



The Manifesto of the King, Part 8: Blessed are the Persecuted

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 5:1-12 (v.10-12)

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Recap and Introduction

So far, as we have been looking at the description of the true disciple that Jesus gives to us in the beatitudes, we have been looking at internal realities right? We have been looking at things that are true of the disciples' character – poor in spirit, mourns over sin, meek before the Lord. We have been talking about the pursuit or desire of the disciple – hungering and thirsting for righteousness who is Christ. Then over the last few weeks we have looked at the way these internal realities are expressed in the conduct of the true Christian and seen that the Christian is merciful, the Christian is pure in heart, single of heart, and then last week we saw that the Christian is a peacemaker and not merely a peacekeeper. These were all characteristics of the disciple, internal characteristics that are expressed outwardly. But today as we look at the last of the beatitudes, we are looking not at a characteristic of the disciple, but rather the consequences that result from being a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple, Jesus says, will be persecuted. Jesus says, starting in verse 10:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10–12, ESV)

This beatitude is what might be called the definitive beatitude. It is strategically placed as the ultimate consequence of all that comes before it. I want you to notice that Jesus seems to single it out in importance, as the summation of all that He has said. Why do I say that? Well, first of all, it is the only beatitude that is repeated. You know when I am preaching to you that often I will repeat a phrase to emphasize it to you. I will say something one way and then I repeat it in a slightly different way to drive the point home. That is what Jesus does here. Second, Jesus does something else that He does not do with any of the other beatitudes. He changes the person of this beatitude from third person to second person, from those to you.

Last, it is the position of this beatitude relative to the others. It is the very last beatitude, the pinnacle, the climax of what Jesus has been teaching. It follows on the heels of all that He has said before about an authentic Christian life, one that gives ultimate glory to God. If we live as a true disciple of Jesus Christ, we will come into direct conflict with the life and the lusts of the world. As we seek to understand the meaning and the message of this last beatitude, we need to begin by considering what is persecution and what is its root.

1) Persecution and Its Roots (v.10a,) Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Persecution is...If we are going to understand what it is that Jesus is talking about, we need to have an understanding of what persecution is. We will look in a few moments at the definitions of the individual words and the specific nature of persecution, but let me give you sort of an inclusive working definition of persecution, something to keep in the forefront of your mind as we are looking at this text today. Persecution is the physical and verbal opposition of the worldly and the religious that inevitably arises against Christians and against the gospel as a result of the disciple's humble and faithful Christ-exalting life. What is the source of this persecution? Why is it that faithful and humble followers of Christ face persecution for following Christ? What is the root of the persecution and opposition that believers face for following Christ? Well, Jesus tell us in this text.

For Righteousness Sake = On My Account

See with me what Jesus is saying. If you look at verse 10, you see that Jesus says that disciples will be persecuted for righteousness sake, and then he says that we will be persecuted on His account in verse 11. What the Lord is saying here is this: To be persecuted for the sake of righteousness is be persecuted because of me. You'll be persecuted because if you live the life that Jesus has described in the first seven beatitudes, we will be living out the life and the character of Christ and the world hated Christ. The testimony of the Word of God is that Christlikeness will always be persecuted. Do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples in John 15? (John 15:18-21)

Christians are not of the world. The world cannot understand this kind of lifestyle that rejects the sinful pleasures, the lusts, and the lies the world prizes -- it convicts them. It is not that we are sinless but we hate sin, we love Christ, we are convicted of by the Spirit when we do sin, we

have godly sorrow which leads to true repentance, we see in our lives a pattern of increasing holiness the result is that the world acts toward us the same way it reacted toward Christ.

Do you see the common thread that this warning in John as with the beatitude that we are looking at? The issue is Christ. True Christians are persecuted, are hated as a result of our association with Christ. It is our association with Jesus that is the real problem. So long as we hold fast to Jesus and worship Him with our lives and live according to His commands we will lay ourselves open to the world's hatred and the more closely we are identified with him - by our words and our deeds - the more of that hatred of Jesus will fall upon us. That is the Lord's great point here.

Paul says something like it. Paul told Timothy: (2 Timothy 3:10–12, ESV) He is saying basically, "You have observed my faithfulness to Christ. You have observed my life. You have seen how my teaching, my conduct, my life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness – how they have led to me being persecuted. Don't let that scare you. Don't back away as the result. Know instead that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

How could Jesus say this so definitively in John 15? How could Paul make such a sweeping statement? "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." They make it on the basis of a deep certainty regarding the nature of Christianity and the nature of the sinfulness of man. Jesus knows, Paul knows that there is such a tension between the message and way of life of Christians on the one hand and the mindset and way of life of the world on the other that conflict is inevitable. It is that way because the very life of the Christian is in direct conflict with the pervasive values of the world. Christians are poor in spirit while the world magnifies and deifies self-esteem. Christians mourn over sin while the world glories in sin and looks for more and more ways to rebel against the righteousness of God. A disciple is meek and is submitted to God while the world seeks to cast off all restraint and be its own god. The Christian hungers and thirsts after Christ while the world minimizes or ignores Him. The disciple is merciful while the world crowns the merciless as victor. The Christian seeks to be pure in his devotion to God while the worldly are devoted to themselves. The Christian is a peacekeeper in keeping with truth and righteousness while the world seeks by their unrighteousness to suppress the truth. Persecution is inevitable because the values of the world and the biblical convictions of the faithful disciple are in stark contrast to one another.

Now I do want to say something and I think it bears saying especially in the age of what is called “radical Christianity.” While it is absolutely true, like Paul says, that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, I want to make sure we understand what Paul is saying. The pursuit is not persecution, but rather a godly life that is rooted in Jesus Christ and is bearing the fruit of that union. There are some people who want a persecution story and so they go looking for it. They try to provoke some form of persecution or see persecution behind every rock so they can claim to have been persecuted for their faith and so they can have their spiritual chops.

Some folks think they are being persecuted because they are standing for righteousness, when in reality, they are just belligerent, or ignorant, or rude or obnoxious. Sometimes what they say with their lips doesn’t match the reality of their lives and so they are mocked. Some people claim persecution because of a martyr complex, paranoia, or because they are hostile, critical, and judgmental. The persecution that Jesus is talking about is rooted in righteousness and it is the result of living a godly life. If you live a godly life, you won’t need to go looking for persecution. Persecution will come looking for you.

The moment you preach the absolute infallibility of God's word, hold to a biblical view of man as a sinner, to God as a Holy and Righteous Judge, to Christ as the only propitiation for sins, the only Redeemer, as soon as you hold to the uniqueness of Christ and seek to live under his Lordship fully and completely, you will be persecuted. True Christians will feel the weight and the cost of their devotion to Christ.

Is there a way to avoid this? There is. R. Kent Hughes says: “If you want to get along in the world, the formula is simple. Approve the world's morals and ethics at least outwardly. Live like the world lives, laugh at its humor, immerse yourself in its entertainment, smile when God is mocked, act as if all religions converge on the same road, don't mention hell, draw no moral judgements, take no stand on moral issues - and above all: don't preach the Gospel to others!” But beloved, those are the habits of sham Christians. The fact is this: the church must be persecuted, or the church is not the church at all. If that is the case what should we expect?

2) Forms of Persecution (v. 11) “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

When we talk about persecution, what should we expect? First look at the word, “when” in verse 11. That is the Greek word, “hotan” which means whenever. The idea is not that we will always be in constant state of persecution. Jesus had times of relative popularity and relative peace when He preached. Paul didn’t have to flee from every place that he preached. The disciples weren’t always thrown in jail, but opposition was always lurking around the corner.

As we see in Jesus’ words to us in verse 11, persecution can take a couple of forms. It can include physical persecution or verbal persecution. The word persecute comes from a word that means, “to pursue with hostile intent, chase down, to” The picture is of being hunted down like an animal and killed. Persecution includes physical abuse, torture, and death. The word revile offers a different picture. The word literally means “things thrown in your teeth.” It is the idea of being told off, mocked, ridiculed, scorned laughed at, or cursed. When Jesus speaks of “evil spoken against us falsely” he is talking about things said behind our backs, unfounded gossip, hateful slander, and abusive insults.

We are familiar with some of the stories of physical persecution throughout the history of the church, beginning with the book of Acts. In 28 chapters, we find at least 58 references to persecution. Servants of Christ suffered for their faith. Stephen was stoned to death for proclaiming Christ. James was beheaded in Jerusalem. John was exiled to the island of Patmos. Thomas was killed in India. Simon Peter was crucified, head down, during Nero’s reign. Simon, who preached the gospel in Africa and then Britain, was crucified. Bartholomew was beaten, crucified, and beheaded, in Armenia. Andrew, Peter’s brother, was crucified in Egypt. Matthew was killed by a spear in Egypt. Mark was burned in Egypt, and Paul was beheaded in Rome. Early church fathers like Cyprian and Polycarp were put to death. John Wycliffe suffered banishment in the 14th century for giving the common people the Bible. John Hus faced excommunication and finally burning for his faithfulness to the gospel. Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli lived under threat of death. We know the name of William Tyndale who was pursued for 12 years by Roman Catholic authorities for the crime of translating the Bible into the common language before being betrayed by a man that he had befriended and trusted and he was strangled and burnt at the stake. Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer, John Bradford, Thomas Cranmer – all famous names of the great persecution that took place in England under Bloody Queen Mary. More recently we know Martin and Gracia Burnham, New Tribes missionaries held captive for over a year in the Philippine jungles by Muslim rebels, before a military rescue operation freed Gracia but cost her husband Martin his life. And for every name we know,

every story we have heard, there are countless numbers whose name we have never known and whose story we have never heard whose faithfulness does not go unnoticed or unrewarded by God. However, the persecution of Christians is not history, it is present fact. The life of Christians in China, the Sudan, North Korea, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Egypt, Nigeria, Cuba, India, Laos and host of other places is dangerous and life-threatening.

But physical persecution is not the only kind of persecution that Christians face. Following Jesus Christ faithfully involves a price, and the cost of discipleship is billed to believers in many different ways. We do not see the extreme persecution that those in other countries face. Still there are many forms of persecution a Christian will encounter.

I hear people sometimes talking about how they have never been persecuted for Christ because they have never been beaten or their lives are not threatened and I understand the heart behind what they are saying, but we need to be careful that we do not see persecution only in overly dramatic and extreme terms. Most persecution for faithfulness to Christ occurs in common ways. Family, marriage, work, school, sports teams, former friendships...etc. Persecution comes in a thousand forms and with varying degrees of intensity. But it is still persecution aimed to silence your Christianity or make you believe the personal cost of following Christ is too much.

There is a cost to following Christ. There is no way to avoid the cost – we must decide if following Christ is worth it. Persecution will come, what should be our attitude?

3) Rejoice and Be Glad (v. 12) Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus is telling us that our response to persecution is not to be like that of an unbeliever complaining about how we got ripped off or got taken advantage of, not sulking or licking our wounds in self pity or even to just gut it out like a Stoic. Instead, He tells us to rejoice and be glad. Jesus says “rejoice and be glad.” That word for rejoice comes from the Greek word, “agalliaisthai” meaning “to leap exceedingly for joy, to skip and jump and be overjoyed.” Christ knows that persecution for His sake brings astonishingly great reward. He speaks specifically of three reasons that we should rejoice in persecution.

Rejoice that you are a disciple of Jesus Christ – “on my account.”

Jesus said that we would be persecuted on His account. Persecution is an indication of genuineness, a certificate of Christian authenticity. We must remember what Jesus has been doing in the Beatitudes. He is describing true Christianity, what it means to be a genuine kingdom citizen. With every Beatitude, the Lord is giving the believer the assurance and certainty that he is a genuine Christian, so the person going through persecution "for the sake of righteousness" realizes that he has an identifying mark of genuineness on his life. In other words, since all the beatitudes describe what every Christian disciple is to be, being rejected, slandered or persecuted is as much a normal mark of Christian discipleship as hungering and thirsting for righteousness or being merciful and so if we are persecuted for Christ sake it ought to produce in us great joy knowing that our faith is genuine.

The Apostle Peter wrote: “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ” (1 Peter 4:14, ESV) If you are insulted for the name of Christ, if you are reviled for bearing faithfully the name of Christ, for living for Christ, for preaching, teaching, and praying in the name of Christ, for walking as a disciple of Christ, it is in reality a blessing because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. Your life bears testimony to Christ. Your life bears testimony to His worth and His glory.

Rejoice in the company in which you are included – “for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

If we suffer for the sake of Christ, we are in great company. We stand in the same line as Elijah, as Jeremiah, as Isaiah, as Daniel, as John the Baptist. We stand in the same line as the faithful men of God of whom we read in the Scriptures. Speaking of the faithful prophets who were before us, the writer of Hebrews says this, (Heb 11:35-38, ESV) The world was not worthy of them, but they were made worthy of the rewards of heaven.

Rejoice in your promised reward – “theirs is the kingdom of heaven...your reward is great in heaven”

Our God has caused us to be born again to a living hope, laid hold of by a living faith in Christ Jesus, a faith which He gives, a faith that transforms the life of the disciple and gives the fullness of eternal salvation in God with Christ, a life which promises persecution for faithfulness to Christ, but also the great reward of beholding and worshipping and enjoying His glory forever. A heavenly reward awaits the children of God. And the supreme reward is God Himself.

James writes: “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” (James 1:12, ESV)

God is glorified when we do not shrink back from faithfully identifying with Christ in all of our lives, but in the fire of persecution, the true promise of eternal life and the love and favor of God in Christ is of more worth than the false promise of acceptance with men if we would just tone our devotion to Christ down a little bit.

Beloved, I am convinced that there is only one way to remain faithful to Christ in the midst of persecution and that is to be convinced that Christ is worth it, that the gospel is worth it, that God’s grace to you is worth it. In order to be faithful in persecution we must be convinced God loves his people with an unchangeable love; that in Christ there is forgiveness of sins and eternal life; that this life is followed for the one who believes in Jesus Christ with a life, an existence so much better, happier, glorious that it cannot really be conceived; and that God the Father will not fail to reward with his smile those who suffer for the sake of his Son, who love his Son and will not let us go even when our faithfulness costs us dearly.

As we leave the Beatitudes and we move on in the Sermon on the Mount, beloved, consider the beatitudes again...are they are reality in your life of do you need to cry out to God for mercy, to grant you repentance and faith and to change you at the core of who you are?

Remember...these beatitudes are a description of every Christian. This is a description of what every Christian is meant to be. Even more, Jesus means for us to see that all of these characteristics are meant to be found in all believers. Certainly they will be present to differing degrees in the lives of believers as they grow and mature, but they are all to be there. We must

examine ourselves by these words, not by contemporary religious theory or human ideas of what a Christian is, but by these beatitudes of Christ.

Are they in you and are they growing? Where do you need God to grow you by his grace? Where do you need to repent of pursuing the lifestyle and mindset of the world? Are you still poor in spirit or does pride and self-exaltation have a grip on your soul? Are you mourning over sin or have you found yourself plowing through conviction and becoming less sensitive to sin? Are you growing in meekness and humility or have you found yourself chafing under the yoke of God? Are you hungering and thirsting after the righteousness of Christ or are you seeking to satisfy your soul with lesser things? Are you finding yourself growing in mercy or is your heart hardened to the needs of other sinners like you? Is your heart singularly devoted to Christ or are you trying to serve two masters? Are you a peacemaker or a peacekeeper? Is Christ worth the cost of persecution to follow Him faithfully? Where do you need to seek repentance and grace from God? Let us not run quickly from these words but let them have their full effect.

Perhaps as we look at these beatitudes, you see that these characteristics of a disciple have never really been a part of your life at all...What do you do? You humble yourself before God and you cry out to God for mercy and grace...

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