

## **8. The Way of Jesus: Persecution as Privilege**

### **Matthew 5:10-12**

#### **Introduction – A Heritage of Persecution**

In the last year, we have heard many stories of persecution of Christians. On February 15<sup>th</sup> of this year radical Islamists released a dramatic and terrifyingly violent video of the beheading of twenty one Christian men in Libya. Just this week, I received an email from World Help, a Christian relief agency, describing the plight Iraqi Christians who had been displaced by ISIS.

“Sufyan and his family of 12 live in one small, unfurnished home in Shaqlawa, a community hidden deep in the mountains of Northern Iraq. Here, 250 displaced families of believers—over 1,000 people in total—are struggling to survive.

Up to five families live in a single home together. Many have been forced to flee ISIS multiple times and finally, for the meantime, found sanctuary here.

Sufyan’s story is no different from so many we met—full of pain and loss, but sustained by a steady faith. A successful pharmacist from Mosul before ISIS invaded, Sufyan lost all he had worked for: his career, his possessions, and each of his three homes. ISIS took everything. Soldiers brutally murdered one of his brothers, and two more from his family fled Iraq to seek refuge in Germany. Now he is alone, carrying the burden of providing for his family but with no way to ensure that it happens.



Even this capable, educated, hardworking man is hard-pressed for a job here. Can you imagine? He has no money. No resources. *A pharmacist by trade with no access to basic medicine to treat sick and injured family members.*

Even though it was clear that Sufyan was intensely discouraged, he refuses to abandon his land, his people, his God.

**‘Our faith is what has sustained us. Our church has kept us going. Please pray for us.’”**

Persecution of Jesus-followers is not new. Since the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7, the world has always resented and persecuted Christians. During its first three hundred years, the church was powerful. During that time, it experienced its most explosive growth. It literally changed the world. It was also a season of some of its most intense and brutal persecution.

*Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* tells the stories of thousands who were persecuted unto death for the sake of Christ. (I highly recommend the book.) I will share just one example from the early church. It is the story of Laurentius, commonly known as St. Lawrence. He was a deacon serving under the Sextus, the Bishop of Rome. When the bishop was being led to his execution he told Laurentius that he would meet him in heaven in three days. Taking that to mean that his

own execution was imminent, he gathered all the poor people of the church together and distributed all treasures that he, as a deacon of the church, had charge over. The persecutors were alarmed by his actions and called him to give an immediate account to the Emperor for what he did. He promised to satisfy them.

Laurentius then gathered together all the poor, the aged, and the helpless and presented them to the authorities saying, “These are the true treasures of the church.” Taking his actions and words to be a mockery of their demands, they immediately ordered him to be tortured. He was scourged with iron rods and had his limbs dislocated on the rack. He endured the tortures with such fortitude and sweetness that they immediately ordered him fastened to a large gridiron over a slow-burning fire, that his death might be excruciating.



But his astonishing constancy during these trials, and the look of serenity on his face under such excruciating torture, gave the spectators so exalted an idea of the dignity and truth of his Christian faith that many immediately became converts. Having endured the pain for a long period of time, he cheerfully lifted his eyes to heaven and yielded his spirit to God on August 10, 258 A.D. (p. 23)

Jesus said,

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil  
against you because of me. 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 5:10-12

## **Prayer**

### **Not for nothing**

This eighth beatitude is the final destination of the preceding seven. Along with the first beatitude – “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” – it frames the other six because its reward, too, is the kingdom of heaven. Not some time in the future, but now. Being on the receiving end of persecution and slander are a distinguishing mark of the Jesus-follower.

If you're not doing it, you should be shifting around in your seat. The thought of social disfavor as normal is unsettling for most American Christians. We live a comfortable life. While I've experienced a little persecution and slander because of my faith, I wouldn't say that it marks my life. What should we make of this beatitude for us today? I don't believe we can simply brush it off and say that these words of Jesus are for other people in another time and another place. While I believe the winds of opposition are rising against us in our culture, this beatitude says more than just “be ready for it.”

The beatitudes were given in an order that makes sense. One flows from the other. It begins with being humble, because no one can have a relationship with God who is obsessed with their own greatness. Such humility leads naturally to grief over one's own sin and the broken condition of the world. People who are dependent on God for everything do not need to assert their power over others because they know that God will take up their cause. Meekness is a

posture of strong faith. Those who have received the mercy of God freely, freely give it to others out of gratitude and humility. Those who live this way are single-minded in their pursuit of God and his ways. They will see him. The beatitudes are the “Jesus way” of living. Those who follow him will have their lives characterized by these qualities.

But the beatitudes are radically countercultural. The world says:

- Be a self-promoter, the world will be yours.
- Believe in yourself and you’ll never have to be sorry
- Assert yourself and you’ll get what you want.
- If it feels good; do it. You only live once.
- Don’t bother with the weak. No one ever helped you.
- Do what’s right for you. No one has the right to judge you.

You live that way, you know what you get? You might get some material success for the short duration of your life. But along with it, you’ll have heartache, addictions that control you, health problems, depression, all kinds of brokenness because you’ll never be satisfied. The prize will always be just out of reach. And worst of all, you’ll never have any peace. You could sum it up by saying, “Cursed are those who follow the way of the world, for theirs is the kingdom of self.”

But the Jesus-way turns the world’s ways on their head. From cursed to blessed. The beatitudes are the world-turned-right-side-up. The beatitudes are the warm front of God’s ways colliding with the cold front of the world. The result will always be a storm.

This beatitude has the distinction of being the only one in which Jesus elaborated. He begins by saying blessed are *those* who are persecuted. But he makes it even more personal when he extends it further and says blessed are *you* when you are slandered for *my* sake. In this beatitude, he makes it clear that all along he is calling people to live in his way. All the beatitudes point to Jesus. It is significant that the Lord tells his followers that they are not alone in their suffering for his sake. We are in the same line as the prophets, the godly ones – the heroes of the Bible – who came before us. It is not for nothing that we suffer for the sake of righteousness.

**Yes, this is normal...**

Genuine righteousness – the righteousness of Jesus – condemns the wickedness of the world. It makes people uncomfortable; no wonder they lash out in retaliation. Those of us who say we follow Jesus must remember his words:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but 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.”

John 15:18-20

Those who were closest to Jesus, the apostles, remembered his words shortly after the church was launched in Acts 5. They were gathering a lot of attention in the Jerusalem though the signs and miracles they were performing in Jesus’ name. They preached the gospel to the great crowds that were gathering around them and many were turning to Christ. This, of course, enraged the Jewish religious leaders who had Jesus crucified just months before. They arrested all of the apostles and made plans to execute them. The intervention of a wise rabbi saved their lives but they were savagely beaten before they were released. In our culture, we would be tempted to hire lawyers to sue, launch a negative campaign on FaceBook, and write books about the injustice and suffering we experienced. The men who knew Jesus best reacted differently:

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

Acts 5:41-42

The Apostle Paul wrote to his disciple, Timothy, to remind him, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (II Timothy 3:12)

A man who would know a lot about persecution and slander – even martyrdom – Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote these words of explanation to his students:

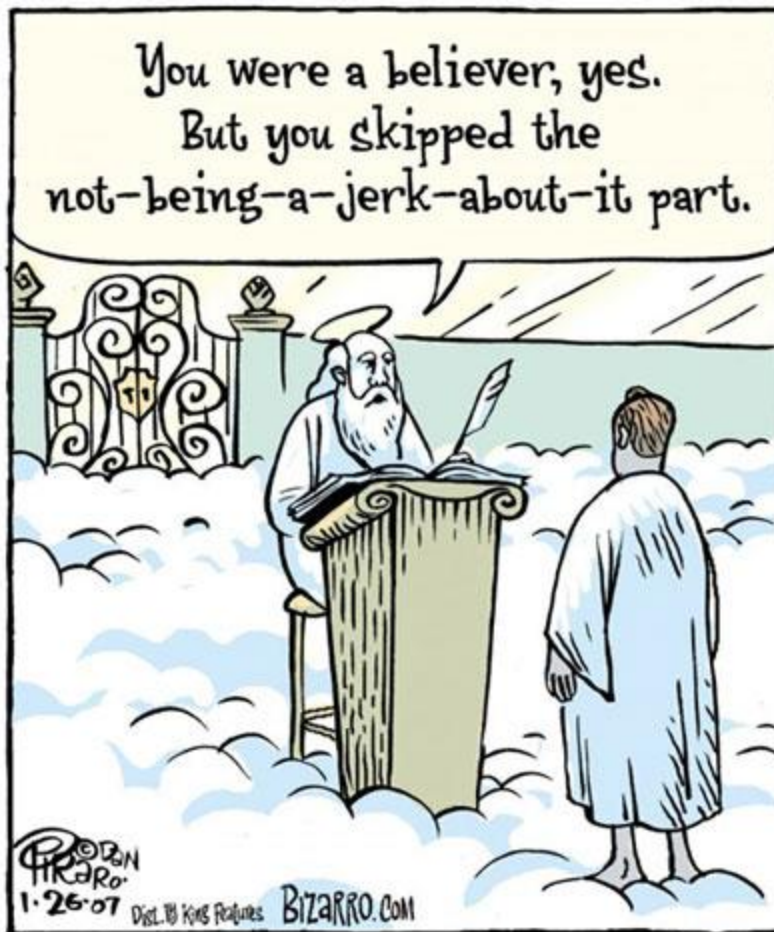
“With every beatitude, the gulf is widened between the disciples and the people, and their call to come forth from the people becomes increasingly manifest...The world dreams of progress, of power and of the future, but the disciples meditate on the end, the last judgment and the coming of the kingdom. To such heights the world cannot rise. And so the disciples are strangers in the world, unwelcome guests and disturbers of the peace. No wonder the world rejects them.”<sup>1</sup>

So what do I do, Pastor Bob, if I'm not being persecuted or slandered? (I've asked that question while preparing this sermon, myself.) Am I then, not a Jesus-follower? It's a fair question. Though there are many other marks of a true believer, I believe that question is borne out in that beatitude. We do live in a privileged culture for Christians, though I sense that our comfort and privilege as biblical Christians is quickly changing. The truth is, if you've been a believer for any time and you seek to follow Jesus and his teachings, you have most likely suffered some hardship – either persecution or verbal abuse because of it. Often, the attack will come through family members. You are ostracized or even made fun of because of your beliefs and lifestyle. Persecution and slander happens with the people that we spend the most time with – often at work or school. Perhaps you were denied a particular job or promotion or privilege that you sought because of your righteous lifestyle and what you've said. I think to some degree, this has happened to all of us. If you aren't experiencing some sort of tension with the world it may very well be that you are too insulated from it. And that is a problem for many of us. Seriously consider if God wouldn't be nudging you into a place of greater engagement with the world so that his light might shine in the darkness through you.

Finally, this beatitude is not encouraging us to seek out persecution. Being obnoxious is not a badge of honor.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by John R. W. Stott in *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 55-56.



It doesn't bring honor to the name of Christ. But I think this beatitude is encouraging. Don't be afraid. Be bold in your Christian witness and the way you live. Know that some persecution and slander will come. Be ready for it. And rejoice! Jesus said that our reward in heaven will be great.

### **The Way of Jesus**

Today is Palm Sunday. I love this day! It marks the beginning of Jesus' campaign to turn the world right side up. He became king by becoming the lowest servant. He defeated evil's power over this world by embracing powerlessness. He won by losing.

Jesus showed the way through his words and ultimately his death. He said, "Take up your cross and follow me." Will you follow him? Even if it means torment by other people? Even if it



means that others will say untrue and mean things about you? If so, rejoice! It is the way of Jesus. It is the way of the cross. And it is the way of the cross that leads ultimately to life.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

He certainly showed he way...

### **Prayer**

### **Song of Response: The Power of the Cross**