

Blessed Are the Persecuted

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8-9-09

Introduction.

- A. This evening, after yet more delays, we come to the final generally addressed Beatitude, which we see in Matthew 5:10. Interestingly enough, this is an idea that the world around us may well buy into. We see the fullest expression of this in the political realm. Identity politics are extremely popular in the United States of today. Everybody wants to claim to be a part of some persecuted minority, even when, as in the case of women, the "minority" makes up 51% of the population. On an individual level, even politicians so obviously in the wrong as Rod Blagojevich like to claim that their troubles are the result of unwarranted persecution.
- B. Much of our society, then, is fascinated with the idea of being persecuted, if only for PR reasons. By contrast, in the church, we don't usually hear much discussion of persecution at all. To us, the word conjures up images of the Emperor Nero and Christians being fed to lions. Perhaps, if we've been keeping up on events in the brotherhood worldwide, we might consider the plight of the saints in China and other countries where the practice of Christianity is not safe. However, it's not something we think about here and now. At most, we might mutter darkly about gay rights and politicians we don't approve of and predict that at some point in future, it will be illegal to preach the gospel. Today, though, we don't expect persecution anytime soon.
- C. Considering that we claim to be New Testament Christians, and the New Testament is filled with stories of and commentary about persecution from Matthew all the way through Revelation, this is a very interesting expectation for us to hold. Why is it that we think that we can share in the character of the first-century church and not share in its persecutions? Is it that we are protected by the religious tolerance of our nation? Or is something else at work? Let's ponder these things as we consider, "Blessed are the persecuted."

I. Sources of Persecution.

- A. Let's begin our study of this subject by looking at some of the sources of persecution in the first century. One of these main sources appears quite clearly in Acts 13:49-50. When I was teaching the high-school class last quarter, we went through the last half of the book of Acts together, and this is a pattern that quickly became familiar to all of us. Paul comes to a new city, preaches the gospel, leads people to obey the gospel, and then, just as things start going really well, the Jews or the idol makers or some other group he has offended gets mad, forms a mob, tries to kill him, and ends up driving him off. That is the story of Paul's missionary journeys. In this, there are two main points that we need to pay attention to. First, it's noteworthy that the spark for all of these persecutions was the gospel. Paul preached Christ so boldly that just as quickly as he stirred up love for the Lord, he also stirred up hatred. The gospel that Paul taught was a powerfully polarizing force. Second, we think of persecutions as being directed by the government, but that wasn't Paul's experience. Even when the authorities get involved in making Paul's life miserable, as they do in Jerusalem in Acts 23, they aren't the ringleaders. Instead, Paul's troubles primarily come at the hands of individual citizens whom he has offended. It is the personal enemies of the gospel who are the source of his persecution.
- B. More ominous still, at least from our perspective, is what Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12. According to Paul here, it's not just preachers of the gospel who have to worry about persecution. Instead, ordinary Christians can expect to be persecuted too, simply because they show in their lives the desire to live in a godly way. Notice that the text doesn't say that some who desire to live godly will be persecuted, or even that most who desire to live godly will be persecuted. It says that all who desire to live godly will be persecuted. Now, if we think we're living godly, but aren't being persecuted, that leaves us in a curious logical position. How come? Did the Biblical prophecy pass its expiration date? Or is there something else at work here?
- C. Jesus sheds some light on the subject in John 15:18-20. He tells us that if we have truly come out of the world to Him, we can expect to be hated by the world, because the world hated Him. The fact that He was persecuted tells us that if we are truly His servants, we can look forward to being persecuted too. On the other hand, if the world loves us and gets along fine with us, that proves that we still belong to the world.
- D. Let's pause for a bit to put all these ideas together. The church in the first century was a persecuted church. Its members suffered for their boldness in preaching the gospel and for their commitment to godly living. Today, the church struggles with preaching the gospel. We struggle with living righteously according to God's word. But, on the other hand, most of us don't have a problem with persecution. Is that just one big coincidence? What's really keeping us from suffering for the cause of Christ? Are we protected from it by the laws of the land, or are we kept from persecution by our spiritual weakness and unwillingness to stand out? Paul would have been just fine if he hadn't gone around stirring up things by preaching Jesus all the time. He would have been fine if he'd lived just like the other Jews and focused on blending in. Would we still be fine if we were as radically godly as Paul was? Or would we find that the world still hates true disciples of Jesus?

II. Reactions.

- A. Because persecution was such a pervasive part of first-century Christian life, the Bible is filled with discussion of what Christians are supposed to do about it. In fact, there is far more material in the New Testament on persecution than there is on any of the other Beatitude subjects except for righteousness. We don't have time to delve into all that material this evening, but it's still important for us to pull out four main scripturally endorsed reactions to persecution. Even if we don't see the same widespread persecution as in the first century, some Christians here are still persecuted today, some on the job, some at school, and some by their own families. Let's look to see what God's word advises us to do when we face persecution.
- B. First, when we are persecuted, we are supposed to endure. Paul describes this in his own life in 1 Corinthians 4:12. There are two main applications that we need to take from this. First, for the child of God, persecution is never an excuse to quit. In fact, in the parable of the soils, Jesus condemns the hearts that are like the stony ground, because they allow persecution and tribulation to wither the gospel after it has taken root. We have to be better than that. We have to keep going through suffering to claim the prize of heaven.
- C. Also, when Paul says that he endures, he doesn't just mean that he endures rather than quitting. He also means that he endures rather than retaliating. When the streets were filled with anti-Christian mobs, Paul sometimes could have collected his own pro-Christian mob and fought back, but he never did. We too must learn not to fight back when we suffer for the cause of Christ. We aren't here to take revenge for persecution any more than we are for any other wrong inflicted on us. We must leave justice in the hands of God.
- D. Second, when we encounter persecution, we need to learn to look on it as a blessing. When we're dealing with genuine persecution for which there is no easy redress, as opposed to the fake, modern-day, victim-politics kind of persecution, this is hard to do. Being opposed, ridiculed, or even injured for the name of Christ isn't fun. However, we see that first-century Christians did count persecution as a blessing. Notice where it appears in Jesus' list in Mark 10:29-30. It's not an accident that Jesus slipped persecution into His list of the blessings of being a Christian. He wanted His disciples to know that they could look forward to persecution, and not just in an ironic sense, either. It was one of the goodies that came with discipleship.
- E. This was something that our brethren 2000 years ago understood, and we can understand it too as we look at their reasons for rejoicing in persecution. Consider the reaction of the apostles in Acts 5:40-41. On its face, this does not appear to be an occasion for rejoicing. The apostles have just been beaten by the highest legal authority of their nation, not because they'd done something wrong, but because they had affirmed their loyalty to Christ. Yet after this humiliating, shameful, experience, they rejoice. Why? Because it meant that God had found them worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus. Persecution is the Christian equivalent of a Boy Scout merit badge. We don't get persecuted for being mediocre Christians and never telling anybody about the gospel. We get persecuted when we let our light shine so brightly that the people around us can't ignore it anymore, and they get mad about it. It happens to us, just like it happened to Jesus, and that's why the apostles were rejoicing. As Jesus said back in John 15, having the world hate us is a natural consequence of leaving the world behind. It's a natural consequence of imitating our Lord and Master. We can't have both sides love us. There is no middle ground for us to find where we are godly enough to please Jesus but wicked enough to please the world. When the world begins to hate us, it tells us that Jesus loves us.
- F. One final response to persecution, though, is prayer—not prayer that the persecution should stop, but prayer for the souls of those who are persecuting us. Jesus instructs us to do so in Matthew 5:44. As we've studied recently, this is not an easy thing to do. When people in the world are being persecuted, the last thing that they think to do is pray deeply and sincerely for the souls of those who are persecuting them. Nonetheless, Jesus expects us to be disciples with such discipline and such love that we do exactly that.
- G. We see an example of this kind of forgiving prayer from the mouth of Stephen, the first martyr, in Acts 7. It just so happened that part of the mob that was killing him was a young man named Saul, who held the coats of the council while they stoned Stephen and watched approvingly. Saul then became a persecutor of the church in his own right, and doubtless many of the righteous whom he put to death prayed for him in their last moments. Those prayers did not go unheard. In time, the gospel touched the heart of even Saul, and he became an apostle, and changed his name to Paul. He went on to suffer a great many persecutions of his own, and eventually to die for the cause of Christ, just like the saints he had murdered. Until we get to heaven, we'll never know what Stephen said to Paul when he first came through the gates of paradise, but I'm certain Stephen was glad to see him there. If we pray for our persecutors, we may see them in heaven too.

III. The Reward of Persecution.

- A. If we remain true to the Lord through persecution like Stephen and Paul did, we can expect to see the reward they did too. Jesus explains in Revelation 2:10. We often quote the "Be faithful until death" part of this passage, but we don't usually do so in context. When Jesus tells the church in Philadelphia that, he isn't telling them to live out their 70-year lifespan as Christians. He's telling them to keep their faith through ten days of persecution concluding with their deaths. If we keep our faith through persecution, we too will claim life.

Conclusion. If you can't now claim life through Jesus, He will receive you this evening if you come to Him.