

Blessed are the Persecuted

Matthew 5:10-12

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

The New Testament was written, in its totality, to a people with no, or very limited, civil liberties. A people who had no prospect of getting anything like the liberties we enjoy. A people whose children and grandchildren also had no prospect of such liberties. No liberty, no prospect of liberty, and for the New Testament – it's no problem. Not only is it no problem – it is, arguably, seen as advantageous. For the marginalized, powerless, persecuted church, is a church which is uniquely poised to hear and heed the call into the mystery of fellowship with Christ Crucified.

Samuel Rutherford, great Scottish pastor and theologian said: I never knew by my nine years of preaching, so much of Christ's love, as he taught me in Aberdeen by six months imprisonment. The cross, he said, is as sails to a ship or wings to a bird. And the church of the New Testament, stripped of all that we think is indispensable, politically disenfranchised, hounded and harassed, is the church of deep, rich witness and inexpressible joy.

So, this morning we come to the 8th and final beatitude. It is the capstone of them all, and it is perhaps the most searching and provocative of them all. And in this piece of probing ethical teaching – that is saying something. So shocking is it, that it is repeated twice. Once in v.10, and again in verses 11 and 12. It's as if it is so unbelievable, our Lord thought he would double down and emphasize it, so that we might have ears to hear it. And we even have a little, but important, rhetorical flourish here at the end. Notice, that all the beatitudes are in the third person – blessed are those who.

But in v.11 Jesus says, pointedly: blessed are you. He switches to the second person, just to drive the point home inescapably, personally. All of this conspires to tell us that, here we are dealing with something of supreme importance. With that, we shall make two points: Persecution and Joy.

I. Persecution

First, persecution. The word for persecution has a range. It can include inflicting pain or even death. Or it can include imprisonment or economic pressure. And pretty much anything in between. In v.11 we see it means verbal abuse and

social ostracism (exclusion): Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you.

In the parallel in Luke, Jesus says: Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil. These are the people who are flourishing, who are pronounced blessed, happy, delighted, by Jesus. Now we should note a few things about persecution. And they are things we don't want to hear.

First, it is a normal mark of Christian existence. That doesn't mean it's always dramatic. It can be mundane and quite civilized. Nor does it happen all the time or with the same intensity (it is pervasive today in a kind of low-level intensity). But, as a rule, it is promised, and the church should expect it, and (speaking collectively) it has never lived without it. After all, the church's Lord warned us in John's gospel:

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

The basic shape of the church's life, the form of her witness in the world, is determined by Christ. To think that the church is not going to follow in the way of Christ's cross and humiliation, this side of the resurrection, is grotesque. Jesus is insistent. Later in Matthew's gospel, he puts it this way:

"The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!"

We are to expect to receive what Jesus received. Persecution. Thus, its absence is not a sign of victory, it is a cause for concern. And Paul adds his own sober witness:

All (no exceptions, all) who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus SHALL be persecuted. Again he says: to you it has been granted not only to believe in Christ, but to suffer for his sake.

Or to the Thessalonians:

No one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. ⁴ In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted.

Persecution is not an exception. It's the normal state of affairs. It is the design of God in Christ. It's just that we American Christians have clever ways of filtering these texts out – if we engage them at all. Or worse. We don't filter these texts. We just end up inverting them. Standing them on their heads.

If you listen carefully to the church, you might think the text says: Blessed are those who are NOT persecuted. Do everything in your power to make sure you never encounter persecution – after all, this is America. Or blessed are those who are in charge, so they can determine who is persecuted. We really don't believe or accept this text. It's not in our DNA. But Jesus is clear. Brace yourself for it – in all its subtle forms. Woe to us when everyone speaks well of us, for that is how the false prophets were treated.

The second thing to say about persecutions is this. Jesus does not say blessed are the persecuted – period. We are not blessed if we are persecuted, as Peter says, for wrongdoing, or even meddling. There are lots of ways one can draw fire. One can be rude, unpleasant, obnoxious, proud, judgmental. Manipulative. Even (especially) in the name of piety. We are to suffer, the text says, because of righteousness. Peter tells us: if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. In this context, and it crucial to note this, in this context, this means that the life of the beatitudes – generates persecution.

People who are poor in spirit stand against and implicitly condemn all the proud, rich in spirit, mighty men. All the self-sufficient, vaunted, finger-pointers. All the strivers and graspers, looking leverage and advantage. Those who mourn sin. Their own, the church's, and the world's, will be a living indictment on sin in all its forms.

Those who are meek, will condemn, by their very existence, all the power hungry, the aggressive warriors of this age. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will refuse to accept the status quo. They will challenge the rich and powerful. They will speak of a coming righteousness and justice that will not be welcome by all of earth's utopian and messianic kingdom builders. They pursue righteousness that will not an unrighteous world despises. The merciful will insist that the rejected and the defiled, the unclean of the world, be embraced in love. That all grudges and petty feuds be abandoned. The pure in heart will condemn an impure, sensuous, deeply perverse and distracted culture. And the peacemakers will endure great pain and hostility, for war and enmity is the natural condition of mankind.

THIS is the righteousness that draws fire. What is called persecution "because of righteousness" here, is called persecution "because of me" in v. 11. This life of flourishing, this blessed life, is the imitation of Christ. Who, in his suffering, left us an example/pattern that we should follow in his steps.

²² *“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”* ²³ *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”*

This One is the embodiment of the beatitudes in all their paradoxical splendor. And it is following in his way which, mysteriously, provokes persecution.

II. Joy

That brings us to our second point, joy. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness – for there is (present tense) the Kingdom of Heaven. Again, notice the bracket with the first beatitude, which also used the present tense: Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs IS the Kingdom of Heaven. What does possessing the Kingdom of Heaven look like in this age? It looks like being persecuted. This is shocking. And – not to beat a dead horse – I don’t think we accept it.

We think it should read: blessed are those who have removed all persecuting forces from society (gospel), so they can live in unmolested peace, for THAT is the kingdom of heaven. We have our own Book of Alternative Beatitudes. Things we wish Jesus said, but didn’t. Who is currently, now, possessing the Kingdom? The persecuted ones. The martyrs. The dispossessed. History’s losers. To partake of the kingdom now, is to partake of tribulation – Revelation 1. The way to the eschatological kingdom, is by passing through many tribulations. Acts 14.

And the church’s response to this persecution? Notice, it’s what Jesus commands (imperative). Rejoice and be glad. In Luke, it is even more vibrant:

“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.”

Now, let’s stop and unpack this. It certainly doesn’t mean we ENJOY the persecutions per se. As if we are masochists. But it does mean we don’t sulk or fume, we are not angry, or stoic, we are not perpetual factories of grievance. It means we are called to rejoice. Why? Because great will be the earthly social and political fruit in this world from your suffering. Or sorry. That was from my alternative beatitudes book. Because great is your reward on earth. Sorry. Because great is your reward in heaven. “Such pie in the sky,” Jesus, “what can we do with that?”

Are we just supposed to roll over? We’re going to lose our whole civilization here! How about reward on earth AND in heaven? Of course, he doesn’t say that either. If heaven itself – and seeing Christ who is in heaven – is not the grand domineering passion of our lives – then this will be disappointing to us.

Heaven is a vivid, concrete place in Scripture. Infinitely more glorious and interesting than 10 million worlds, for it is the glory throne of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. The place where the radiance, the thick infinite glory of the Triune Lord is seen in fulness, the place where Jesus is seen, the place where myriads of fiery, angelic beings dwell, the place where the spirits of the just made perfect, assemble around the throne. The place where the church is lifted up to worship, now by faith, and later by sight.

Persecution lays up reward, glory, for the afflicted THERE. In heaven. And the recovery of heaven – as a live, pulsating reality, transcending all earthly ends, is the dominant need of our time (one of them). And it is the prospect of having our great reward – our immeasurably great reward – THERE – that causes JOY in persecution – whether it be low level rejection or torture and death.

Wherever your treasure is, there you will find your heart. And there you will find your joy. For saints, the prospect of heaven is the mother of all joy. Especially joy in persecution. Listen to Calvin on this:

“Since, in this life, the way of the godly is most miserable, Christ duly lifts our thoughts up to the hope of heaven. Once our minds are lifted up to heaven, he says, there unbounded ground for rejoicing opens up to us, and swallows up the sadness.” Heaven provides unbounded ground for rejoicing.

Again, we should acknowledge, if we are to make progress, that this seems absurd to us – we are, if the deep secrets of our heart could be told – we are offended by this. That is why the history of the Sermon on the Mount is a history of attempting to domesticate everything in it that is shocking, demanding, and uncompromising, and render it harmless. But the apostolic church – heeding these words of Jesus, in a way we can scarcely imagine – grasped the ethos of this text in a profound way.

In Acts, when the apostles suffered, they left the Sanhedrin, “rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” (didn’t immediately lawyer up) Peter, the apostle who initially rejected the way of the cross, the way of suffering, later writes: If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. It is out of this teaching – right here from the lips of Jesus – that Paul says: For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

So when it comes to persecution, to verbal and social hostility, to marginalization, to being stripped of power, Jesus not only calls for non-retaliatory love. But he goes beyond non-retaliation, to rejoicing. Its stunning – it cuts across the grain of our deepest instincts. We rejoice in our suffering, Peter says, because we have – not an earthly – but a heavenly inheritance, safe and secure from the vicissitudes of American politics. Imperishable, undefiled and unfading, reserved/kept in

heaven for us. So far did this ethos impinge on the early Christians, that the book Hebrews tell us: they “joyfully accepted the seizure of their property” knowing they had a better and abiding possession. (2nd amendment)

Thus, suffering well, Bonhoeffer said, is THE badge of true discipleship. “A certificate of Cristian authenticity.” Luther even called the church “the company of those who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel’s sake.” It is a sign that you possess the kingdom of heaven. That your treasure/joy is in heaven. And our text highlights (as it concludes) that this suffering places us in good company. “For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

In heaven, the great 4th c. hymn, the *Te Deum*, tells us, adoring the Triune God, is the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and the noble army of the martyrs. We are now called to take our place in that train of prophetic witness. Brace yourself for the same reception.

Rejoice that you are called to imitate Jesus, the Persecuted One, who, for the joy set before him endured the cross, and now has sat down at the right hand of God. Rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Flourishing, blessed, are those who are persecuted, for theirs in the Kingdom of Heaven. And THERE, in heaven, their reward is great. Amen.

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