

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, February 20, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:10-12

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD’S KINGDOM #8
THE JOY OF PERSECUTION

It was eight weeks ago that we began taking a look at Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In those weeks we have learned so much about what it means to be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven through Jesus’ teaching of the Beatitudes. Today, we come to a close on this first section of The Sermon on the Mount. As we do, let’s take a moment to read the Beatitudes one last time.

- 3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 4 Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
- 5 Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
- 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
- 7 Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
- 8 Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
- 9 Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.
- 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Can you imagine what it would have been like to be in the crowd that day? Beatitude after beatitude, paradox after paradox, Jesus turns the tables on conventional wisdom about the one who is blessed and the one who is cursed. But here, in the eighth Beatitude, Jesus goes a step further. Something happens in Matthew 5:10-12 that hasn’t happened in any of the preceding verses. Jesus repeats Himself, clarifies His audience, and clarifies

what He means. He moves the third person to the second person – from “blessed are those” to “blessed are you.”

And, what an interesting way for these Beatitudes to conclude! Remember, the Beatitudes speak about the godly character of the citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Christian. The Beatitudes may be the clearest picture we have of the man or woman who is spiritually mature. They are in a sense a word picture of the one who has gone through the process of sanctification; that means in which God transforms sinful men and women to the image of Christ.

And what can the one who becomes like Christ expect to receive this side of heaven? Look again at verses 10-12.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It is a result so shocking that when Jesus talked about similar things later in His ministry, the large crowds left en masse. When people understand the cost of discipleship, many of them abandoned Jesus. We like the blessing, but we don't like the cost. Do you remember the first time that you suffered for being a Christian?

Some people I talk to remember those days happening in junior high. They stood up for their faith in junior high and they experienced the teasing and taunting of classmates. I remember it happening to me in high school. I was in a high school biology class and I pronounced that I believed that God created the world in six days. My teacher belittled me in front of the entire classroom, berating me for making a disturbance in class and calling me an idiot. Once the teacher hurled her insults at me, the class started in. The pretty girl in front of me, who I had thought about asking to the freshman dance, quit speaking to me. I had a group of three guys who sat near me who began calling me names. I would be known as a Jesus freak for the rest of my time in high school. I talk to people almost every week who talk about facing some type of persecution for their faith.

Many commentators feel that Jesus repeated Himself in Matthew 5:10-12 because the disciples found it so difficult to believe what they were hearing. “Jesus, let me get this straight. Blessed am I when I'm poor in spirit . . . okay I've got it. Blessed am I when I mourn over the condition of my impure heart . . . check. Blessed am I when I am meek . . . that makes sense. Blessed am I when I hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . well of course you'd say that, you're God! Blessed am I when I show mercy . . . well I like people who show mercy to me. Blessed am I when I'm pure in heart . . . yeah, like that will ever happen. Blessed am I when I am a peacemaker . . . well, my mother always told me that. But, blessed am I when I am persecuted! Blessed am I when people insult me, persecute me, say all sorts of lies about me. You want me to rejoice in that? Really, Jesus?”

And I know if the disciples asked, Jesus would respond, "Really. I really do! There is blessing and joy that comes in being persecuted for our faith."

Verse 10 is the Beatitude

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

There is something similar about the eighth Beatitude and the first. Both Beatitudes list the reward as the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is coming to the conclusion of this section of His teaching, and He does something that the disciples will recognize. He repeats the blessing of the first Beatitude here with the last. What Jesus is essentially showing the disciples is that if you want to experience the Kingdom of Heaven and all that is meant by that, you must be someone whose life displays the character traits of all of the Beatitudes. We've talked at length in this series about how each of the Beatitudes build upon the previous Beatitudes. Now, Jesus is saying, it's not only possible, but the expectation that citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven display all of these character traits.

There is something also very different about the eighth Beatitude. It is the only Beatitude that is not a character trait that can be produced. This Beatitude speaks to those who have been persecuted because of righteousness. There are Christians over the years who have been persecuted because of their own obnoxious attitudes. Their insensitivity or judgmental attitude has gotten them into trouble. This Beatitude isn't talking about being persecuted for being a jerk. It's talking about being persecuted for righteousness. In other words, "If you live the life described in the first seven Beatitudes, you will be persecuted." Jesus may as well have said, "Live like me, and expect persecution." That is essentially the message that Jesus gave His disciples in John 15:18-20.

18 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. 20 Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

The Apostle Paul was equally blunt when he wrote his second letter to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 3:12 we read, "12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,"

I mentioned it earlier, but it bears repeating. The disciples must have been mystified by what Jesus was saying. "Let us get this straight Jesus, you want us to strive to live a life that honors you, and our reward, this side of heaven is that we will be persecuted?"

Jesus must have anticipated their question, because he does another unique thing in this Beatitude. He repeats Himself, clarifying what it means to endure persecution, and

assuring his audience that they heard him right. He also personalizes the Beatitude. "Blessed are you." Jesus knew that all of His disciples would endure persecution. All but one of these men would be martyred for their faith.

Listen to Christ's clarification.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

So, what will this persecution look like?

1) Insults

I told you a little bit about my high school experience with insults. Would you believe that insults of Christian teenagers have been going on for a lot longer than your days or mine? Leighton Ford shares an amazing story of the persecution of a first century believer. The persecution was discovered in 1857; about 1800 years after the persecution took place.

"Archaeologists digging in the remains of a school for imperial pages in Rome found a picture dating from the (first century, some 30 years after the resurrection of Jesus). It shows a boy standing, his hand raised, worshipping a figure on a cross, a figure that looks like a man with the head of a (jackass). Scrawled in the writing of a young person are the words, 'Alexamenos worships his God.' Nearby in a second inscription: 'Alexamenos is faithful.' Apparently, a young man who was a Christian was being mocked by his schoolmates for his faithful witness. But he was not ashamed; he was faithful."¹ And the picture? The cartoon mocking Jesus and Alexamenos is the first known artwork of the cross of Jesus.

We will endure insults. Think about the mockery that Jesus endured on the cross. Think about the insults that were hurled at him by the raucous crowds and the cruel soldiers. The Apostle Peter considered persecution to be part and parcel to the Christian life. When he wrote 1 Peter, he was very well acquainted with suffering. He had been jailed, beaten, and would eventually be crucified upside down for his faith. Listen to his words in 1 Peter 4:12-14:

12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

¹ Leighton Ford, *Good News is for Sharing*, (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1977), p. 78. with additional information from: <http://www.cowart.info/Monthly%20Features/Ugly%20pix/Ugly%20%20pix.htm>

2) Bodily Persecution

There is a second way that Christians will endure persecution and that is the very real possibility of bodily persecution. Again, I defer to the Apostle Peter. This disciple knew suffering and those he wrote to were familiar with it to. In 1 Peter 3:14-17 he wrote, “14 But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.”¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”

During China's Boxer Rebellion of 1900, thousands of Christians were martyred for their faith. In one such instance, insurgents captured a mission station, blocked all the gates but one, and in front of that one gate placed a cross flat on the ground. Then the word was passed to those inside that any who trampled the cross underfoot would be permitted their freedom and life, but that any refusing would be shot. Terribly frightened, the first seven students trampled the cross under their feet and were allowed to go free. But the eighth student, a young girl, refused to commit the sacrilegious act. Kneeling beside the cross in prayer for strength, she arose and moved carefully around the cross, and went out to face the firing squad. Strengthened by her example, every one of the remaining ninety-two students followed her to the firing squad.²

Kent Hughes writes, “. . . the fact is, the church must be persecuted or it is no church at all. People need to be told if they follow Christ, there will be a price to pay. It will affect how they get along at school. It will affect their profile at the club. It will affect how they make their living.

The early church had no doubt where a believers duty lay. One hundred years after Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, a man approached the great church father Tertullian with a problem – his business interests and his Christianity conflicted. He ended by asking, ‘What can I do? I must live!’ Tertullian responded, ‘Must you?’ When it came to a choice between loyalty to Christ and living, Tertullian held the real Christian chooses Christ.

It is a glorious thing when the church and the individual are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, because that means they are like Christ.”³

3) Lie about you

² Today in the Word, February, 1989, p. 17.

³ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 74.

Jesus tells us that there is a third way that this persecution may manifest itself in the life of the believer. We may be lied about.

Have you ever been the victim of slander? It is a terrible thing. I have known men and women whose entire lives were thrown into chaos because of false accusations. The great Bible historian, William Barclay, says that there were six primary ways in which the early Christians were slandered.

The first was over the practice of the Lord's Supper, with its language about the body and blood of the Lord. This was taken so far out of context that the early Christians were depicted as being vicious cannibals.

The second way that early Christians were slandered about had to do with the great emphasis that the early church placed on love. Here at Woodbury Community Church we have talked about the irreducible core of the Christian life being to love God, love others and make disciples. The emphasis of the early Christians on love led to slander that Christians were given over to lust, immorality, and incest.

The third way that early Christians were slandered was that they were called home-wreckers. When a person became a Christian and had to make hard choices about existing family relationships where paganism held sway, Christians were repeatedly accused of breaking up homes.

The fourth way that Christians were slandered was that they were called atheists. With the emphasis on one God in a polytheistic culture, Christians were often slandered as atheists for refusing to accept the Roman gods.

Fifth, since Christians accept only Jesus as Lord, they could not call Caesar lord, and were therefore subject to allegations of political disloyalty.

And, finally it was Nero Caesar who fabricated the slanderous lie that it was the Christians who had instigated the rioting that resulted in the burning of Rome.⁴

So, have you been lied about for your faith? You are in good company. On the night that Christ was crucified He was the victim of not only cruel insults, mockery, and the cross; but trumped up charges that were vicious lies. God knows the truth, and He is the One whose opinion matters most.

Look one final time at Matthew 5:11-12.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

⁴ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=68152

Why does persecution come?

Persecution, that Christ will bless, will come . . .

Because of Jesus

Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you *because of me.*"

If the persecution is coming because you are being a jerk, then it isn't a persecution that God will bless. If we are living a life that is free of any kind of persecution for our faith, be assured that we are either not living a true Christian life, or that persecution is on its way. Be prepared, but don't be afraid. Why? Because, persecution will lead to . . .

1) Rejoicing

It may sound ludicrous to think that someone who is persecuted could rejoice, but that is what Christians throughout the centuries have done. There are thousands of examples, but let me read just one.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas are falsely accused of stirring up a riot in the city of Philippi. When the city officials are brought in to the mix, things don't go well for Paul and his friend.

Look at verse 22: 22 The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. 23 After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. 24 Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

Who does that? Christians do. When we suffer for Christ, even after being beaten, we can rejoice.

2) Gladness

There is a second thing that persecution leads to. It's gladness. "Rejoice and be glad," Jesus said. We can be happy when we are persecuted. Why? Because of the third thing that persecution leads to.

3) A Great Reward in Heaven

2 Corinthians 4:17 says, “17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

We won't be able to rejoice in suffering if we live as if this world is all there is. This life is a mist. It appears for a little while, and then comes eternity. How we live our lives on this side of heaven matters. Paul said these light and momentary troubles (an interesting choice of words considering all the persecution that Paul went through) are nothing compared the glory that awaits us in heaven.

Near the end of his life, Paul gave us a clue as to what that reward was. In 2 Timothy 4:7-8 he wrote, “7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

4) Identification With the Faithful Throughout the Ages

The final reward that persecution leads to is an identification with those who have been faithful to Christ throughout the ages. The specific words that Jesus used in Matthew 5:12 were, “12 for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Last year we studied Israel's most famous prophet, Elijah. Do you remember all that Elijah had to endure as he stood alone for Christ in his generation? When we are faithful to Christ in our generation, we identify with those who have been faithful to him throughout the ages. How awesome to think that we might stand shoulder to shoulder with the heroes of the faith, as those who have been faithful to God no matter the cost!

When you are persecuted . . . rejoice
When you are persecuted . . . be glad
When you are persecuted . . . remember your reward
When you are persecuted . . . remember those who came before you

Jesus endured the ultimate persecution. May it be your privilege to suffer for following Him!