

Happy Are the Persecuted:

Matthew 5:3-12

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

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

I want to try and achieve a couple of things today:

1. I want to help clarify what this last beatitude is really saying and not what we have heard it say.
2. I would like to show you why persecution comes to the Christian.
3. I want to challenge you to examine you life and ask yourself what you are not doing right if you are not being persecuted.

Now...this topic is not dealt with properly today because the modern Pentecostal churches and word of faith churches do not have a doctrine of suffering.

They don't have room in their theology for things not going according to plan. You just don't have enough faith and that is very clearly NOT what the Bible teaches.

General observations:

We now come to the last of our manifestos of the Kingdom and it is different than the others.

Seven of these beatitudes deal with character only this last one, verses 10-12, deal with conditions.

The philosophy of the world, and unfortunately the philosophy behind much modern preaching has become:

‘Alter your conditions, and you will alter your character.’

Where as what Christ has always taught:

‘Alter your character, and you will alter your conditions.’

Jesus makes little of His surroundings.

He is not concerned with their ability to impact us,
He is concerned about our ability to impact them.

Does that mean He has no concern for what we face, what we struggle with, what we need?

Not at all.

He is simply saying ‘Lift your eyes; live as if heaven matters. Live with eternity in mind and everything else fades.’

So we come now to yet another change in this series of his teaching.

The Persecution:

‘Happy are those that are persecuted for righteousness sake.’

Note here that it is not those that are persecuted for religious bigotry who are happy.

It is not those persecuted for religious stupidity who are happy.

No.

It says happy are the harassed who live a right life.

It is those that make a stand for the sake of
right-doing,
right-living and
right-being
that will consider themselves blessed. That is happy, fortunate, well
off, when people single them out and harass them, mistreat them or
are hostile towards their ideas and way of life because of their love of
Christ.

Remember the context of His preaching here:

These 3 verses do not stand alone.

Jesus didn't write in verses,
He taught in parables and delivered them in sermons.

This isn't a stand alone thought.
There is a continuity of thought.
He is finishing one series of thought and flowing into the next.

He didn't stop at verse 12 and then announce in bold letter 'Salt and Light' as a topic change.

The editors of our Bibles did that.

So in one way we can't read these verses on persecution in a stand alone fashion.

We need to look at the context that He was speaking in.

I believe that He was saying that these people who are living with the Kingdom in their heart.

These people have realized their fallen state.

Who have mourned for their sinfulness.

Who have hungered to be changed and become more like Christ.

Who are actively engaged in acts of mercy.

And determined to reconcile God with man and one with another.

These people they stand out from the crowd.

They will stand out like light in a dark place.

They are not like others around them.

They don't bring a sense of decay and destruction.

There is something about these people, they are like a preservative, they stop the rot from spreading they hold families together, business together, communities together.

These people live different, act different, believe different, love different, desire different, want different.

And these people, it is not just in what they say, we just don't hear differently from them.

They are different because they live different, the difference is visible.

Our Lord is saying because of the striking contrast between who you were and who you have become, because of the striking contrast you throw on the lives of those around you, you will be harassed.

Salt and Light:

Salt and light don't make a lot of noise, they just are.

I was speaking at a business gala and a lady came up to me and asked me what I did.

I told her I ran a leadership development and coaching company and I am the pastor of a church.

She turns to her husband and says, 'See I told you he is a Christian.' 'I knew there was something about you. You were different.'

I am glad she caught me on a good day.

Everything about you says something about you.

The message behind this last beatitude and what it flows into is consistency.

Are you the same people wherever you go, or do you modify your behavior and actions to appeal to the crowd?

Are you daily living 'for His sake'?

Jim Elliot said:

'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.'

The Misreading of This Scripture:

Often when this scripture is read or taught it is reduced to 4 words, 'Blessed are the persecuted...' and we have clearly seen that is not the case.

That is not the focus of what Christ is saying.

There are groups of the church who believe that trails and hardship and poverty are the natural fruit of the Christian life, but that is not what this says.

The whole focus of verses 10-18 is the impact of a life lived passionately for Christ on the world around them.

This life should be a happy life,
a passionate life,
a life of joy,
a life of light and possibility,
a life of balance,
a life of color,
a life of excellence,
and good works.

That is what verse 16 says.

Matthew 5:16 ESV

(16) In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

It says that the daughter and son of the Kingdom should attain these excellent, beautiful, and virtuous qualities and to be an example to all around them and a sign that they are a citizen of the Kingdom.

There is nothing impoverished, nothing small, and nothing mediocre in this passage at all.

This passage doesn't diminish us, it should embolden us.

So Why Are We Persecuted, why are we harassed?

If you are being that sort of person, living and lovingly touching your world, why are you the object of harassment?

Well for two reasons-

- the focus of your life and
- the activities of your life.

Focus of your life:

For a person who knows not God, these 70 years are the closest thing to Heaven that they will ever know.

For the citizen of glory, for a citizen of the Kingdom they are the closest thing to hell we will ever know.

- 'For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.'
- 'For great is your reward in Heaven.'
- 'And glorify your Father in Heaven.'

We are surrounded by people who are living for themselves.

Loving themselves.

Focused on themselves.

Selfish.

Needy.

Narcissistic.

But you're not like that.

Their eyes are inward.

Your eyes are outward.

For those that don't know Him, it is all about them.

For those that do know Him, it is all about Him.

Activities of a Life:

The other reason Kingdom people are persecuted is because of the activities of their life.

They will harass you because of how you live and what you believe.

Righteous means being
merciful,
pure,
peaceable,
and serving others.

If you truly are that sort of person...who would persecute that?

Let's look at Luke 16:14-15

14 The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. 15 And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Luke 16:13

13 No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

Then comes the persecution:

Luke 16:14

14 The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.

So why did they ridicule Him?
Why did they mock Him?

They persecuted Him because they were lovers of money.
In other words Jesus' attitude to money was such a contrast to theirs,
that they felt it was an attack.

He was shining light and it exposed their darkness. He applied salt and they realized they had an open wound.

Jesus wasn't being insulting.
He just highlighted a difference between what He believed and what they believed.

He was saying you cannot have two kings over one kingdom.
Either God reigns in your heart or you do.

This was not an antagonistic insult,
He just ticked them off because of who He was and what He believed.

So to make themselves feel better, to justify their attitude and behaviors they put Him down,
they mocked Him,
they ridiculed Him
they harassed Him.

Self-justification is the root of all persecution.

If you cherish chastity and marital fidelity, your life will be attacked by people with a passion for sexual perversion.

If you live simple and happily and within your means, you will be harassed and called impoverished by credit card millionaires.

If you are punctual and show excellence in your work, you highlight the laziness of others.

If you speak with compassion, callous people will be exposed.

If you are spiritually minded, you will expose the worldly mindedness of those around you, both inside and outside the church.
All of these are judgmental and actions brought upon you, but does your living righteously have an affect on others?

What type of people will persecute you?

Jesus continues to teach on and says

(5:20) 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of these Pharisees and Scribes, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'

Often we have limited our thinking of Scribes and Pharisee to religious circles, and we always think of a Pharisee as someone other than ourselves.

A Pharisee is a person with a certain sort of attitude. And Jesus said these people will not enter the Kingdom. And these will be the people who will persecute other Christians.

The Pharisee had an elitist mentality built on a system of self-absorption and self-righteousness. In other words they were the Jewish version of the Texan self-made man.

Their entire lives were lived in an atmosphere of competition with other people.

They were not concerned with the inner conditions of the bowl, just the outward.

They were not concerned with the inward condition of their heart and relationship with God, just the external appearance.

Their only true concern was just how others saw them, how others perceived them, how others regarded them, especially concerning religious activities and practices.

These people looked at the followers of Christ and harassed them. Condemned them and insulted them.

Why?

They were living and loving something beyond what could be seen, something eternal.

To be honest I read this scripture and I am struck with the most horrible thought, what if I am not being persecuted? What if I am not being harassed?

What if people are just ignoring me or patting me on the head and saying, there there?

There is only one possible conclusion; I am not living my life consistent with my values.

Your life and love of Jesus Christ SHOULD INTERFERRE with your work conduct, your personal conduct, your activities and appetites. If you are not being harassed every now and then, then I wonder if your light is shining or hidden?

Because happy are those that are harassed.

You're kidding Right?

And this leads us all the way back to our opening scripture...

Happy are the persecuted...

Rejoice and be glad when you are persecuted

Smile and enjoy it when you are harassed.

Now the very natural and real response is...

There is no way!

This is not what Jesus meant!

There are only two possible reasons why Jesus would say something like this:

- a) He was insensitive and uncaring and psychopathic.

Or

- b) He had seen something, tasted something and knew something that others did not.

This is not a pastoral novice here.

This is not some young 25 year old straight out of seminary coming into a funeral slapping high fives and saying...Dude...Bummer...gnarly way to go!

The emphasis here is not the persecution, it is the reward.

Our Lord is saying....

Boys it will come, they will hate you because you love Me.

They will hate you because of the impact I have had on your life.

They will hate you because of the favor I give you, the wisdom I will pour into you, the prosperity in every area of your life you will experience.

*But boys, do not limit your vision to the immediate.
Don't limit your vision to the troubles or the pain, lift your eyes
and live as if heaven matters.*

Jesus is saying that to you who make a stand, to you who do not buckle, to you who shine like light in a dark place, remain and persevere, preserving all around you.

For your struggle.

For your faithfulness.

For your diligence, I see every tear and I will reward you.

Sometimes that is the only think that will keep you going
When hell is set on destroying your dream, where every time you turn
around there is an obstacle, it is sheer tenacity that gets you through.

It is the over arching belief that:

*What ever I have to face this side of glory to see His Kingdom
established in the hearts of people is worth because we shall
reap what we show.*

If the same reward could be obtain in heaven without suffering...why
would we embrace it?

We wouldn't.

This Kingdom of heaven is mine.

Regardless of what they say.
What they do to me.
How they treat me.
I will live as if heaven matters.

I will give myself to that one thing that he is requiring of me.

I believe this is the emotion that lies behind Paul-

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 ESV

(17) For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

(18) As we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

I believe that Jesus longs for us to have our heart more in heaven than on earth.

That He desires us to be more concerned for what is to come than what we are facing.

He longs that our heart be so set on things of heavenly importance that all else fades.

Now at this point I am urged to temper my passion.

I did not say that we are to be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good.

Not at all.

It is our longing for heaven.
Our passion for our Lord.

That makes us a better worker, a bigger dreamer and a more determined doer.

Let's conclude by looking at some examples of people who lived with heaven in mind:

John Rogers was burned alive because of his faith in Christ.

His children accompanied him to the place of execution and called out encouragements to him through their tears that he might be strong and not turn back and dishonor Christ

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As he left his prison room on the way to the gallows in 1945, he said to Payne Best, "This is the end—for me the beginning of life"

Ten years later the camp doctor wrote,

At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.

Two Moravian boys:

Two young Moravians in their early 20's heard of an island in the West Indies where an atheist British owner had 2000 to 3000 slaves. And the owner had said, "No preacher, no clergyman, will ever stay on this island. If he's ship wrecked we'll keep him in a separate house until he has to leave, but he's never going to talk to any of us about God, I'm through with all that nonsense."

Three thousand slaves from the jungles of Africa brought to an island in the Atlantic and there to live and die without hearing of Christ.

Two young Moravians heard about it.

They sold themselves to the British slave owner and used the money they received from their sale, for he paid no more than he would for any slave, to pay their passage out to his island for he wouldn't even transport them.

As the ship left its' pier in the river at Hamburg their families came to say goodbye, they would never return, they were sold as slaves for life.

As the gap widened one lad with his arm linked through the arm of his fellow, raised his hand and shouted across the gap the last words that were heard from them, they were these:

"MAY THE LAMB THAT WAS SLAIN RECEIVE THE REWARD OF HIS SUFFERING!"

They were living with heaven in mind.

Some people look at this and say it is unobtainable.
Now it is just not what you are asked to face, we here in Texas have different challenges.

Every time you make a stand in the face of your colleagues in a boardroom for ethical business because you know it is the right thing to do...you are living with heaven in mind.

Every time you are traveling on business and you refuse to engage in activities that could compromise your marriage, your living with heaven in mind.

When everyone goes away on Spring Break and gets hammered and you stay at home....you are living with heaven on your mind.

Will we get mocked for it? Yes.
Will we pay a price for it? Yes.

Will you get burned at the stake for it...maybe not this year.
But you may not get promoted.
They may lie about you and sneer at you.
Insult you and no longer associate with you.

Because you have made a stand for righteousness sake.

My last example, JD Rockefeller:

J.D. Rockefeller was an American oil magnate; he revolutionized the petroleum industry but also redefined the structure of modern philanthropy.

He became a billionaire and some say, by comparison the richest man in modern history.

He was a faithful church goer.

He taught Sunday school, and was a trustee, clerk, and occasional janitor for the modest Erie Street Baptist mission church where he went every Sunday.

His faith was a guiding force throughout his life and Rockefeller believed it to be the source of his success.

As he bluntly stated later, "God gave me money",
He felt entirely at ease with his wealth and followed John Wesley's dictum,

"gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can."

When he died, every paper in United States was speculating how much he was worth.

For one reporter it got to be too much for him, and he ran and he organized a meeting with one of Rockefeller's aids, and he came to him and when he got into the room with this man, he said to him:

'How much did Rockefeller leave?'

The man looked at him and soberly and calmly said: 'He left it all'.

We can't take it with us friend.

You can't take the cash and you can't take the conflict'

It all fades away.

We should all be living with heaven in mind.

Don't let the cares of this world rob you of the joys that are coming.

When you are hassled, be a little more obnoxious, that is what Jesus did.

They more they pushed His button, the more He stuck it to them.