

Blessed are The Persecuted

Matthew 5:10-12

Those who would live righteously for God have always been persecuted by those who would not. It has been this way from the beginning of history. Righteous Abel gave a worthy sacrifice to the Lord and it pleased the Lord. Wicked Cain made an unworthy sacrifice to the Lord which was not accepted. The result was that Cain, in a jealous rage, lashed out and murdered his brother Abel. Every righteous man or woman mentioned in the Bible has suffered at the hands of the unrighteous. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Israel, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, all the prophets including Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, John the Baptist, Jesus Himself and all the apostles. It seems that righteousness is a magnet for persecution. Persecution against the righteous has continued from the Apostolic period to the present day.

Turn to Matthew 5. The whole thrust of Jesus' message here is to explain the nature of true righteousness as opposed to religious righteousness, the self-righteousness, of the Scribes and Pharisees. Our righteousness must exceed theirs in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus begins the sermon with a series of statements concerning the blessings that would be received by those who had the characteristics of righteousness. We have seen throughout our study that no one can develop these characteristics on their own to become righteous. Instead, these are the characteristics a person that has already been made righteous by the working of the Holy Spirit. These are the marks of true righteousness.

In Matthew 5:10-12, Jesus concludes this series of statements about blessing, the Beatitudes, with a declaration that is similar to, yet very different from the previous ones. ***“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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.”***

These are not two beatitudes, but one beatitude stated twice with verses 11 and 12 expanding on verse 10. This is also the only beatitude that is **NOT** a distinctive positive description of a righteous person's character. This is instead a statement describing **the reaction of the world** toward those that live righteously along with a statement of the blessings that will be received and the reasons to rejoice during suffering. This is by far also the most difficult of the beatitudes to both understand and to live out. More than all the other beatitudes, this one will draw the line and divide between those who are truly righteous and those that are not; between those that are truly Christians, and those that feign Christianity but are not actually converted and saved.

If we are to understand how this beatitude divides the true and the false, then we must first understand the persecution that Jesus is talking about. There are many people that claim this beatitude fits them, but they are sadly mistaken. Contrary to their own claims and belief, **they are not being persecuted because they are righteous.** The unrighteous suffer much persecution at the hands of other evil people, and there are also many that are supposed to be righteous that suffer because of their unrighteous behavior.

Persecution That Is Deserved

The Apostle Peter writes to encourage the early believers scattered throughout Asia Minor that were already being persecuted and to prepare them for more persecution. Peter makes several statements about making sure any suffering they experienced was for correct reasons and not because of their own foolish worldly behavior.

In 1 Peter 2:12 for example, Peter says, ***“Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe [them,] glorify God in the day of visitation.”*** ²⁰***For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer [for it] you patiently endure it, this [finds] favor with God.”***

In other words, make sure that when others speak evil against you that it really is slander. Then you continue to live righteously so that they might give glory to God when He comes. Peter adds in verse 20, If you sin and are harshly treated, then you have only received what your sin deserves.

Peter goes on in 1 Peter 3:17 to say, *“For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.”* You gain nothing in suffering if you suffer because you have done wrong. Now look at 4:12-16, *“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; 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. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if [anyone suffers] as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.”*

Too often too many people look at their suffering as a mark of their spirituality when the persecution they are undergoing is **deserved** because of their sinful actions. They do not suffer for the sake of righteousness. They suffer because they: hate, fight, bicker, assault, lie, gossip, slander, covet, steal, lust, commit sexual sins or a host of other sins. This even includes some that are supposed to be ministers of God and preachers of His word. It is not hard to find such false teachers on “Christian” radio and TV who promote and exalt themselves rather than being humble servants who glorify Jesus Christ.

Some preachers are persecuted because they are just plain obnoxious. There are no Scriptures in which God commends someone for being obnoxious in proclaiming the gospel. The gospel itself is offensive to the sinner because it requires people to recognize their sinfulness and turn from it. Sinners do not like hearing the truth about themselves. However, proclaiming the gospel in an offensive manner will obscure the message of God’s love extended to sinful mankind in Christ Jesus.

Some proclaim the gospel with a self-righteous or “holier-than-thou” attitude. I’ve known preachers that must “**win**” the argument even if it is to the detriment of the individual they are trying to teach!! I’m not suggesting compromise, rather *“speaking the truth in love”*. Eph 4:15

What does it mean to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness?

The nature of true righteousness is such that it provokes the unrighteous. Those who are not living according to God’s standards react and persecute those **who are walking in righteousness**. We would expect such persecution from those who are in open rebellion against God or following false religions since the gospel exposes sin and inadequacy.

This should not surprise us for at times in history what occurred under the name of Christianity was no different from what Judaism had degenerated into at the time of Christ. They had exchanged the law of God for their own system of rules and regulations that they could manipulate. Many denominations, sects and all cults that claim to be Christian have exchanged the gospel of Jesus Christ for substitutes that are false. The gospel is the good news that though man is sinful and under the wrath of God and facing impending judgment, God has also provided a way for man to be redeemed and forgiven of his sins through obedient faith in the Lord Jesus.

It was the Jewish religious leaders that led the persecution against Jesus and had Him crucified. Heretical and aberrant groups within what is professed to be the “church” have often followed that same path in persecuting the righteous disciples of Jesus.

True righteousness is becoming like Jesus in character. Jesus said that the blessing comes to those who are *“persecuted for the sake of righteousness”* in verse 10 and in verse 11 *“on account of Me.”* The more we become a reflection of Christ, the greater our righteousness, and the more the unrighteous world cannot stand us. Jesus said in John 15:18-21, *“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. 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. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me."

The more we are like Jesus, the more the world will hate us because it hates Him. To live for Christ is to live in opposition to the devil and his world system Eph 6. **If I live for Christ**, then I will be an affront to a sinful world by my personal holiness. The world loves its own, but it hates those who are not like them John 15:19. Paul said it plainly to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:12, *"And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* Notice you don't even have to be successful in living a godly life.

Three forms of persecution are listed 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."* The "when" here can mean "whenever" and carries the idea that personal insults, physical abuse, or slander can come at any time. It does not mean that the mistreatment will be constant, not even Jesus was constantly harassed, but that oppression will come to all who are righteous.

Persecution includes harassment, oppression, and physical assault escalating even to murder. Jesus called upon His followers to take up their crosses and follow Him in Luke 9:23. They knew what that meant, and it did not mean to a gold cross on a gold chain around their neck. It meant being willing and ready to die. And, die they did. Tradition holds that all the apostles died as martyrs except John who was exiled to the Island of Patmos.

Persecution here in the United States is not as extreme as in other countries, but it does happen here too. More commonly in the United States, persecution takes the form of verbal abuse, losing promotions or work, having our constitutional rights attacked and being sued for standing up for righteousness.

The Outcome to Being Persecuted For Righteousness?

First, you must remember your reward is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10). The beatitudes start and end with this same blessing. You are persecuted because you demonstrate the characteristics of true righteousness: Poor in Spirit, Mournful, Meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, Merciful, Pure in heart and Peacemaking. As you become more like Jesus, the world will react to you the same way it reacted to Him. As mentioned earlier, Jesus said in John 15:20, *“A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you . . .”*

You can also rejoice during the turmoil that comes with persecution that you will have a great reward in heaven (Matthew 5:12). You are laying up the gold, silver and precious stones that are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3 that bring glory to God and show your life is preparing you for eternity with God.

Being Persecuted for Righteousness puts us into some great company. Hebrews 11 points out many of these great men of God who suffered as examples for us: Abel, Noah, Joseph, Moses and others of course. Let each of us live righteously in this life and expect the persecution that will come our way. May God give us the strength to endure.