

# The Beatitudes: Blessed are the Persecuted

Persecution is a given for followers of Christ, but our response to it is critical.



The Transformation for Adult LifeGroups

Matthew 5:10-12

July 28, 2019

## TODAY'S TEXT

Text: **Matthew 5:10-12**

*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.*

## FIRST THOUGHTS

Which of these statements best describes what you think of when you hear the word "persecution"?

1. The hardships the early Christians faced from the Jews and Romans because of their faith.
2. What some modern Christians in other countries face from government or other radical religions opposed to Christianity.
3. The cultural pressure placed on Christians in America to compromise their beliefs.
4. A personal experience you or someone you know has had with being persecuted because of their faith.

For some of us persecution is something that happened a long time ago or to people in other countries. For others it is something they have personally experienced. The Bible has a lot to say about it and our response to it. In fact, Jesus ended the Beatitudes with a statement of blessing for those who are persecuted.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

**What was persecution like for the early Christians?** Certainly the Roman Empire was tolerant of other religions in the areas they conquered (including the Jewish faith), but most of these were allowed because they were long-established in the regions the Romans conquered. Christianity, as it became separate from Judaism, was a "new" religion. The main problem Christians faced was their refusal to offer sacrifices to other Roman gods or to the Emperor. Beginning with the Emperor Nero in 64 A.D. up until Diocletian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, Christians faced regular outbreaks of severe persecution from the government. These included seizing property and possessions, jail, beatings, and execution in a variety of vicious ways. Christians were killed in contests with wild animals, burned alive, and drowned, It wasn't until the early 4<sup>th</sup> century Emperor Constantine that Christianity became a protected religion.

**What is persecution like for Christians today?** Today, Christianity is the most highly persecuted religion. It can take many forms similar to what the early Christians experienced, like beatings, imprisonment, and even in some cases death. But there are also newer forms like cyberbullying, extortion, kidnappings, and job loss. In some countries, followers of Christ may not be physically assaulted, but they are forsaken by their family and shunned by their community. According to various watch groups, the top 5 countries where persecution is the most severe are North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, and Pakistan. It is believed that about 4,000 Christians are killed each year because of their faith.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### HOW ARE WE PERSECUTED?

- **Read Matthew 5:10-12**  
The final Beatitude is different from the others that come before. It is not something we seek or pursue or cultivate. Rather, persecution is the response we receive when we begin to live out the other Beatitudes. It almost seems surprising that the response to being merciful, pure in heart, and a peacemaker is to be persecuted. But as we will see in these verses, it has always been the response of those far from God to His people.
- **How do blessing and persecution seem to contradict one another?**
- **Why does Jesus say we should rejoice when persecuted?**
- **How were some of these people from the Bible attacked for their faith? Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Peter, Stephen, Paul**
- **Read these verses: 1 Peter 5:8-9, 2 Timothy 3:12 and John 15:20. What do they tell us about persecution?**
- **Why do you think persecution happens to followers of Christ?**
- **What are some of the forms of persecution that Christians in our culture can expect to experience? Have you personally experienced any of these?**

**HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO PERSECUTION?**

Perhaps the most important thing we should understand about persecution is how to properly respond. Persecution is an opportunity for us to display godliness. That can mean many things. Basically there are three options: we compromise to end the persecution (which we know is not what Christ wants), we flee the persecution, or we endure persecution. BOTH of the last two options are valid ones for followers of Christ. Sometimes He calls us to stay and sometimes he tells us to go. How do we know which one is the right one in any situation?

- There are times in Scripture where believers were told to flee persecution. Read Matthew 10:22-23, Luke 4:28-30, and Acts 17:5-10.
- There are times in Scripture where believers were told to stand up to persecution. Read Hebrews 10:32-36 and 1 Corinthians 4:11-13.

Hundreds of years ago, Christian Pastor John Bunyan (the author of "Pilgrim's Progress") faced persecution for his public preaching because he was not licensed by the Church of England. His choice was to stop preaching or go to jail for years. He anguished over his decision because he was a father of four. His oldest daughter was blind. He did not worry as much about the hardships he faced as he did about what his family would face. Finally, after prayer and consultation with his wife and trusted friends, he gave the judge his answer: "If I were out of prison today, I would preach the gospel tomorrow, God willing." He was then taken to prison for 12 years. During this time he wrote about how he came to this decision. He made it clear that he considered both options (leaving to preach elsewhere or going to prison). He talked about two tests he applied, *"There are few rules in this case. The man himself if best able to judge concerning his present strength, and what weight this or that argument has upon his heart to stand or to fly."* We might call these the Strength Test and the Heart Test.

- Read each one of these situations. What factors would you need to consider as you sought God's will about whether you should flee the persecution or endure it:
  - Your High School daughter has taken a stand for sexual purity because of her faith in Christ. Other girls are mocking her as old-fashioned, uptight, and judgmental. Her boyfriend has broken up with her because of her beliefs. It has spilled over onto Social Media in a hurtful way. The relational and emotional stress she is facing is affecting her desire to be at school and her performance at school. What are some ways that would help her endure the persecution? What are some ways she could flee the persecution? How would you advise her to know what she should do in this situation?
  - Your boss has presented you with an opportunity for promotion. In order to move up, he is asking you to do some things that you feel ethically uncomfortable with. When you express your concerns, his response is "Well maybe you'd just rather not work here then. I mean, I'm not asking you to break the law, just get with the program." You are the only Christian in your office and some of your coworkers have expressed interest in church because they hear you talking about it all the time. What are some ways you could endure the persecution? What are some ways you could flee it? What factors would you take into account in your decision?

**SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE**

Ultimately we should end this discussion with the second half of the Beatitude: ". . . rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven." (Matthew 5:12). There are two things that are certain about following Christ: we will be persecuted and we will be rewarded. This eighth and final Beatitude is surely one of the hardest callings for Christians. But great reward awaits those who suffer for the sake of the Savior. And Christ gives strength and wisdom to suffering believers as we anticipate the joys that will soon be ours in His presence.

**PREPARING FOR NEXT WEEK**

- Next week we will look at the verses that immediately follow the Beatitudes: Matthew 5:13-16. Read them this week and look for ways you see Christians being salt and light in the world.
- Review the Beatitudes and ask God to help you make progress through them. Which one do you struggle with? How can you encourage your LifeGroup to keep pressing on?

**READ THROUGH THE BIBLE**

**28th** — Isaiah 53-56; 2 Peter 2 | **29th** — Isaiah 57-59; Psalm 103; 2 Peter 3 | **30th** — Isaiah 60-62; John 1 | **31st** — Isaiah 63-64; Psalm 107; John 2 | **1st** — Isaiah . 65-66; Psalm 62; John 3 | **2nd** — 2 Kings 21; 2 Chronicles 33; John 4 | **3rd** — Nahum 1-3; John 5