

“Kingdom Character: The Beatitudes” (part 9)

Matthew 5:10-12

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who lived in the early part of the 20th century. He was a vocal opponent of the Nazis and of Adolph Hitler. He was arrested by the Gestapo in April of 1943, imprisoned for nearly two years, and was executed by the Nazis on April 9, 1945 just two weeks before the Allied Forces liberated the camp where he had been unjustly held.

Bonhoeffer is perhaps best known for his books, one of which was *The Cost of Discipleship*, and also for the many letters that he wrote during the days of his imprisonment.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer - *“Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the Cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his commission, his work.”*

Martin Luther - *“The kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ; he wants to be among friends, to sit among roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the devout people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever have been spared?”*

Because the kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies, persecution is a reality for the followers of Jesus. Because His followers carry His name, they gladly embrace the shame that goes with it in the eyes of the world.

Hebrews 13:13-14 - **“Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.”**

This last Beatitude that Jesus mentions here in this passage deals with the subject of persecution. Because they are not of this world, the followers of Jesus will face persecution and mistreatment in this world.

This persecution is the crowning point of the character that He has already described in the preceding verses.

- Poverty of spirit gives way to mourning over sin
- Mourning over sin gives way to meekness

- Meekness gives way to hungering/thirsting for righteousness
- Hungering for righteousness gives way to being merciful
- Being merciful gives way to being pure in heart
- Being pure in heart gives way to being a peacemaker
- Being a peacemaker gives way to persecution

Jesus is telling us here that Kingdom Character is always persecuted by those who do not possess it nor understand it.

According to Jesus, we are blessed when we are persecuted. In other words, we are happy when we are harassed for the sake of our faith. Of all the Beatitudes, this one seems the most strange and foreign to our thinking.

What does He want us to understand about persecution?

1. Persecution is a REALITY of redemption

Following Jesus means forsaking the world.

To be a follower of Jesus in the early days of Christianity was to be a marked man or woman. Those who aligned themselves with Christ and His kingdom understood that they were abandoning all other ties and renouncing former allegiances.

Even as we are assembled here right now, untold millions of believers are suffering for their faith.

In many ways, we have been blessed with religious freedom as American Christians that we hardly know what persecution is and what it looks like, let alone having experienced it ourselves.

Paul Marshall, “Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians”

“Western Christians enjoy numerous blessings of religious freedom. Our rights, while sometimes challenged, are many. We speak freely about our faith, our churches, our denominational preferences, and our answered prayers. We treasure, read, and write comments in our Bibles, and share our beliefs with others without fear of danger. Our churches can have religious schools and broadcasts. We wear crosses around our necks, and our bishops, priests, ministers, monks, and nuns dress in a broad array of distinctive styles. Our

Christianity doesn't require us to keep looking over our shoulders, unsure if we will be arrested or attacked for having a Bible. Our churches are well built, well equipped, and promoted by signs. Our pastors are able to concentrate on their ministerial responsibilities without having to worry about threats from hostile police and angry mobs. For our encouragement and entertainment, there are Christian television networks, music industries, websites, and publishing enterprises. Our religious freedom is largely protected by our governments as well as the cultures in which we live. Unfortunately, most of the world's Christians don't share these circumstances. Their experiences are not just dissimilar to ours; they are unimaginably different. Clearly we needn't feel guilty about our religious freedoms, which are God-given. But sometimes we have to be reminded about what life is like for Christians in other countries, whose everyday lives bear so little resemblance to ours. These men, women, and children of courage and faith are scattered in large numbers all across the globe. Even now, as these words are being written:

- A Christian pastor sat in a squalid prison cell in Iran for three years...The pastor was condemned for converting to Christianity from Islam, called apostasy in Iran, and sentenced to death. Still, he did not recant his Christian faith.*
- In Pakistan, a woman awaits the day of her execution. She is ill, weak, and weary, and she misses her five children intolerably. She, too, has been sentenced to death because of her Christian faith.*
- In China, friends and loved ones await the word of an elderly man who was abducted, never to be heard from again. He is frail but faithful to his beliefs and his church. But in his faithfulness, he has offended China's Communist Party regime.*
- In Nigeria, surviving Christians can still smell the smoke and the burning flesh in their village. At least eleven worshipers were burned to death when terrorists firebombed a church. More than twenty others were horribly injured. Christians in surrounding areas are running scared...well aware that they also are targets."*

These are real stories of real people who have faced extreme persecution in recent days. According to Pew Research, in two-thirds of the world's countries, persecution has gotten worse in recent years.

To live a redeemed life openly in an unredeemed society invites ridicule and persecution according to what Jesus says.

What is persecution, and how do we define it?

“Persecution” - *carries the basic meaning of chasing, driving away, or pursuing*

To be persecuted is to be pursued and made a target because of our faith in Christ.

It may be that we are not “pursued” in our faith in western society very much because we don’t have anything worth pursuing. Ouch.

The truth is that whenever Christians are not sought out and persecuted by society may very well mean that they are conforming to the society rather than confronting that society for the gospel’s sake.

v. 11 - “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.”

“Revile” - *idea of casting in one’s teeth; means to hurl verbal insults and speak hurtful words*

This is the very way that the chief priests mocked and insulted Jesus on the night of His arrest:

Matthew 26:67 - “Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, saying, Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck you?”

It is the way that He was treated by the soldiers who crucified Him:

Mark 15:16-20 - “Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison. And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, and began to salute Him, Hail, King of the Jews! Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him. And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him.”

If you have ever been reviled for your faith, you are sharing in the reproach of Christ. Hurtful words may come from those you work with. It may come from strangers. It may even come from family and friends who do not understand your faithfulness to Jesus.

2. Persecution is a RESULT of righteousness

Persecution is a natural result of following Jesus Christ and reflecting His light in the midst of a dark world.

v. 10 - “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”

v. 11 - “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.”

Jesus is saying that His followers are persecuted because of the righteous character that they reflect. Darkness hates light. Evil hates righteousness. The kingdom of Satan hates the kingdom of Christ.

John MacArthur - *“Imagine a man who accepted a new job in which he had to work with especially profane people. When at the end of his first day his wife asked him how he had managed, he said, Terrific! They never guessed I was a Christian. As long as people have no reason to believe that we are Christians, at least obedient and righteous Christians, we need not worry about persecution. But as we manifest the standards of Christ we will share the reproach of Christ.”*

Christ living in His people today will produce the same reaction from the world that Christ Himself produced during the days of His earthly ministry.

2 Timothy 3:12 - “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

Those who live righteous lives will inevitably be made a target. A righteous life and witness generates antagonism from the world.

John 15:18-21 - “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me.”

It is not so much us that the world persecutes as it is Christ who lives in us. We are hated and despised for His sake.

As a person, you have to decide whose applause you desire more--the applause of men, or the applause of Christ. Do you want the recognition of the world, or would you rather have the recognition of heaven?

Jesus made it very clear that following Him would be costly. He said that the way would be hard, narrow, and difficult. Only a few would find it. We bring no glory to Christ nor benefit to others when we minimize the cost of following Him in discipleship.

3. Persecution is a REASON for rejoicing

Rather than hanging our heads down in shame, persecution is a reason for rejoicing and celebration.

v. 12 - “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

When I am persecuted for my faith, Jesus says that I am in good company. Study Scripture and you will find that almost everyone who lived for God and made a splash for the kingdom were hated and harassed by the culture of their day:

- Abel was murdered by his own brother
- Joseph was betrayed and sold; falsely accused
- the prophets were hated and mistreated
- Jesus was crucified
- the apostles and the early church were attacked

At the close of the first century, Rome began to require emperor worship from all within the empire. It became a law to verbally declare at least once a year “Caesar is Lord,” after which the person was free to worship however they saw fit. Because the early church refused to do this, they were marked as traitors and suffered the confiscation of their property, the loss of employment, imprisonment, torture and death.

If they persecute us, we are in good company because the world of darkness has always targeted the children of light.

Many went to their deaths rejoicing.

Acts 5:40-42 - “And when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

How now shall we live as disciples?

- Be DECIDED in your mind
- Be DEVOTED in your heart
- Be DELIBERATE in your witness
- Be DEPENDENT in your worship

If you want to avoid persecution, all you have to do is live like everyone else. Don't make waves. Don't be a conversation starter. Just conform to the world around you and don't dare be different. Do this and you will avoid persecution.

Do this, and you will also miss out on true happiness.

Luke 9:26 - "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels."

Matthew 16:25 - "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works."

Many people want a faith that costs them nothing.

Jesus says save your life now and lose it later. Or, lose you life now and find it later. Which will it be?