

Matt. 5:1-12;

October 7, 2018

James 1:2-4 2 Timothy 1:8-9, 12-14

Blessed Are the Persecuted

Today we come the last of the Beatitudes in our preaching. This is the one that many call the “unpopular beatitude.” *Blessed are those who are persecuted... Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you... Who wants to be persecuted, insulted, or slandered? [There’s a sign up sheet at the welcome desk if you want that kind of treatment].* Jesus is simply warning us of the cost of discipleship, for as He lives in you and as you begin to live in Him, there will be blowback.

Each and every one of these sayings that we’ve been speaking on for the past month and a half, is an invitation, an encouragement to find your life in Jesus ... for that is where you’ll find your true identity (Who am I? Who am I becoming?) and through Him a supernatural work of God can transform you. It is a matter of supernatural power that enables you to live for Him and endure all manner of persecution for His sake.

A Familiar Scene

Two weeks ago, when I spoke about purity of heart, I mentioned that God can purify our hearts through the fire of trials. *“He knows the way that I take. When he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold,”* Job 23:10. In God’s hands the fire will purify you, not destroy you. Trusting God in the middle of the fire, isn’t easy, but that’s how purity of heart gets shaped to produce Christlike character.

So Jesus speaks here of a blessing here that perhaps none of us really wish for. Few healthy people freely choose the path of persecution. And to count it a blessing and rejoice sounds crazy!

Persecution: men burned at the stake, babies taken from their mothers, Christians thrown to the lions, brave pastors tortured and murdered in horrifying manner. Persecution of Christians is actually a familiar scene in history. Have you ever wondered what happened to the apostles and early church leaders after the writing of the New Testament? Church history and tradition gives us the following answers:

**James–Beheaded Phillip–Crucified Matthew–Slain by the sword
James the Less–Stoned to death Matthias–Stoned, then beheaded
Andrew–Crucified, left hanging on the cross for three days
Peter–Crucified upside down Paul–Beheaded by Nero in Rome
Jude–Crucified Bartholomew–Beaten to death with clubs
Thomas–Speared to death Simon the Zealot–Crucified
John–Exiled to the island of Patmos; died a prisoner**

All died as a result of their faith in Jesus Christ. None of the apostles escaped persecution. Didn't Jesus say "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also," John 15:20? And so it has been.

As a child I heard in Sunday School the stories of persecution of the early Christians ... lions in the Roman coliseum and all. One of the most well-known accounts of Christian martyrs is that of Perpetua and Felicity (believed to have died in 203 AD). Vibia Perpetua was a married noblewoman, said to have been 22 years old at the time of her death, and mother of an infant she was nursing. Felicity, a slave imprisoned with her and pregnant at the time, was also martyred alongside her. Despite pleadings from her socially well-placed family, Perpetua refused to recant her faith in Christ.

Perpetua went to her death as a powerful witness of Jesus and how He transcends social distinctions, in contrast to the inequality that pervaded Roman religion and society. Perpetua, the noble woman, and Felicity the slave, were equal in martyrdom despite differences in class.¹

But what of today? Surely no one is persecuted for their faith in Christ today, right? Many of you remember that three years ago our congregation took part in "Operation Safe Havens" rescuing Christians in Syria and Iraq from the bloody hands of ISIS. Sean and Carol Beahm inspired us to raise over \$54,000 to transport displaced Christian families to safe homes in Poland.

On September 10, 2018 *The Washington Post* published an article by Christopher Bodeen for AP, reporting on how China's government is "ratcheting up a crackdown on Christian congregations in Beijing and several provinces, destroying crosses, burning Bibles, shutting churches, and ordering followers to sign papers renouncing their faith." Just a few days ago I had this report corroborated by a mom at our preschool. Her parents are missionaries in China and they have told her of this new wave of repression against Christians.

There is not enough time for us to even lightly touch on all the stories of those who have been persecuted for their faith in Christ; their number is legion. Active persecution of Christians continues today in the Middle East, in North Korea, Viet Nam, and other places. More Christians were martyred for their faith in our lifetimes than in all the centuries combined since the advent of Christianity.

The Christian Norm

John Calvin, leader of the Swiss reformation (early 1600's), once said: "It is the ordinary lot of Christians to be hated by the majority of men." Jesus, in this beatitude, identifies three forms the opposition will take:

1. Persecution: The word means to pursue, chase, harass and pressure. It was used for chasing down criminals. Christians can expect to be tracked down for ill treatment.

2. Insults: The word means “to cast into the teeth,” as in “hurling an insult.” Christians can expect to be made the butt of public jokes and open ridicule.

3. All kinds of evil: unbelievers will tell deliberate lies about us. It also means there is no limit to the kinds of slander and falsehood we may have to endure.

Let’s be clear, this saying of Jesus is not referring to those people who suffer because of offensive or crude behavior. If you don’t use deodorant, don’t claim persecution because no one wants to sit next to you. That’s not what Jesus has in mind.

Neither does this beatitude promise a blessing on those who break the law or become obnoxious in pursuit of things they feel righteous about. You can’t claim persecution if you are arrested for shooting an abortionist. Abortion is wrong, but so is killing an abortionist. This beatitude does not apply to trouble you bring on yourself. It does, however, apply to those cases where you face opposition because you stand for Jesus Christ. The key here is the word “righteousness.” It means “straight.” When your life is straight by God’s standards, it is righteous. We live in a crooked world filled with people whose lives are made crooked because of sin. What happens when you put a straight stick next to a pile of crooked sticks? The crookedness is exposed by the straight. The difference is obvious for all to see.

This beatitude might be translated, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because their lives are straight.” Jesus is pointing out the clash of kingdoms. God’s kingdom collides every day with the kingdoms of men and women, built on selfish ambition, power, greed, which results in falsehoods and cruelty. *“For the kingdom of God is ... righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost,”* Rom. 14:17. These two kingdoms are ever in conflict and will never lie down together in peace. Therefore, it is no surprise that being despised and rejected of men is the natural condition of those who follow our Lord. It is just as much a part of the gospel as being poor in spirit, meek, or merciful. *“... persecuted because of righteousness.”*

We have been extremely fortunate when you look at life around the world and through history ... extremely fortunate that, for the most part, Christians in America haven’t faced physical persecution – the rape, murder, driven from homes, loss of property, faced by Christians today in various places around the world. The most any of us may face at this time is ridicule or disagreement or being stereotyped or called names by the detractors of our faith. Nonetheless, we should not be surprised if anti-Christian rhetoric increases. We should rather be surprised if it does not. *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own,”* John 15:18.

Persecution may well be a sign that your life is straight in contrast to the world. Jesus warned: *Everyone will hate you because of me, Luke 21:17.*

Rejoice

When persecution comes Jesus says: *Rejoice and be glad.* What happened to the prophets, happened to Jesus. What happened to him, happens also to us. That's our heritage! Strangely, many Christians who come through severe persecution exhibit a greater joy for life and for their Lord than others (My three Viet Nameese students at Claremont). I think it is because they discovered that through the terrible times of trial God was shaping them for glory. In a sense, persecution is the believers' birthmark; a sign that we are part of the family tree. Here's some tough questions I ask myself: Have you done or said anything for Jesus, in the last month, that has caused anyone to challenge your faith? Have you risked speaking out in favor of righteousness? Have you defended the cause of Christ and the purity of the gospel? Do we have any enemies for Jesus' sake?

One of the essential truths of religion is that what feels good isn't necessarily good for you or for anyone else. Goodness isn't to be found in our feelings, but in the pattern of our outcomes. Jesus has been teaching us that the outcome we should be looking for is found in the character He exhibits ... which He can develop in each one of us. When we ignore Him – that is, when we do not have a personal and abiding connection to Him - our efforts to “do good” don't turn out to do much good for anyone.

Responding to Insult and Slander

Painful as it is, opposition to our faith in Christ persecution grants us a clearer understanding of yesterday (our heritage) and tomorrow (our hope), which makes it easier to endure what happens today. In the process God is transforming our very nature. *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you, Isaiah 43:2.*

If God is doing that, what are we to do? The Bible offers three pieces of advice:

- 1. Pray** *But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, Matt. 5:44.*
- 2. Bless** *Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you, Luke 6:28 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse, Romans 12:14.*
- 3. Endure** *Many are the foes who persecute me, but I have not turned from your statutes. Psalm 119:157*

Pray for yourself and for those who oppose you. Bless them in the name of the Lord. Endure persecution patiently knowing that the Lord is in control. (*We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it...* 1 Corinthians 4:12).

During WWII in Germany Pastor Martin Niemoller opposed the Nazis and for that was sent to a concentration camp. When someone commented to his father how terrible that this should happen to his son, Heinrich Niemoller replied: “Yes, it is a terrible thing to have a son in a concentration camp. There would be something more terrible for us: If God had needed a faithful martyr and our Martin had been unwilling.” Persecution is a terrible thing. Unfaithfulness is far worse.

Though we don’t face persecution today, let us take this beatitude to heart. It’s not that we’ve said anything against Jesus. More likely we haven’t said anything at all. We’ve gone along and gotten along. We’ve whittled down the sharp edges of our faith so as to “fit” more snugly in the holes of the world. “The greatest criticism of the church today is that no one wants to persecute it because there is nothing very much to persecute it about.”² Friends the glory is too great to pass up for the comfort and glitter of the moment.

Jesus promised that “*Great is your reward in heaven.*” Centuries ago, the great Christian reformer Martin Luther made this observation about our arrival in heaven: “When we shall live in that day, we shall look with wonder on one another and say, ‘Shame, that we were not of better cheer, braver, stronger, and more joyful, to trust Christ, and to endure all tribulations and crosses and persecutions, since this glory is so great.’”

When we finally get to heaven, no one will ever regret having lived for Jesus while on the earth. We’ll only regret that we didn’t live for Him more. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord. I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day (2 Tim. 1:12).

***Jesus told us: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world,”* John 16:33.**

¹Read more: <https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/10-famous-christian-martyrs/#ixzz5S8Jqw5Ec>

²George F. MacLeod. Leadership-Vol. 2, #4.