

“The Blessedness of Joy-producing Persecution”

Matthew 5:10-12

April 15, 2018

As long as people have no reason to suspect that you are a Christian, you have no need to fear persecution.¹ But *“all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”* (2 Tim 3:12). It’s been said that *“One of the outstanding qualities of Jesus was His sheer honesty. He never left men in any doubt what would happen to them if they chose to follow Him.”*² Jesus said, *“the slave is not greater than His master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you”* (John 15:20).

This morning we arrive at the climactic pronouncement of blessing that Jesus gives to those in His kingdom. **[vs. 10-12]** It is climactic, not only because it is the final beatitude and it has 3 verses devoted to it whereas all the other beatitudes were only 1 verse. It is climactic in the sense that living out the last beatitude (enduring persecution in the Spirit of Christ) demonstrates that the other beatitudes have reached maturity in us. Let me show you:

- *Blessed are the poor in spirit* (vs. 3) – Our brokenness and humility is mature when we are able to endure the brokenness of other’s sin against us in persecution.
- *Blessed are those who mourn* (vs. 4) – Our grieving over sin is mature when we don’t react out of the flesh toward others’ sin against us.
- *Blessed are the gentle* (vs. 5) – Our meekness is mature when we can treat our enemies with gentleness rather than acting presumptuously.
- *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness* (vs. 6) – Our desire for righteousness is mature when we are willing to suffer for the sake of righteousness.
- *Blessed are the merciful* (vs. 7) – Mercy is mature when it is expressed to enemies and not just friends.

- *Blessed are the pure in heart* (vs. 8) – Our maturity of heart is pure when persecution doesn’t result in a divided heart or breach of loyalty to God.
- *Blessed are the peacemakers* (vs. 9) – Peacemakers are mature when persecution is met with sacrifice for sake of exalting Christ who made peace through the blood of His cross.

Another way to see the final beatitude in a climactic way is by identifying the overarching theme of the beatitudes. That theme is righteousness. The first two beatitudes express a turning away from unrighteousness as we mourn over our sin in a deep poverty of spirit. The next 5 beatitudes have to do with seeking or reflecting righteousness (through meekness, mercy and purity of heart as peacemakers who hunger and thirst for righteousness) while the last beatitude climaxes in suffering for the sake of righteousness.

This final beatitude is the most demanding and the least desired, not to mention the most perplexing, suggesting that persecution is a means to blessing. So let’s take a closer look at this idea of persecution.

Why Persecution?

Jesus said, *“no servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other”* (Matt 6:24). Believers live in the midst of two kingdoms in conflict. The kingdom of God in which Christ is King and the kingdom of this world which is ruled by the prince of the power of the air, which is Satan. These two kingdoms have opposing values—you can’t please one without disagreeing with the other. That means that sooner or later a deeply God-centered Christian who lives to exalt Christ and His values and His message will face opposition and be mistreated for what He believes and how He lives.³ This is why *“all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”* (2Tim 3:12).

To put it simply you will either serve God and be in opposition to the world or you will love the world and be in opposition to God.

¹ John MacArthur, *MacArthur NT Commentary: Matthew 1-7*, pg. 220.

² William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, p. 106

³ John Piper, *Blessed are the Persecuted* (March 16, 1986 sermon).
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The Blessedness of Persecution

Here in Matt 5, Jesus not only assumes that we will encounter persecution, He also wants us to know God's response to persecution. There is future reward and blessing for those who suffer because of their allegiance to Christ.

Vs. 10 – “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, of theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

In essence, Jesus is saying persecution may cause present pain and loss, but it cannot steal your eternal, heavenly reward. In fact, persecution enhances your eternal reward. “*Blessed* are those who have been persecuted...your reward in heaven is *great*.” God compensates with greater eternal reward those who have suffered on account of His name.

The apostle Paul, after giving a lengthy description of the suffering He endured for the gospel, said it this way in 2 Cor 4:17: “*Light and momentary affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.*” God makes our suffering a servant of our eternal joy!

God's response to our persecution is so significant that Jesus lingers on this last beatitude more than any other. Vs. 10 is a statement of fact (3rd persons), but in vs. 11-12 He restates it in a much more personal way (1st person): “Blessed are *you* when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you *because of Me*.”

Now we know what Jesus meant by suffering for righteousness in vs. 10 because He clarifies in vs. 11 that suffering for righteousness means suffering for Him. Jesus is the living portrait of righteousness. We don't just suffer for a principle of righteousness. The suffering that is rewarded is definitely not self-righteousness. It is an unwillingness to defile our love and devotion to Jesus by succumbing to the world's pressure to disobey God. It's saying, “the eternal reward of loving, serving, and treasuring Christ, is worth whatever cost is required of me in this temporary earthly life.”

Rejoicing in the Reward of Persecution

So great is the coming reward from our Father, that vs. 12 commands us to be glad, to rejoice! When persecution comes, the way we walk through it without losing our hope, is by continuing to rejoice in the heavenly reward that is coming. Or as Paul said it in 2 Cor 4, we fix our eyes on not the temporal things we can see now, but the eternal things that are yet to come.

The gladness Jesus talks about is not being happy about our painful circumstances but rather gladness that our hope and joy is grounded in something deeper and more lasting than our circumstances.

1 Peter 1 encourages those who are suffering persecution to rejoice because in Christ they have an eternal inheritance that is “undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven,...protected by the power of God through faith.” This protection doesn't mean we won't suffer but rather that no amount of suffering can tear us apart from Christ and the eternal reward of blessing He has promised. My body they may kill, but my soul they cannot touch, for I am one with Christ who has defeated death by His resurrection.

Look at where I stand as I preach this message on persecution—at the foot of the cross, where Jesus, the righteous One, endured the persecution of godless men. Hebrews says it was for the joy set before Him, He endured the cross (Heb 12:2). And we must do the same. As we take up our cross to follow Jesus, we endure its pain and the world's disdain by looking forward to the joy set before us that no amount of suffering can steal away—the weight of glory beyond all comparison.

The question you need to ask yourself is this: *Is your joy/gladness resting on temporary pleasures in this world and the approval of those around you, or is your joy/gladness resting in the living hope of Christ?* Are you living for momentary pleasure or are you living for the future blessing beyond this life.

Don't listen to those who warn of being so heavenly-minded that you are of no earthly use. According to Jesus “people who have their hearts and

minds so much in heaven that they fear no man” and rejoice even in the face of persecution are so radically free and joyful secure that in the following passage Jesus refers to them as the “salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.”⁴ When persecution comes, remember that it is an opportunity for you to be salt and light. Don’t shrink back. Lean into the presence and power of Jesus.

Biblical Principles of Persecution:

1. **God is able to deliver us from persecution, but until then He has purposes to fulfill through it** (2 Tim 3:11)

2 Tim 3:11—“*what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord delivered me!*”

2. **Persecution produces perseverance and faith** (2 Thess 1:4).

2 Thess 1:4—“*we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.*”

3. **Persecution is a test as to whether God’s word has taken root in our hearts** (Matt 13:21).

Matt 13:21 (parable of the sower)—“*the one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.*”

4. **Persecution is a catalyst in the spread of the gospel**—the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church (Acts 8:1).

Acts 8:1—“*And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the*

regions of Judea and Samaria...Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.”

5. **God will use the blood of persecution to judge the unrighteous** (Matt 23:34-35).

Matt 23:34-35—“*Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth,*”

6. **Persecution shall never separate us from the love of Christ** (Rom 8:35).

Rom. 8:35—“*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nothing shall.*”

7. **Persecution cannot steal our identity or alter our eternal destiny** (2 Cor 4:7-10).

2 Cor 4:7-10—“*But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.*”

8. **God’s grace is sufficient to supply peace and contentment even in the midst of persecution** (2 Cor 12:9-10).

2 Cor 12:9-10—“*And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness...Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*”

⁴ John Piper, *Blessed are the Persecuted* (March 16, 1986 sermon).

9. **Remember that those who persecute you may still be reached for Christ** (Gal 1:23).

Gal 1:23—Said of Paul: *“He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.”*

10. **When we are persecuted, Jesus considers it His own** (Acts 9:4-5).

Acts 9:4-5—*“and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who art Thou, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting...”*

Speaking of persecution, one man wisely said, *“No man ever suffers alone; if a man is called upon to bear material loss, the failure of friends, slander, loneliness, even the death of [a loved one], he will not be left alone, for Christ will be nearer to him than at any other time.”*⁵

So great is the presence and power of Christ in our suffering, so sufficient His God’s grace, so enduring is our eternal hope, that believers can have a radical response to persecution:

- **Rejoice and be glad** (Matt 5:12; 1 Peter 1:3-7). To the degree that you share in the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing (I Peter 4:12-19; Acts 5:40-42)
- **Bless those who persecute you** (Rom 12:44)
- **Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you** (Matt 5:44)
- When we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate (I Cor 4:12)

You may not be enduring the kind of persecution for Christ many of our brothers and sisters around the world are experiencing today, but perhaps you have someone in your life right now that is acting as your enemy.

I want to conclude today by giving you some time to pray for the person that is inflicting pain in your life. To prepare our hearts, consider the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

“In prayer we go to our enemies, to stand at their side. We are with them, near them, for them before God. Jesus does not promise us that the enemy we love, we bless, to whom we do good, will not abuse and persecute us. They will do so. But even in doing so, they cannot harm and conquer us if we take this last step to them in intercessory prayer. Now we are taking up their neediness and poverty, their being guilty and lost, and interceding for them before God. We are doing for them in vicarious representative action what they cannot do for themselves. Every insult from our enemy will only bind us closer to God and to our enemy. Every persecution can only serve to bring the enemy closer to reconciliation with God, to make love more unconquerable.

How does love become unconquerable? By never asking what the enemy is doing to it, and only asking what Jesus has done. Loving one’s enemies leads disciples to the way of the cross and into communion with the crucified one.”

- Name your enemies, picture them in your mind, “stand at their side” before God, pray for them.
- Lord of peace and justice, let me not so much want victory over my enemies as true and mutual reconciliation with them.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, p. 113.