

## ***The Blessed Persecuted***

**Matthew 5:10-12**

Readings: Matthew 5:3-12, Matthew 20:20-28

Trinity CRC, September 19, 2021 AM

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Beatitudes Series #8

### **Matthew 5**

He said:

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.

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

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

### **Matthew 20**

<sup>20</sup> Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons (that’s James and John) came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

<sup>21</sup> “What is it you want?” he asked.

She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

<sup>22</sup> “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”

“We can,” they answered.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

<sup>24</sup> When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.

<sup>25</sup> Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup> Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—<sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

My dear fellow disciples of Jesus,

Why would anyone choose to follow him? When the Lord Jesus says, *Blessed are the persecuted*, he's telling us that we can expect hardship for following him. So why does anyone bother?

Why is Christianity attractive to people if it promises suffering? Why especially in the first century when Roman society detested Christians and their morality would anyone seriously want to follow Jesus? Why trade in an easy life that fits in with society for a life that faces opposition from society at almost every turn?

That seems to be the life that Jesus is inviting us into when he closes out these marvelous beatitudes with "blessed are those who are persecuted..."

In an article last year, New York pastor Tim Keller wrote,

In the first three centuries, Christians were persecuted more than any other religious group. Because they refused to honor other gods or worship the emperor, they were seen as too exclusive, too narrow, and a threat to the social order.

You see, in the Roman world,

It was expected that people would have their own gods, but that they'd be willing to show honor to all other gods as well. Nearly every home, every city, every professional guild (trade union)—including the empire itself—each had its own gods. You couldn't even go to a meal in a large home or to a public event without being expected to do some ritual to honor the gods of that particular group or place. To not do so was highly insulting, at the least to the house or community. (More importantly,) It was also dangerous, since it was thought that such behavior could elicit the anger of the gods. Indeed, it was seen as treason to not honor the gods of the empire....

So you can see how Christians found themselves in a tough place in that world. They were committed to the worship of our God exclusively. In time, Christianity spread through all ethnic groups in the Roman Empire, and "most believers were former pagans who suddenly, after conversion, refused to honor the other gods." The refusal of Christians to bow before or even acknowledge the legitimacy of other gods created huge social problems from the public square to the marketplace to people's homes. "If a family member or a servant became a Christian, they suddenly refused to honor the household's gods." If an employee became a Christian, he wouldn't bow before the trade union's god. And if a Roman citizen became a Christian, he or she wouldn't bow before Caesar who considered himself a god. In summary,

Christianity's spread was seen as subversive to the social order—a threat to the culture's way of life. Followers of Jesus were thought to be too exclusive to be good citizens.

"Too exclusive" sounds very current to me. How about you? Just a few years ago our federal government withheld funding for summer jobs from any group that

wouldn't affirm a pro-choice position. Pro-life supporters are often labelled extremists, a danger to the health of society. The same sort of thing is happening more and more today over sexual orientation. Because of our belief in one true God and a rejection of all other gods and of non-biblical morality, Christians are persecuted in our world.

I think it's safe to say, however, that we in the western world don't feel it nearly as intensely as some of our sisters and brothers in places like Afghanistan or North Korea. According to the 2020 World Watch List from Open Doors, 8 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith every day. Every week, 182 churches or Christian buildings are attacked. And every month, 309 Christians are imprisoned unjustly.

So why, if Christians were seen as offensive and were excluded from circles of influence and business and often put to death, (why) did anyone become a Christian in the first century and why do people still choose to follow Jesus today when it leads to persecution?

### **Persecution Defined**

Our eighth and final beatitude, which includes two beatitudes really, talks about persecution **for righteousness**. And the second half expands that saying, *Blessed are you when people insult (or revile) you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you **because of me***. It's important to note that people can be persecuted for all kinds of different convictions, practices or beliefs. If you live in Russia and Putin and company don't like you because you oppose their policies and cause dissent against them, you might end up getting poisoned to death. That's political persecution. That may have nothing to do with your faith in Jesus, though it most certainly could.

Jesus is talking about being persecuted for righteousness which he describes as words and actions against you because of him—because you follow him.

### **Persecution Illustrated**

In the Old Testament, the rulers of God's people sometimes mistreated prophets because of unpopular judgements which they brought from God. For example, in 1 Kings 19, Queen Jezebel threatens to have Elijah killed because he stood up to and against the prophets of Baal. During the time of Esther, the Jews were hated for their exclusive beliefs and religious practices by certain people like Haman, a top official of King Xerxes of Persia. Had Esther not intervened with the courage and faith God gave her, all the Jews could have been killed. Prophets like Jeremiah often died at the hands of those to whom they preached God's word. It isn't recorded in the Bible, but historians believe Jeremiah was stoned to death by his own people while in Egypt. Likewise, Isaiah was apparently sawed in two by King Manasseh of Judah, and Ezekiel killed by Jewish leaders he opposed for their worship of idols. These are OT examples of prophets persecuted for righteousness.

Historical reports, either in the Bible or from other sources say that nearly every one of the disciples died a martyr. Acts 12 reports:

*Acts 12:1b ...King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. <sup>2</sup> He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.*

This is the James and John, the sons of Zebedee, we read about in Matthew 20.

The Roman Emperor Domitian, trying to silence the word of God, had John exiled on the Island of Patmos. Thomas, previously the doubter, ending up dying by a spear in India where he went as a missionary. According to church tradition, Peter was killed by Emperor Nero around 64 AD, after the Great Fire of Rome, which Nero blamed Christians for starting. Of course, there's the first martyr recorded in the New Testament. Stephen was stoned to death at the hands of the Sanhedrin. All persecuted for righteousness.

Hebrews 11 gives a summary of other persecutions. We read there that some *Heb 11:3b5 ... were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup> Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. <sup>37</sup> They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— <sup>38</sup> the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.*

All because they wanted to follow Jesus but were opposed.

In summary, perhaps the description of how Moses suffered is a good way to encapsulate persecution for righteousness:

*Heb 11:24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. <sup>25</sup> He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. <sup>26</sup> He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.*

## **Persecution's Reward**

So think with me now about the reward for being persecuted for righteousness. Jesus said,

*Mt 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Mt 5:11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Jesus says the reward is the kingdom of heaven and also talks about a reward *in* heaven. When we hear "kingdom of heaven", we often think Jesus is talking about a reward we'll get after we die and go to heaven. That's not wrong. But it's also not complete. The kingdom of heaven starts now. Think of Jesus' prayer that God's kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. He's praying for heaven's presence and practices to invade our hearts in such a way that it is felt on earth already. He's praying for us to bring a little more of heaven to bear here on earth. Or as one

theologian puts it: “The life of heaven—the life of the realm where God is already king—is to become the life of the world, transforming the present ‘earth’ into the place of beauty and delight that God always intended. And those who follow Jesus are to begin to live by this rule here and now.” (NT Wright; *Matthew for Everyone*).

So the reward of the kingdom of heaven is something that starts now and will be fully experienced in heaven.

And what will be, do you think, the greatest experience of heaven? What one thing—above many others—will make heaven heaven? Well, I would suggest that it will be full fellowship with Jesus. The reward is about our connection to the king. That’s something we experience now already but only completely in heaven. As much as trading the ways of this world for a life where Jesus is King will make us unpopular in our culture, Jesus says it will connect us more fully with him. We will experience more of the kingdom where Jesus rules our hearts and lives.

The twelve—and many others—clearly learned much about the cost of following Jesus after the events recorded in Matthew 20. There they got it wrong. Remember how we read about them fighting for first place in the kingdom? Wanting positions of honour and prestige? Jesus’ response to this request is that they don’t understand yet. If the kingdom is already here and now, it’s not about sitting on thrones. It’s about serving God and others, bringing the life of the gospel to bear in the here and now. It’s about loving sacrifice, following the example of Jesus who lays down his life for us! Jesus told them,

*Mt 20:26b ... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,  
27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—<sup>28</sup> just as the Son of  
Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a  
ransom for many.*

So, it’s about laying down our life, setting aside our desires. It’s about serving and saying, “Lord, do with me what brings honour and glory to your name! Take my life and let it be consecrated all to Thee!” That’s where fellowship with Jesus is found, my friends! Clearly, that’s something the disciples learned and therefore were even willing to die for that.

My friends, that’s a powerful reminder of what grace does to us. That’s a powerful reminder of what grace does to us. Let’s be certain that our reward is not something we earn. Like all of our salvation, it’s a gift from God. Jesus through **his** being despised and rejected—persecuted—enables us to enjoy the taste of heaven here on earth. He alone makes our eternal reward a reality. And by his Holy Spirit, he empowers us to bring a little bit of heaven to bear here on earth. It is by his grace that our life reflects his greatness, even dimly, and that we enjoy greater fellowship with him as a result.

The reason we are willing to sacrifice is that he changes us. As we fall more and more in love with him, our heart changes and our desires change. We don’t consider it a real hardship to give up certain things, to stand out from society. Our heart’s desire becomes more and more like that of Jesus. And our reward is fellowship with Jesus. That’s why we want our life to reflect the kingdom of heaven, to

bring glory to God. Like Moses, we choose *to be mistreated... rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time*. Or to **regard disgrace** for the sake of Christ as *of greater value than anything this world offers*. We choose fellowship with Jesus first and foremost, his rule—his kingdom—over others.

## Persecution Today

So what does that look like today?

First of all, it looks like people deciding to follow Jesus, regardless of the cost. It's like the first century Christians who chose to say no to the gods of their day and culture in order to worship Jesus alone and pursue the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven.

It's looks like Daniel's three friends being led to the fiery furnace if they wouldn't bow down and worship Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue. These men were given faith by the Spirit to forsake their own lives in order to testify to God's power and kingdom. Remember what they said?

*Dan 3:16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. <sup>17</sup> If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. <sup>18</sup> But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."*

Such faith and courage is a gift from God.

Maybe ask yourself this morning where you're being asked to forsake Jesus by bowing to today's idols? Or maybe ask yourself where you've already been bowing down to idols without even really thinking about it.

I think a lot of us bow to the idol of money without realizing it. We rationalize our personal comforts. We live in one of the most affluent parts of the world! We think it's our right. When the Lord convicts us to care more about others who are struggling and less about ourselves, we aren't always willing to give up our things for the sake of loving our neighbour. We rationalize that the poor just need to work harder. They aren't our responsibility. But we forget the kingdom motto Jesus taught that it's better to serve and than to be served. That's the life of the kingdom. That's how we bring heaven to earth. And, yes, that's how we encounter Jesus. As we break free from the shackles of money, greed, pride, or anything else that keeps us from caring for others, we enter more and more into the kingdom of God and we meet Jesus. Our hearts are transformed to be more like his.

We also live in a society that is more and more like the first century Roman world. We have many views and religions. There are all sorts of denunciation of absolute truth. No one can claim truth. It's just "your truth." But when you disagree with certain vocal and politically correct views today, you are singled out. Their truth is all that matters. Any views to the contrary ought to be destroyed. This is kind of climate that leads to persecution.

But we don't have to wait for overt persecution to come to us in order for us to be blessed for our righteousness. Our righteousness—living for Jesus and his kingdom—will always help us to meet Jesus and find greater fellowship with him. And that, in turn, will make some despise us and will make others find our Jesus more attractive.

One of the primary reasons people became Christians in the first century—and still today—is that Christianity offers a personal relationship with God. The Roman world was filled with people wanting to win the favour of the gods. And you could never be sure if you'd done enough. Christianity, by contrast, offers a God who ensures our favour with him through his own sacrifice for us. Christianity offers people assurance of salvation. The gospel is all about full assurance now and for eternity because it is a gift of God. It's free and it's attractive.

Back then and still today, people seek connection to the universe or some kind of enlightenment. Christianity offers a living relationship with the God who made us and redeems us and the world. It offers a love that shows itself most fully in Jesus coming to suffer in order to bring us to himself. Salvation is by grace, not works; by Christ's work, not ours. That's what made it attractive to people back then and still today. We can know the God of the universe who loves us, lives in us, and gives us eternal security and peace along with true purpose in our lives. That makes Christianity attractive.

Friends, it is also the life of the Christians that made and still makes Christianity attractive. Our lifestyle both offends and attracts people. Larry Hurtado has studied the early church extensively. He points out, "Christians forbade both abortion and the practice of 'infant exposure,' in which unwanted babies were simply thrown out." Christians were also countercultural in their sexual practices. "They abstained from any sex outside of heterosexual marriage in a society that thought that, especially for married men, sex with prostitutes, slaves, and children was perfectly fine."

In addition, many in the Roman world were attracted to Jesus by seeing the selflessness of his followers. They were people who were seeking the kingdom of God first, above all. And it showed. It made an impact. Hurtado again says, "Christians were **un**usually generous with their money, particularly to the poor and needy, and not just to their own family and racial group." I think of Paul's words about the Christians in Macedonia. He wrote about them in 2 Corinthians 8:2 as Gentiles who were giving money to the suffering Jerusalem Church.

*<sup>2</sup> Cor 8:2 In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. <sup>3</sup> For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, <sup>4</sup> they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. <sup>5</sup> And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.*

Friends, our giving from our joyful and generous hearts can be attractive today, just as it was in the Roman world.

In short, these are just a few manifestations of how Christians lived countercultural lives. The disciples in Matthew 20 fight for a place of honour without any suffering. But after observing the full extent of Christ's love, going all the way to the cross and death and hell for us, they are changed. To some watching the disciples live out their faith after Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples' teaching and lifestyle were worthy of condemnation. But to others—as the Holy Spirit opened hearts and minds—people were attracted to Jesus by the people who were faithfully following him—seeking his kingdom at all costs.

Think about how to follow Jesus in your life. As students, always be thinking about how you have the opportunity to learn in order to make a difference with your life for the kingdom. Your education is not about gaining better earning power. It's about being better equipped for service as citizen of God's kingdom, to help transform so much of what is broken by sin in our world, including in our work places, the environment and politics.

Friends, our job is not merely about bringing home a paycheque. It's about looking for opportunities to serve with Christ-like humility and passion. It's where you'll sometimes lead the way in loving others on the job. But it's also where you'll have the opportunity to let the light of Jesus shine in how you do your job, working hard and faithfully. It's about how you stand up for your faith and how you respond to opposition to your faith.

I think that's the message of the beatitudes. The life of disciples following Jesus, the life of the kingdom of God "may seem upside down" to many in our society, "but we are called to believe, with great daring, that it is in fact the right way up," wrote NT Wright. And likewise, Matthew Henry made this important remark: "Religion, if it is worth anything, is worth everything; but it is worth little, if it not worth suffering for."

I don't know about you, but this final beatitude makes me feel that I've had it pretty easy as a Christian in Canada. And maybe that's just a blessing of living in Canada. To some extent that's true. However, this beatitude in particular reminds me that I should never be afraid to follow Jesus, regardless of the cost. It will always be worth it. Always! After all, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. So there's nothing—really—to worry about. Jesus has us safe in his loving hands. Follow how he leads you. The reward of fellowship with him—now and for eternity—is worth it.

Amen