirs

Matthew 5:10

As many of you know, my family is considered larger by today's standards. One time, when we were in the McDonald's drive-thru, I was ordering for my family. And, of course, it took a little while. But I was going as fast as I could through the order. Then, I heard a woman from two cars behind yelling at me – telling me to get on with the order. I tried to tell her I was and that I had a large family, but she kept yelling. I got through with our order, and I was shaken up. I was fearful and anxious. Then, Tracy and I decided that we were going to pay for her meal. We paid for ours, and we paid for hers. But I can still feel some of the strong feelings in me when I think back to that situation. Have you ever been in a scenario like that? You thought everything was fine and dandy, and then someone comes at you with something that shocks your system?

I can imagine, to some degree, this is what Jesus' audience was thinking when hearing the Beatitudes – especially the Beatitude we're going to look at today. The people would have been surprised by the seeming upside-down values of Jesus. The blessed are those who are spiritually bankrupt, meek, mournful, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. While this is surprising because these values weren't prized by many of the religious leaders of the day, you could still come through this and think, "Well, if I live this way, at least I won't cause a ruckus. I'll just live life with my head down and no one will notice me." Or, maybe I'll live this way and people will actually like me. I'll be a kind person and who doesn't like kind people?

This might be how many Christians today read the Beatitudes. If I live this out, I will be loved! But then comes the final Beatitude, which is an utter shock to the system: **Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake are blessed because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.** Persecuted? What? Why would a person who knows they're spiritually bankrupt, who is meek and merciful, who mourns over sin and hungers over righteousness be persecuted? This doesn't seem to add up, right? But if we think this way, and this doesn't make sense to us, maybe we're still thinking in worldly terms.

I am personally grateful for this final Beatitude because I believe it drives home Jesus' points. Remember that the Beatitudes, and the entire Sermon on the Mount, is intended to summon people to Jesus himself as the One we need. Jesus is the Great Blessing over all. Our consistent temptation might be to interpret each Beatitude as something we can do in our own strength as opposed to reading the Beatitudes as characteristics God gives us as we live in a wonderful relationship with Jesus. The point of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount isn't simply to help us be nicer, more kind people. Our goal isn't even to have other people like us and accept us. The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount is dealing with our need for God himself and how Jesus is of greater value than anything in this life.

This final Beatitude presses this point. Think about it. When we get to election cycles in America, we don't hear Senators or Representatives or potential presidents say, "I will bless us with persecution on our shores!" How does that sound to you? Alluring? No. But somehow, when Jesus says it we realize that Jesus is saying he's worth more than anything – so when we are persecuted – we are blessed

because we have Jesus and His Kingdom (which is worth more than whatever we lose in this life). Do you believe that?

In a few moments, we'll get to asking the questions related to this Beatitude, but I do want to share two important points about this particular Beatitude. First, this Beatitude gives a characteristic that is unique among all the other Beatitudes. The other Beatitudes are characteristics that are a part of us, by God's work within us. We know our spiritual bankruptcy. We mourn over sin that still remains in our lives and in the world around us. We have an internal hunger for righteousness. But this one is a characteristic that happens to us. We aren't commanded to persecute ourselves. We aren't commanded to go out and pursue persecution. Actually, in the Lord's prayer, we are called to pray that we enter not into temptation (which is also the word for trial). We aren't to be masochists – pursuing pain. This Beatitude simply states that those who are all these other things will experience elements of persecution. This is something that happens to us. The second point I want to emphasize is that the blessing of this Beatitude is identical with the first Beatitude. Look at verse 3 again. Do you see it? This is a beautiful literary feature that Jesus uses here. The Kingdom of Heaven is the point. From beginning to end, Jesus emphasizes that those who follow him are part of a new Kingdom – a Kingdom that will never die, a Kingdom that will one day be seen, a Kingdom where there will someday be no more sadness, pain, death, or sin. Those who are blessed with all these characteristics are those who are a part of this Kingdom. And, if you're ever tempted to despair because of the brokenness of this world, and you're tempted to give into this world, remember that the Kingdom of heaven is yours, Christian! What hope. What joy, amen? With this backdrop, let's get into what this Beatitude means:

1. What does “persecuted for righteousness’ sake” mean?

Like last week, I am going to emphasize first what this doesn't mean. Then we'll move to what it does mean. **This does not mean.** . . .

We are to be objectionable people. When we read of the qualifications of pastors in 1 Timothy 3, the final point made by the apostle Paul is that “. . . he must be well thought of by outsiders. . .”¹ Earlier in 1 Timothy, Paul calls all Christians to be able to live quiet and peaceable lives in this present age. In addition, just think about all the previous Beatitudes. Is Jesus calling us to be objectionable people? When we are reminded that the New Testament teaches Christians that we are to follow the pattern of God's commands to exiles in the Old Testament, then we can take a passage like Jeremiah 29:7 and apply it to us today: **But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.**² We ought to live in this life loving God and displaying his love to the world. While we know that the gospel message is a stumblingblock to people, we aren't to be stumblingblocks!

We are to be overly-zealous people. We aren't to be people who are always busily pointing out all the errors and faults while lifting ourselves up and ensuring we're “just right” with God. Listen to the apostle Peter's words in 1 Peter 4:15: **But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.**³ Look at this list. We can read it and completely understand the first three. If you're in prison for being a murderer, don't be prideful about your suffering. That's just suffering. Same if you're a thief and evildoer. But then Peter puts in “meddler.” Do you know what that word means? It refers to

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 3:7.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Je 29:7.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Pe 4:15.

someone who busies himself in other people's affairs. Meddling is not righteous. How do you spend your days? Are you often more concerned about what other people are doing and how they're behaving? Are you trying to correct the wrongs of the world or the behaviors of the church? This is to be overly-zealous. You're not focused on your relationship with God and loving others in such ways to help them grow in their relationship with Christ. So, let me make it clear, Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are you if you are persecuted for meddling's sake."

Finally, Jesus is not saying that we are blessed if **We are to give our lives for good causes**. I still remember the time when my dad told me about a conversation he had with someone. That person, I think, said something like how he just wanted *good* kids, and my dad said, "I don't just want good kids. I want godly kids." Do you know the difference? There is one. And yet, I think many Christians believe they're being persecuted simply because they've attached themselves to a good cause. A good cause may not be righteous.

Biblically speaking, only those who are rescued by God can even do righteousness. In Romans 8, we read, "**For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**"⁴ Then, a couple verses from this, Paul adds, "**Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.**"⁵ To be "in the flesh" is a phrase Paul uses to refer to people who haven't turned from their sinfulness and turned to God for forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with him. Because Jesus came in the flesh and took the punishment our sins deserved, and because Jesus rose from the dead; anyone who trusts him for cleansing and forgiveness will receive it. In addition, while you still are in this fleshy body, you are given the Spirit so that you can grow in righteousness. But those who don't trust Jesus cannot please God. They cannot live righteously. Do you believe that?

Ok, then let's apply this. Again, I'm going to quote from one of my favorite preachers in the 20th century: Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In writing about how suffering for righteousness is not the same as suffering for a cause, he targets something that sounds eerily familiar to our day. This is a lengthy quote, so I'll share it on the screen with you: **Another great danger in these days is that this pure Christian faith should be thought of by those who are outside in terms of certain political and social views. They are eternally distinct and have nothing to do with one another. Let me illustrate this; the Christian faith as such is not anti-communism, and I trust that none of us will be foolish enough and ignorant enough to allow the Roman Catholic Church, or any other interest, to delude and mislead us. As Christians we are to be concerned for the souls of communists, and their salvation, in exactly the same way as we are concerned about all other people. And if once we give them the impression that Christianity is just anti-communism we are ourselves shutting and barring the doors, and almost preventing them from listening to our gospel message of salvation. Let us be very careful, Christian people, and take the words of Scripture as they are** (*Studies on the Sermon on the Mount, Lloyd-Jones, p. 114*).

How does this apply to us today? Is suffering for being pro-life suffering for righteousness' sake? Don't misunderstand me. I believe that all life is sacred, from conception on into eternity. Having said that, unbelievers (people who are in the flesh and cannot do righteousness) can be pro-life. This line of logic continues. I have friends who are unbelievers, and they are ardent Republicans. The wife, who had grown up in Poland, spoke at a Republican meeting at a Baptist church. And I'm genuinely concerned for

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 8:3–4.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 8:8.

her. What's her view of Christ? Does she think Christianity is simply living out the Republican ideals? I fear certain Christians have eclipsed Jesus in their zeal for good policies that they share with unbelievers who are in the flesh (and thus, do not please God). Do you view yourself as suffering for Jesus simply because you hold to a certain stance that many people don't like? Does that mean you are suffering for righteousness' sake?

Right now, I imagine that many might feel confused. You're asking, "If that's not righteousness, what is?" Now we move to what it is. Let's start with the word "persecuted." That simply means, **"to harass, to be mean to, to threaten."** This word for persecution can be anything from harsh words and rejection to physical oppression. I say this because sometimes we can tend to think that persecution is the beatings and torture. So, when we think of harsh words or even certain people purposefully rejecting us, we think, "Well, I'm not being persecuted." Hold on! That is included in the meaning of persecution.

Now, we can ask, "What does righteousness' sake mean?" All we need to do is look at the very next verse. Verse 11 says, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."⁶ I don't believe this is another beatitude. Instead, Jesus is moving further into his sermon, and he's clarifying the last Beatitude. **To be persecuted for righteousness' sake is to suffer on account of Jesus.** The persecution Jesus is speaking of is Jesus-centric. You're not suffering because of your preferences and desires. You're not suffering because you're being rude. You're not suffering for socio-political reasons. You are not suffering for your musical tastes or clothing choices. Are you being persecuted for Christ?

But what does this mean? Well, look at Paul. Look at Peter. Read about the early church that was persecuted. I think of Paul's words to Titus where Jesus is referred to as the God and Savior. This was phraseology that was used of the Caesar. But Paul says, "No. There is only One God and Savior: Jesus." I'm reminded of a couple years ago when I was in Southern Germany. I was staying in a town that used to be the site of a Roman Encampment on the northern border of the Roman Empire. When walking through a museum with artifacts from the site, and when I walked through the fallen walls of the encampment, I saw the area where sacrifices to the Caesar would be made. This was how soldiers showed their dedication. This wasn't simply promising they'd do their best to protect people. This was worship. I asked a person what might happen if someone refused to worship the Caesar? It was in that moment that a Christian would either have to make clear who they worshipped or they would reject Christ. I'm reminded of how Paul wasn't persecuted for being a tentmaker or for expressing differing household codes than in the Roman Society. The Roman Society was a melting pot of many ideas. What they hated was the exclusivism of Jesus.

Throughout the ages, people have been persecuted for Jesus' name. And, of course, Jesus himself was persecuted to the point of death. Jesus, who was meek and lowly, was killed. Why? Because he lovingly confronted people's sinful hearts. If you live life and do not turn to Jesus for forgiveness and reconciliation with God, you are already condemned to Hell. You're a sinner. And you cannot do anything to prove yourself to God. You cannot make yourself clean enough. Going back to my friends that I mentioned earlier. One time, years ago, they visited Ventura. The wife heard a portion of my sermon, and I mentioned Hell and how we couldn't do anything to gain forgiveness. Later on, she talked to my mom about this and essentially was bothered by this message. You see, left to ourselves, we don't like messages that say we can't do anything. We don't like messages that saw we're in greater brokenness and sin than we care to admit. And, if we are truly light and salt in this world, while we are

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:11.

quiet and peaceable and loving and gracious, there will be people who will actually *hate* our message so much they'll want to shut us up.

I've had situations like this happen to me. I've experienced it from people within the church context and without. While I haven't been beaten or tortured, I've experienced people clearly *hating* the message and wanting to either argue with me or simply turn and reject. But I realize that it's not me they're rejecting. They're rejecting Jesus.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Christians, while we don't pursue this, it *will* happen to anyone who belongs to Christ. And, I want to emphasize that this *will* happen to all who belong to Jesus. The Scriptures don't say persecution might or may happen (or even that it will be probable) for Christians. Second Timothy 3:12 says, "**Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. . .**"⁷ Godly means to live a life centered around God on the basis of Jesus. In Luke 6:26, Jesus says, "**Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.**"⁸ Again, we must be careful here. Jesus doesn't say that everyone will hate you. Not everyone hated Jesus. But there were people who treated Jesus as an enemy. The same is true for all Christians. So, Paul says to the Philippian church: **For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake. . .**⁹ Focus on this verse for a moment. We never get the idea that God wants us to have a martyr-complex – a "woe is me" Eeyore kind of attitude where we say, "Yep, I'm a Christian. Look at how bad I'm suffering." Instead, Jesus turns it all around for us. If we suffer for Jesus' name, Jesus calls us to rejoice! Why? Not because we love pain, but because that means the message is being proclaimed and as Jesus' suffering led to the salvation of people, so our suffering will not be wasted by God either! He will use it to proclaim his glory not only in the right-now, but for all eternity! Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake! Now, we ask the next question,

2. What is the kingdom of heaven?

As I stated several weeks ago, the Kingdom of Heaven is the Kingdom of God. It's the Kingdom of Jesus. We read in Colossians 1, "**He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**"¹⁰ Those who trust Jesus are part of this Kingdom now. And this Kingdom is yet to come. We await a day when God brings about the New Heaven and New Earth where we will live in peace forever! In that day, God himself (the One we were made for) will live with us. We will live in eternal blessedness – knowing He who is All-Good, All-Beautiful, and Best.

So, the persecution functions like a finger pointing to eternity. In a few weeks, I'll be taking a long drive to Florida. I'll see exits and mile markers and signs of mileage to our destination. I know the feeling when I see a mile marker that actually shows the city we're going to. Then the signs-to-come reveal the mileage is less and less. Think of persecution like a mileage sign. If you're persecuted for Christ let Jesus' words speak to you and say, "**This is another sign that you're on your way to Glory! You're blessed.**"

Now, we will conclude with some application questions for you to consider:

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Ti 3:12.

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 6:26.

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 1:29.

¹⁰ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 1:13–14.

1. Do I find Jesus of greater worth than my own life? I used to hear preachers or missionaries who would talk about their sacrifices for Jesus, and how we ought to be willing to sacrifice for the Lord. But they made it sound like we need to be willing to be miserable for Jesus – as though Jesus wasn't as good as the things we're sacrificing. That's so wrong! As the apostle Paul said, "To live is Christ!" Jesus is life! Do you know that? Can you agree? If not, maybe your application is to daily pray to the Lord that he would increase your love and valuing of Jesus. If you value Jesus supremely, you can't *not* talk about him to others. You cannot *not* care about people – whether those people agree or disagree with you on various things. Whether they are communists or capitalists or cannibals or Christians. Jesus is of utmost worth!

2. Am I a meddler? Are you focusing your attention on how bad your neighbors or this sinful world is that you're missing Jesus yourself or you're not growing in loving Jesus because you're too focused on trying to fix the world? Meddling doesn't point to Jesus. Meddling focuses simply on you and others. It creates enemies between you and them. Instead, focusing on Christ, puts you in the same category as others. If you were left to yourself (in your sin), you'd be condemned just like them. Yet, Jesus saved you and you're a part of his kingdom! Now, you want to go to others who don't know this glorious and good Lord. So, instead of meddling, you sacrificially love.

3. Am I persecuted for Christ's name or for other things? I think, in some ways, we're more to be persecuted for things we love or for socio-political things. But to make Jesus explicit and be persecuted for him? I recall having a conversation with someone a while ago who said that they were more concerned that they were more vocal and passionate about politics than they were about evangelizing. That's a very valid concern. Are you more focused on proclaiming Christ in all things or are you skirting around Jesus and just emphasizing passion areas?

Oh, may we be a church, may we be a people, who love Jesus so greatly that he is spoken of often by us, and that our actions reveal that we are living to make him known! And, when persecution comes, may the reason be obvious why it's coming. It's coming because we love and want to make Jesus known to everyone. **Those who are persecuted are blessed because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.**