

Main Idea: As we listen to the words of the Lord Jesus this morning, from Matthew 5:10-12, we will consider persecution from two perspectives.

- I. The Blessing of Persecution Explained (10)
 - A. The beatitudes are offensive.
 - B. Righteousness is offensive.
 - C. Living for the kingdom of heaven is offensive, but worth it.
 1. God’s kingdom advances through the suffering of His Son.
 2. God’s kingdom advances through the suffering of His Son’s followers.
 - II. The Blessing of Persecution Applied (11-12)
 - A. Jesus tells us what to expect (11).
 - B. Jesus tells us how to respond when it happens (12a).
 - C. Jesus tells us why we can rejoice when persecuted (12b).
 1. Heaven is a great motivator.
 2. The prophets are a great motivator.
- The Bottom Line: Jesus commends the blessing of being persecuted.
1. Am I preparing myself to experience this blessing?
 2. Am I living now in light of what is coming?

This morning we return to Jesus’ beatitudes in the sermon on the mount. I’d like to read them, then share a story which illustrates the powerful reality of the eighth beatitude, and then explore Jesus’ words carefully that we might understand the strange blessing of being persecuted.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

Last week I read a sobering account of what’s been happening in the country of Central African Republic. One out of five people in the CAR (a country of five million) have been forced from their homes because of the cruelty of their own countrymen. Two missionaries, identified in the story as Ron and Donna, shared how the turmoil affected them, and modeled for us the reality of Jesus’ eighth beatitude.²

Ron and Donna have faithfully served as missionaries in Africa for more than 35 years. They have helped plant more than 80 churches in previously unreached areas, and worked for more than a decade to establish and maintain a missions aviation base in eastern CAR.

Just two years ago on Good Friday 2017 Seleka rebels attacked the mission station. “We were warned of the possibility of an impending attack,” Ron said, “and then within 30 minutes we heard gunfire in our town.” All Christians in the area were either killed or driven into the forest and forced to live off the land while the rebels made way for Muslims to occupy the town.

“Eventually, when we returned to the town,” said Ron, “we saw that the entire mission station, including the house we built for our family and the aircraft hangars and maintenance facility that we built by hand, were all destroyed.”

On the verge of tears Ron shared, “It was a deep, deep hurt for me to realize that [what took] generations of missions effort to build was all destroyed. We lost the whole thing, but not the privilege of being able to put it on the altar for Christ.”

^{**} Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the series preached at WBC in 1988.

² Voice of the Martyrs, July 2019, p. 3.

What a biblical perspective. And this. “I would not change the cost of what I have done for God,” Ron continued tearfully. “It is so valuable. Everything I can give is worth it. When I stand before the Lord, I will say, ‘Thank You for allowing me to spend my life on things that count for Your eternal kingdom, and thank You for allow me to share in the sufferings of Christ.’”³

That’s beatitude number eight in living color. I want that. I want it personally. I want it for you. I want us to experience what Jesus taught and Ron and Donna exemplified, as are literally millions of our brothers and sisters around the world this very day.

When you hear that believers are losing everything they own and even their lives, what words come to mind? Unthinkable? Senseless? Tragic? Yes, but how about this word?

Blessed. That’s the very word Jesus used to describe the experience of people like Ron and Donna. “*Blessed* are they who are persecuted because of righteousness.” How can that word be connected to the nightmare that happened in the CAR on Good Friday 2017? And to make it more personal, how can we become people who embrace Jesus’ assessment regarding the blessing of being persecuted? Jesus says that our maximum joy is at stake, for He says that the proper response to persecution is to *rejoice and be glad* because *a great reward is coming*.

I need these words. We need them. And since they are so foreign to our natural way of thinking, we need right now to give our careful attention to these words. Jesus essentially makes two points in Matthew 5:10-12. We see the blessing of persecution *explained* in verse 10, and the blessing of persecution *applied* in verses 11-12 (it’s the only beatitude that Jesus actually takes time to apply by moving to the personal “you”).

I. The Blessing of Persecution Explained (10)

Verse 10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” If we take these words of Jesus to heart, we will soon discover that three things are offensive.

A. The beatitudes are offensive.

Keep in mind the audience. When Jesus spoke these words, it was during the first part of His ministry. Crowds were following Him and the disciples He called were near Him (see 5:1). He is the King, but His kingdom differs greatly from what they have in mind, as He makes clear.

He begins with eight “blesseds”. Blessed are. Blessed are. He identifies the people that God approves, that He blesses. The beatitudes are all related, a package deal. And when taken to heart, they are *offensive*.

There are two categories, and both of them end up offending people, especially the self-righteous. First, the need beatitudes. Then, the help beatitudes.

The NEED Beatitudes (#1-4): Blessed are the...

v 3 Poor in spirit—those who admit their spiritual bankruptcy

v 4 Mourn—they grieve over the cause of spiritual bankruptcy, which is SIN

v 5 Meek--Allow their spiritual bankruptcy to condition their behavior and attitudes towards other people and God

v 6 Hunger—they know it's not enough to mourn over and confess past sin;

God’s kind of people are those who presently hunger for righteousness

The HELP Beatitudes (#5-8): Blessed are the...

v 7 Merciful—those who show compassion on others, for they are spiritually

³ Voice of the Martyrs, July 2019, p. 3.

bankrupt too

v 8 Pure in Heart—those with singleminded focus; they want to see God

v 9 Peacemakers—those who partner with God in helping other people get right with God and each other

v 10-12 Persecuted – this is the final identifying mark of God’s kind of people

They are persecuted. Why? The previous seven beatitudes answer the question. This is where the beatitudes inevitably take us.

They’re persecuted, fundamentally, because they are *peacemakers*. If they would just stay to themselves, no one would care. But this they will not do. They cannot. As their Savior has done, so do the Jesus-followers. They get involved in sinner’s lives, urging them to be reconciled to God and to each other. They are peacemakers.

And why? Because, by God’s grace they are now *pure in heart*, and they know they will *see God*. It’s their greatest longing, and they want it for others too, in fact for everyone, and they can’t stop talking about the One who makes it possible.

Where did this passion come from? They have *received mercy*. Receiving mercy produces an intense desire to see the One who demonstrated the mercy. It also produces a capacity to be merciful, particularly to those who still need what we have received.

Righteousness. Where did we get our right standing with God? We didn’t earn it. All we could do, and that by grace, was *hunger* for it. And by simply *hungering and thirsting for righteousness*, God gave it to us through the merit of His Son. And receiving righteousness leads to loving righteousness which leads to offending those who lack righteousness, which leads to persecution.

But it goes back further, to *meekness*. Meekness is offensive. It’s power under control, and when lost people see it they realize they don’t have the capacity to do it.

Go back yet another step. Blessed are those who *mourn*. Our mourning makes people uncomfortable. Why can’t those people just enjoy the party with the rest of us? Why do they always have to make such a big deal about...what do they call it...*sin*?

Here’s why. It all begins with, “Blessed are the *poor in spirit*.” In a world where sin is mocked or excused or blamed on others, there is no room for this. To be in the presence of a person who is brutally honest about their sinfulness, who freely acknowledges their spiritual poverty. Now that’s convicting...and unless shared...that becomes offensive...and unless something changes...that inevitably leads to persecution. The offender must go.

E.g.—

B. Righteousness is offensive.

That’s the point Jesus is making in the eighth beatitude. Verse 10, “Blessed are those who are persecuted.” Stop there. Jesus never told his followers that they would win a popularity contest with the world. He told them up front that those who would have God’s approval (blessing) would be those who were persecuted, a word that means “to pursue, to drive away, to put to flight.”

It didn’t take long for the early church to experience what the Lord predicted. The noun form of this word (“persecution”) appears in graphic description of the onslaught against the Christians in Acts 8:1, 3--“And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria. . . As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house and, haling men and women, committed them to prison.”

And why would it happen? “Because of righteousness,” says Jesus. What does that mean? Frankly, many over the years have used this verse to justify what it doesn’t mean. So let’s talk about that first.

Jesus did not say, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are fanatical.” Or, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are offensive.” Or, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of their extreme devotion to a cause.”

E.g.—

John Stott, British pastor and author, offers the following insight into the reason for persecution, "Persecution is simply the clash between two irreconcilable value systems." That’s what’s going on here. “Blessed are those who are persecuted *because of righteousness.*”

Righteousness offends. How? It exposes unrighteousness.

Think of a group of kids who are contemplating doing something they shouldn’t be doing. Lots of laughter. This will be great. Until one of them says, “Hey guys, we shouldn’t do that. That’s not right.”

I remember what happened to a Christian friend at work. He discovered the company was in violation of the law, so he went to his boss, expecting him to say, “Wow, thanks for catching that.” But instead heard, “Listen, we exist to make a profit. Get in line.” When he refused, he was fired. Because of righteousness.

Righteousness is very important for those who are truly members of the kingdom of God. According to Jesus...

--We are to hunger righteousness (5:6).

--We are to seek righteousness (6:33).

--We are not to be satisfied with external righteousness (5:20).

--We face persecution because of righteousness (5:10).

The Bible speaks of righteousness in two basic senses, and the Jesus-follower values both. The first is positional or legal righteousness—a right relationship with God which we obtain forever when we believe in Jesus Christ (i.e. justification). The second is practical or moral righteousness—the daily outworking of the implications of our right relationship with God (i.e. sanctification). It is particularly this second type of righteousness to which Jesus is referring in verse 10. He’s talking about conduct that is proper and pleasing to God. He says that a life that is *righteous* will result in opposition or persecution.

That seems surprising to us at first. We might think, "Why would the world be upset at our right living?"

I think Martin Lloyd Jones explains it well. The opposition from the world does not come simply because we live good lives, but because we live *different* lives. That’s why the Pharisees hated our Lord. It was not because He was good; It was because He was DIFFERENT. His life showed them how inadequate theirs were. There was something about Him that condemned them. That was what they disliked. The righteous may not SAY anything; they do not condemn others with their words. But just because they are who they are condemns those around them. Their righteousness lives make the unrighteous feel uncomfortable. And because of this, they are hated. Because of this, they are persecuted.

Proverbs 29:10 "The bloodthirsty hate the upright, but the just seek his soul." Or to paraphrase--"Bloodthirsty men hate one who is blameless. . ."

Who is the source of this opposition? Certainly the world is, and it has been antagonistic to Christ’s church since its origin. But there’s a second source of persecution for God’s righteous people. Throughout history, some of the most intense persecution ever poured out against Jesus’

followers has come from RELIGIOUS people. Nominal Christians. Who were Jesus' chief persecutors? The Pharisees and Scribes! What about the Reformation of the Church in the 16th century? Why did the Puritan Fathers come to America? To obtain religious freedom from the antagonistic state church. Formal Christianity is often the greatest enemy of the pure faith.

Why are the righteous persecuted? Listen to Lloyd Jones, "The good and the noble are very rarely persecuted because we all have the feeling that they are just like ourselves at our best. We think, 'I am capable of that myself if only I put my mind to it,' and we admire them because it is a way of paying a compliment to ourselves. But the righteous are persecuted because they are different. That was why the Pharisees and the scribes hated our Lord. It was not because He was good; it was because He was different. There was something about Him that condemned them."⁴

Have you ever heard anyone say, "Well, I like Jesus, and I'd be interested in Jesus if His people were more like Him"?

There's some validity there, and we Jesus-followers should take it to heart. But there's also a great misunderstanding of who Jesus really was and is. The truth is, if we think that if we were more like Jesus, the non-Christian world would approve us, we're forgetting what the non-Christian world did to Jesus. They threw stones at Him. They chose a murderer instead of Him. They crucified Him. Why? Because He was not just good, but *righteous*, and His righteousness exposed the lack of righteousness in these "good" people.

Lloyd Jones is right, "There are worldly people who tell us they admire Jesus Christ, but that is because they have never seen Him. If they saw Him, they would hate Him as His contemporaries did."⁵

And they do the same to His followers...when they see *righteousness*.⁶

Lloyd Jones again, "This beatitude tests our ideas as to what the Christian is... Is not our idea of what we call the perfect Christian nearly always that he is a nice, popular man who never offends anybody, and is so easy to get along with? But if this Beatitude is true, that is not the real Christian, because the real Christian is a man who is not praised by everybody. They did not praise our Lord, and they will never praise the man who is like Him."⁷

Indeed, Jesus said, "Woe to you, when all men speak well of you (Luke 6:26)!"

To put it another way, again borrowing from Lloyd Jones, "If you try to imitate Christ the world will praise you; if you become Christlike it will hate you."

This brings us to a third point. The beatitudes are offensive. Righteousness is offensive.

C. Living for the kingdom of heaven is offensive, but worth it.

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Now Jesus has come full circle. That's the promise He attached to the first beatitude ("Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"), and now to the eighth ("Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"). It's all about which kingdom we're living for. The verb is present tense. Theirs IS the kingdom. They are poor in spirit. They've come to God mourning, received His righteousness as a gift through Christ, embraced the role of peacemaker so as to help others, and suffered persecution for it. Those are my people, says Jesus. Those are the blessed.

⁴ Lloyd Jones, p. 135.

⁵ Lloyd Jones p. 136.

⁶ See the letter of 1 Peter for Peter's pastoral application regarding suffering for the believer.

⁷ Lloyd Jones, p. 136.

Do you see the REVERSAL of values going on here? Not the popular, but those who are persecuted are blessed. They are the ones who will receive the benefits of the kingdom to come. You say, “This seems so contradictory to our way of thinking.”

It does. But as one theologian (Thielicke) put it, “Anybody who enters into fellowship with Jesus must undergo a transvaluation of values.”

Think of it this way.

1. *God’s kingdom advances through the suffering of His Son.*
2. *God’s kingdom advances through the suffering of His Son’s followers.*

So it’s not meaningless suffering, but purposeful suffering. The Son died on the cross. The Son’s followers die making the message of the cross known. And that’s how God adds to His kingdom. Through suffering.⁸

This is Kingdom Living 101. Become God’s kind of person, says Jesus, and a person will suffer. Suffer *now*, that is. But it won’t last long. Heaven. That’s what is coming. And that makes it worth it all.

At this point Jesus does something He doesn’t do for the other seven beatitudes. Verse 11, “Blessed are *you*.” We have seen the blessing of persecution explained by our Lord so far. But now He moves from “they” to “you,” from explanation to application.

II. The Blessing of Persecution Applied (11-12)

Jesus tells us three things here, by way of application.

A. Jesus tells us what to expect (11). “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”

We’re to expect three things. One, for people to insult us (ESV ‘revile). Two, for people to persecute us. And three, for people to “utter all kinds of evil against” us, as the ESV puts it.

And it’s not “if”, but “when.” This will happen, and you are blessed when it does.

Friends, when we take seriously what it means to live for Jesus, this will be the response we get. Let’s think for a moment about what the first Christians had to endure. The early Christians suffered severely for three basic reasons.⁹

One, their **work** was affected because of Jesus. Suppose a man was a stone-mason. That seems harmless enough of an occupation. But suppose his firm received a contract to build a temple to one of the heathen gods, what was that man to do? Suppose a man was a tailor, and his company asked him to produce robes for the heathen priests--what was he to do? There was hardly a job where an early Christian would not find themselves in a conflict between his business interests, and his loyalty to Christ.

Two, their **social life** was affected because of Jesus. In the ancient world, most of the feasts were held in the temple of some god. The meat to be eaten was what remained after the sacrifice was made to a pagan god. The person who offered the sacrifice would invite his relatives and friends to join him in a feast to enjoy the meat. Could a Christian share in a feast held in the temple of a heathen god? Even an ordinary meal in an ordinary house began with a libation, a cup of wine, poured out in honor of the gods. Could a Christian participate in a heathen act of worship like that?

Three, their **home life** was affected because of Jesus. It happened again and again. One member of a family would become a Christian. Another would not. A wife believed. A husband rejected. Immediately there was a split in the family. Often, the Christian would be

⁸ See Colossians 1:24

⁹ See William Barclay for this explanation.

cast out of the home and forsaken as a traitor.

Jesus told his disciples that following him would be costly. And indeed it was. The penalties which early Christians suffered were terrible beyond description.

Christians were flung to the lions or burned at the stake. Nero wrapped Christians in pitch, set them on fire, and used them as living torches to light his gardens. He sewed them in the skins of wild animals, and set his hunting dogs upon them to tear them to death.

They were tortured on the rack. Molten lead was poured hissing upon them; Eyes were torn out. Parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted before their eyes.

These things are not pleasant to think about, but these are things a person had to be prepared for, if he took his stand with Christ.

But don't miss those words, "because of me." Not because of our political convictions. Certainly not because we're hard to get along with. The blessed are those who are attacked because they identify with Jesus, because of righteousness, as Jesus said in verse 10, because the two are synonymous. Christ is our righteousness, says Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:30.

Jesus had more to say about this in John 15:20, "Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also." Since Jesus was slandered and abused, it ought not surprise us that His followers would be slandered and abused.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus makes it clear that our identification with Him is going to offend and disturb people. This is what we are to expect.

B. Jesus tells us how to respond when it happens (12a). Verse 12, "Rejoice and be glad." Those are commands. Be exceedingly glad. Literally "leap for joy" (the same type of joy a climber would have once he conquered a mountain, and leaped for joy).

What makes you joyful and glad? When people speak poorly of you because of you're seeking to live for Jesus? That's not natural. This is something the Holy Spirit makes possible. The fruit of the Spirit is joy. And by His help, we do so. It's an act of faith. We rejoice.

C. Jesus tells us why we can rejoice when persecuted (12b). The end of verse 12, "...because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Jesus gives us two motivators here. Heaven, and the prophets.

1. *Heaven is a great motivator.* Why can Christians rejoice even though they are forced to suffer for Christ? The motivation is wrapped up in this one phrase, "for GREAT is your REWARD in heaven." Friends, heaven is coming. Think about it. Think about it often. Heaven is a great motivator.

2. *The prophets are a great motivator.* "...for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Do you know the prophets? Jesus says we should, which means we must know the Old Testament. Make a study of these wonderful servants who went before us. Find out what happened to them, and what sustained them. Think about...

*Abel--persecuted by his brother Cain

*Moses--persecuted and harassed by the Egyptians (see Hebrews 11:24-26)

*David--persecuted by Saul

*Elijah--hunted by Ahab and Jezebel

*Jeremiah--thrown into a pit

*Daniel, and his three friends (Shadrach, Meshak, and Abednigo) stood up for God, even though they knew it would cost them their lives.

And then come to the New Testament. Stephen was stoned. James was beheaded. And of course, Paul was hated by many, imprisoned and executed by the Romans. It was Paul who reminds us, in 2 Timothy 3:12, "All who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

Then move into church history. Find out what happened to Luther and Calvin and Tyndale and John Hus, and what enabled them to rejoice in their suffering.

Few men understood better the inevitability of suffering than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who lived in Germany during Hitler's hostile reign. He was executed by the direct order of Heinrich Himmler in April 1945 in the Flossenburg Concentration Camp. His death was the climax of his beliefs and teaching. He wrote these words:

"Suffering then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means suffering, because we have to suffer. . . Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of his grace."

The Bottom Line: Jesus commends the blessing of being persecuted.

He explains the blessing, saying that it's the trademark of those who possess the kingdom of heaven. Then He applies it, saying that we should rejoice and be glad when we suffer for Him, for a great reward is coming. So now we need to ask ourselves a couple of questions.

1. *Am I preparing myself to experience this blessing?* Look again at those words, "because of me." What have you done with Jesus? What are you doing with Him?

Do you know Him as your Savior and Lord? He came to pay sin's penalty. That's why He died on the cross, and then conquered death and the grave. Have you repented of your sin and received Him into your life? If not, I urge you to do so right now.

And then make Him number one in your life. That's the key to this blessing. Because of Me, He said. Make everything you do revolve around Him. Take righteousness seriously.

2. *Am I living now in light of what is coming?* When you walk out of a dark room into the bright sunlight, what happens to your eyes? The light is painfully brilliant! So is the righteous life of the Christian painfully brilliant as it shines before men who are not Christians. To become like Christ means that we will become light. Light always exposes darkness. And darkness always hates the light.

If we are experiencing the dynamic of the eighth beatitude, we have reason to be encouraged. If not, we need to ask ourselves, why not? Is it because our lives have lost the distinctive shine of Christ? What needs to change so that people see Him more clearly?