

## The King's Sermon

*Blessed are the Persecuted* (Matthew 5:10-12)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 7, 2017

### Introduction

- ❖ I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that our passage contains the most important verses for the Church today. We've been in a series on the Sermon on the Mount, lately in the Beatitudes. And this morning we're looking at the eighth and last one, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake . . . . Blessed are you when others revile you are persecute you*".
  
- ❖ **I'd say from our relatively comfortable, safe perch, American Christians are mostly oblivious to the plight of the persecuted Church around the world.** According to one source ([opendoorsusa.org](http://opendoorsusa.org)), each month 322 Christians are killed for their faith; 214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed; and 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians. That's every month. It's an epidemic, and yet it's ignored even by us Christians.
  - ▶ I'm guilty of this. I can preach this text as just another text of Scripture. Where I believe it's true; it's from God; it's applicable. But do I hang on these words? Do I cling to them to get through another day? Are they so precious to me that I meditate on them night and day? Because that's how important these verses are to so many of our global brothers and sisters in the faith.
  
- ❖ But for us, this can be just another text and another sermon in our series. That was my attitude. **But God has been showing me how much we have to learn from the persecuted Church.** The Church in the West often acts as if we're the ones who have so much to teach and so much to give to Christians in the East, Middle East, and Global South.
  - ▶ But in fact we have so much to learn from them. They are a witness to *us*. **The persecuted Church is preparing us for the coming day when we will have to imitate them in clinging to this beatitude.** And at the same time, their witness convicts us. It reveals the deficiencies in our own discipleship to Christ.
  
- ❖ **We've said how the Beatitudes are diagnostic in nature.** They can be used to diagnose your spiritual condition since they're describing the character of all Christians. You can expect to find all these qualities in a Christian.
  - ▶ A Christian is poor in spirit, mournful over sin, meek in humility, hungry for righteousness, merciful towards others, pure in heart, a peacemaker. **As we study these beatitudes, you should be searching your own character to determine whether or not these qualities describe you.**
  
- ❖ Now for these first seven it's not easy to know. To know if you're poor in spirit or pure in heart requires a level of subjectivity. You'll have to look inwardly. And anytime you have to search your heart, it's never super clear. You can always fool yourself.
  - ▶ **But with this last beatitude, you're not looking inwards anymore.** You're not searching your heart. You're looking outwards at how the world responds to you. That's far less subjective. **Are you being persecuted or not?** It's pretty clear, which is why this beatitude is pretty revealing.

- ❖ So how are you doing? **How well does this beatitude describe you?** Are you being persecuted as a Christian? Now you might think that's an unfair question since we live in a very different context than the persecuted Church. But if this is a beatitude like the rest, why would we treat it differently?
  - ▶ If the question, "How well does this beatitude describe you?" made sense for the past seven, then why would this one be any different? Why would we treat this last beatitude as only descriptive and applicable to certain Christians but not all?
  
- ❖ **My point is if we have somehow avoided Christian persecution, we shouldn't feel relieved.** That's how backwards we have it. We actually feel blessed to live in a context where we're not persecuted. **When in fact we should feel concerned. What does that say about us and our relationship to the kingdom of heaven and the King himself?** Are you concerned or are you comforted by these verses? It's one or the other.
  - ▶ My hope is for us to experience greater solidarity with the persecuted Church in both the experience of persecution and the experience of this beatitude as deeply precious. I've divided this message into three parts: 1) the expectation of persecution, 2) the reason for persecution, and 3) the gladness in persecution.

### The Expectation of Persecution

- ❖ I want to begin by continuing to emphasize the expectation of persecution in the Christian life. Look back at the v11. Notice how Jesus says, "Blessed are you – not *if* others revile you and persecute you – but **when** others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."
  - ▶ **So this is not conditional; it's inevitable.** Not if it happens but when it happens. That's the consistent witness of the New Testament. **Philippians 1:29**, "*For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.*" Suffering for Christ's sake has been granted to us.
    - **1 Peter 4:12**, "*Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*" In other words, it shouldn't surprise you. It should be considered normal.
      - **2 Timothy 3:12**, "*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" Will be. Not may be. If you want to live a godly life in Christ – expect to be persecuted.
  
- ❖ Now the form of persecution Jesus has in mind is identified in v11 with reviling and slandering. He imagines his disciples being spoken against and falsely accused. Later in **Matthew 10**, Jesus expands on this, warning his sheep that he's sending them out among wolves – among men who "*will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.*" (vv17-18) He goes on to give an even darker warning, "*Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death.*" (v21)

- ❖ So we're not just talking about mean words and verbal threats. **When Jesus speaks of the inevitability of persecution, he also means floggings and being put to death.** John the Baptist's arrest and beheading recorded in Matthew 14 was just the start. Things will only get harder. The Lord warns in **Matthew 24** that as this age comes to a close, there will be those who, "*deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.*" (24:9)
  - ▶ Now there are those who tend to read Matthew 24 and predictions like these as taking place in the future at the end times, but when you read church history you realize that these predictions were already being played out during the time of the early church.
  
- ❖ Back in the second-century, there was official Roman policy in place for how to persecute the Church. There's historical documentation of correspondence between a provincial governor named **Pliny** writing to Emperor **Trajan** asking for guidance on how to deal with the Christian problem in his region (now modern Turkey).
  - ▶ The Empire's first attempt at a policy determined that it wasn't worth the effort to actively root out Christians since they weren't committing any crimes, but if someone was credibly accused of being a Christian, then he or she must recant and offer a pinch of incense to the gods or otherwise face death.
  
- ❖ And it's important to note that they didn't make it illegal to worship Jesus. It was just illegal *not* to worship the other gods of the Roman pantheon, including the emperor. **You can be a follower of Christ – just not of Christ alone.** As long as you're willing to bow to the cultural gods of the day, you're tolerated. Refusal to do so made you look unpatriotic.
  - ▶ The emperor would interpret your refusal to worship him as a denial of his divine right to rule. And your neighbors would fear that your exclusivity and refusal to worship the gods would incur wrath. Because of you, the gods would curse your entire city and bring destruction. **So Christians were viewed as bad citizens and bad neighbors because they held onto to beliefs considered harmful to society.**
    - It started off as just an annoyance of Christians for their obstinacy, but by the third-century, annoyance had devolved into a deep hostility. Emperor **Decius** was the first to enact an empire-wide, systematic persecution. He didn't want to make martyrs. He wanted apostates. So he didn't kill Christians. He tortured them until they would offer that pinch of incense. The persecution lasted two long years. Many lapsed but many endured. They were known as Confessors and were highly regarded in the early church like celebrity pastors today.
  
- ❖ Actually if you think about it, this is all very similar to what we're experiencing today. In our culture, where religious tolerance is so highly valued, no one has a problem with you worshipping Jesus. **Their problem is when you worship Jesus alone and deny the reality and power of all other gods.** As long as you're willing to bow to the cultural idols of the day, you're tolerated. But if you refuse, if you insist your God is the only God that saves, that other religions only offer false gods that leave you in your sins – then don't be surprised if you're viewed as a bad citizen and a bad neighbor with harmful, hateful beliefs.

- ❖ That's the way it is in Western society today. **But I wouldn't be surprised if the prevailing culture's current annoyance of biblical Christianity continues to devolve into a deep hostility**, and we start to experience greater violations of religious liberty and greater attacks that threaten not just our careers or social status but possibly even our safety and lives. It happened before in church history. Who's to say it couldn't happen again.
  - ▶ Be prepared if you want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus. I realize at this stage, in our context here, it may not cost us our safety or our lives, **but many believers in our country have already been maligned, marginalized, and expelled from the workplace, marketplace, and academia** – because they wouldn't offer a pinch of incense to the cultural idols of our ever more secular society.
  
- ❖ **The point is every disciple of Christ should expect to experience persecution to some degree.** In Luke's account of the Beatitudes he records a very similar blessing, "<sup>22</sup>*Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!* <sup>23</sup>*Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.*" (Lk. 6:22-23)
  - ▶ But in Luke he also records Jesus's woes (warnings). He says, "*Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.*" (Lk. 6:26) So while the average person would assume it's a blessing to be universally accepted and well-liked by everyone, **Jesus warns that universal acceptance is actually a mark of being a false teacher, a fake Christian.**
  
- ❖ So again I ask, how well does the beatitude (and not the woe) describe you? **Are you being persecuted as a Christian to any degree?** And if not, why not? Could it be that you're not living a godly life in Christ Jesus? Could it be you've managed to fool everyone into thinking you're not a Christian? Or could you be fooling yourself and you're not actually a Christian? Let this beatitude diagnose you.

### The Reason for Persecution

- ❖ But if you do think you've been persecuted, before you draw comfort from this verse, it's important that we understand the exact reason for persecution mentioned here. Because there are some forms of persecution that are *not* blessed. This is our second point.
  
- ❖ **Notice how Jesus is calling it a blessing when you're persecuted for righteousness' sake – not for your own sake.** Not because of your own personality or tone. If you're being reviled because you're obnoxious or pushy or unnecessarily harsh with your convictions, then don't consider yourself blessed.
  - ▶ In 1 Peter, Peter explains that there's a form of persecution that Christians can suffer that should not be a cause of rejoicing but cause for repenting. Listen to chapter 4:14, "<sup>14</sup>*If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. <sup>15</sup>But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.*"

- ❖ **There's a difference between suffering as a consequence of your sin versus suffering as a consequence of your faith.** Now you may not think you're at a high risk of committing murder or theft, but it's not beyond Christians to commit a fair share of meddling. The ESV says a *meddler*, other translations say *mischief-maker* (RSV) or *busy-body* (KJV).
  - ▶ I think Peter's making a distinction between Christian suffering that's inevitable so long as you are being true to your faith and public with it – from suffering that's a consequence of meddling in the lives of others.
    - **In our zeal to help others, to see others saved in Christ, we can be guilty of meddling, of being busybodies.** Unnecessary frustrating and annoying those we truly care about by speaking or acting foolishly.
      - So before you wear your suffering as a badge of honor, you have to ask yourself, “*Are they insulting me because of what I say or what I stand for? Or is it because of how I'm saying it or the posture in which I'm standing?*” That's an important distinction. One is a cause of rejoicing. The other a cause of repenting.
  
- ❖ So this beatitude is not blessing those who persecuted for their own sake. Here's another important qualification: **It's not even saying blessed are those who are persecuted for goodness' sake – for being good and charitable.**
  - ▶ In fact, if you think about it, no one is really persecuted for being a good person. **The world doesn't persecute good people – just righteous people.** There are plenty of examples of good people who have made noble sacrifices – given up good careers, donated lots of money, or even sacrificed their lives – and the world praises them as heroes. Good people are praised, not persecuted.
  
- ❖ Maybe that explains why we don't experience much persecution. **Maybe it's because our idea of Christianity simply amounts to being a good person, a better version of you. But Jesus says it's about becoming a righteous person, a brand new you who hungers and thirsts for righteousness.** You see, it's when you're born again into a new life in Christ – when you're not just being good but imitating Christ – that's when you can expect to be persecuted for righteousness' sake.
  - ▶ Why is that? **What is it about righteousness (compared to goodness) that evokes such a hostile reaction?** Martyn Lloyd-Jones has been so helpful in understanding the difference. He writes, “*The good and noble are rarely persecuted because we all have the feeling that they are just like ourselves at our best. We think, “I am capable of that myself if I only put mind to it,” and we adore them because it is a way of paying a compliment to ourselves. But the righteous are persecuted because they are different. That was why the Pharisees and the scribes hated our Lord. It was not because He was good; it was because He was different. There was something about him that condemned them.*”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Eerdmans: 1976, 116.

- ❖ **The righteous in Christ don't have to condemn you with their words, with their teaching or lecturing – no, but simply by who they are and how they live their lives in obedience to Christ.**
  - ▶ Just think of the OT prophet **Daniel**. He wasn't flamboyant with his faith. He wasn't in-your-face obnoxious with his beliefs or his spiritual practices. All he did was pray on his knees three times a day, and yet that was too much for his persecutors. His righteousness exposed their unrighteousness and condemnation, which they'd much rather ignore.
    - The same thing happened to **Jesus**. The scribes and Pharisees revile him and conspire to kill him – all for what? Because he healed on the Sabbath, and he dared to eat with sinners and tax collectors. If he were merely good, they probably would've praised him. But because Jesus was righteousness, they persecuted him.
- ❖ I remember when I was pretty far from God during the first two years of college, my roommate (who grew up in this church with me) really annoyed me. Why? Because every morning – after whatever ungodly thing I did the night before – I'd wake up and see him doing his devotions. Man, did that annoy me! I don't recall him ever trying to correct me back then. I just remember him in prayer with his Bible open. **And here was I cursing him under my breath for practicing his righteousness while I was walking in darkness.**
- ❖ Friends, if you seek to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, obeying your Lord, practicing your righteousness in everyday life – then prepare yourself to be persecuted for righteousness' sake, which is really for Christ's sake. Like he says in v11, it's on his account. It's because of him in your life.

### **The Gladness in Persecution**

- ❖ Now as we said earlier, most people are going to call it a blessing to avoid being persecuted for their faith. We say it's a blessing to live in a country like ours where we don't have to fear for our safety in making the choice to worship together like this.
  - ▶ But Jesus calls the opposite a blessing, and he goes on in v12 to command his disciples to "*Rejoice and be glad.*" That's a bold statement. It could even be interpreted as a cruel statement if we think Jesus expects us to just grin and bear it. No, there's nothing blessed about persecution in itself. **But there is something blessed in the way persecution says something about you.** I can see two messages in our text – two reasons why you can rejoice and be glad. This is our third point.
- ❖ **First, you can be glad in persecution because it tells you who you are.** Suffering *for* Christ tells you that you're *in* Christ, that you're in his kingdom. Remember, the second half of this beatitude promises the kingdom. It says if you're persecuted for the sake of the King, then yours is the kingdom. You are a child of the King. **There is great assurance to be found in knowing that the reason the world hates you is because it hates the King who sovereignly chose you out of the world.**

- ▶ Listen to the words of Christ in **John 15:18-20**, “<sup>18</sup>*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>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.*”
- ❖ **The point is that persecution identifies you with Christ the King and with a long line of kingdom citizens.** Look at the end of v12, “*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” If this is how the people of God were treated in the past, then it’s a great encouragement if we’re suffering the same.
  - ▶ I understand why we use the category of the Persecuted Church. The Church in **Syria** is practically decimated. Churches in **Egypt** are being bombed. Christian schoolgirls in **Nigeria** are being kidnapped and forced into marriages. Last year **Russia** passed a law making evangelism illegal outside the walls of registered church buildings. And in **China**, crosses are being torn off church buildings, and I read about Korean missionaries in the province bordering North Korea having recently been expelled.
- ❖ **Clearly our trials pale in comparison, but I want to affirm (based on this text) that, in a sense, the entire Church is persecuted.** We should emphasize the solidarity we share with the global church and all of our brothers and sisters who are suffering for righteousness’ sake. That’s why we’re going to start including in our bulletins each week a prayer guide for the top 50 closed countries most hostile to Christianity. I hope it sparks more prayer, more compassion, and more inspiration to share in their sufferings and rejoice in it as a blessing.
- ❖ **Second, you can be glad in persecution because it tells you where you’re going.** Look back at v12, “*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*” Christian, if this world is persecuting you, then take that as a message that you don’t belong here. You don’t belong to this world. Remember, Jesus said you are not *of* the world. He chose you *out of* the world (Jn. 15:19). So this is not your home.
  - ▶ **And when you finally get home, Jesus says a great reward will be waiting there for you.** Do you see what a cause for rejoicing this is? If you identify as a Christian in this world (especially in this day and age), there’s a good chance your reputation is going to take a hit. And your name can get dragged through the mud.
    - But in heaven, Jesus stands ready to crown you with honor and give you a new name, written in heaven, one that lasts forever!
- ❖ **And this is only possible because the King of heaven was once willing to come into our world and allow his name and reputation to be dragged through the mud.** He took the reviling, and let them utter all kinds of evil things against him falsely. **He even endured the cross, despising its shame, all for the joy set before him – namely you and me and all who have been saved by his blood.** Friends, if this is your hope, if this is who you are and where you’re going, just know that these present sufferings are but a light and momentary affliction, not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (cf. Rom. 8:18).