

Introduction

In the evening service at 6pm we have been going through the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). These are the much misunderstood and often overlooked opening words to Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. This week we are up to the last one, which is really a double Beatitude (Matt. 5:10-12). It doesn't matter if you haven't heard the other sermons in the series because this one is a kind of summary of the whole.

The Beatitudes are a portrait of the Christian life. They give us the marks of authentic Christianity. It all begins with the disciple on their knees before God. He (or she) confesses that spiritually they have nothing to offer God (see Matt. 5:3). They mourn over their sin and the state of the world (5:4). They have a posture of meekness and gentleness before God and others (5:5). However, they don't wallow in their sins but hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6).

Next we see the disciple moving out into the community. Our relationship with God shouldn't make us withdraw but engage with the hurting world around us. The disciple should be in the thick of it. Showing mercy to all without prejudice (5:7). Acting with integrity before God and others (5:8). Seeking to make peace in all relationships (5:9).

Yet, far from being thanked for their efforts, the disciple is persecuted. Hear these words from Jesus in Matthew 5:10, "**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.**"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who was executed by the Nazis in Germany during WWII, wrote a book called, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Commenting on the Beatitudes he says this, "With every Beatitude the gulf is widened between the disciple and the world." And the inevitable result is persecution. The grand theme is that those who belong to the kingdom of heaven will be persecuted. So let's look together at these all important words of Jesus under three headings:

1. The Kind of Persecution
2. The Kick of Persecution
3. The King of Persecution

1. The Kind of Persecution

a) What it is not...

It's important that we understand the kind of persecution Jesus is talking about. First of all let's look at what it is not. Notice Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are unwise in their witness." Or "Blessed are the difficult people who stir up trouble." Many Christians are persecuted, but often for the wrong reasons.

For instance, Joseph Bayly's tells a satirical story called, *The Gospel Blimp*. Some believers in a small town were eager to share their faith. They came up with idea of

a gospel blimp. The blimp was piloted over the town, dragging Scripture banners and dropping tracts into backyards. They called these “gospel bombs”. The people of the town put up with the intrusion for a while but their tolerance soon vanished and turned into hostility. This happened when the owner of the blimp installed a loud speaker and began insulting people with gospel broadcasts. The locals had enough. The blimp was sabotaged, and of course the Christians saw it as persecution. Christians are often mistreated not for their Christianity, but because of their lack of it. Christians can be rejected because they are hypocritical, insensitive or thoughtless in their witness. Jesus is talking about persecution of an altogether different nature.

b) What it is...

To understand what Jesus means we have to read his words in their entirety. Notice Jesus says in verse 10, “**Blessed are the those who are persecuted because of righteousness...**” and in verse 11, “**You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me.**” It is the disciple’s righteous living and their allegiance to Jesus that the world hates. Firstly, what is this righteous living?

The righteousness Jesus is talking about is that which he has already laid out in the Beatitudes. Why does the world hate this? Because the kingdom of heaven is not of this world. The world values the rich in spirit, the proud and self-assertive. Jesus values poverty of spirit. The world loves the happy go luck folks; those who make fun of sin not mourn over it. The world loves the strong and brash, not the gentle and meek. The world loves the material things only, the disciple longs for Christ and his righteousness. The world holds grudges and is callous, the disciple shows mercy to all. The world loves war, strife, and gossip. The disciple makes peace. It’s no wonder Christians are persecuted! The gulf between the values of the kingdom and the world is irreconcilable.

But the foundational reason why a disciple faces persecution is in verse 11, “on account of me,” or “for my sake,” Jesus says. It is our allegiance to King Jesus that will inevitably lead to persecution in this world. Listen to Jesus testimony in John 15:18-19: “**If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 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.**” The world hated Jesus and therefore it will hate you. It’s as simple as that. The Apostle Paul writing to Timothy, puts it like this, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

c) What about you?

If we are Christians, we must ask ourselves a searching question, “Have I ever been persecuted because of my allegiance to Jesus?” or, “Am I being persecuted because of my allegiance to Jesus?” Now I’m sure not many of us in Australia have been physically tortured for Christ. But notice in verse 11, Jesus doesn’t limit persecution to physical torture. It is extended to insults, lies made up about you, slander etc.

Have you ever been verbally abused for following Jesus? Have you ever been bullied for being a Christian? Have you been excluded from groups and conversations because of your faith? If yes, rejoice! If not, why not? You might have to ask yourself the hard question, am I really a Christian? The Beatitudes give us a searching test, are we really born again? Have I been born into the kingdom of heaven? If the answer is yes, you will face persecution.

100 years after Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount, a man approached the great church father Tertullian. This man had a problem—his business interests and Christianity conflicted. He ended by asking, “What can I do? I must live!” Tertullian replied, “Must you?” When it came to loyalty to Christ and living, Tertullian held that the real Christian chooses Christ. And friends, that is a glorious thing! It’s a cause for great celebration. Which takes us to the second point, The Kick of Persecution.

2. The Kick of Persecution

By ‘Kick’ I mean pleasure, as in ‘I get a kick out of this.’ I don’t mean to be flippant, but I only mean it to be memorable for you. Far from persecution causing you to become bitter or cynical, Jesus says it’s cause for rejoicing.

Check out verse 12, “**Be glad and rejoice, because your reward in heaven is great. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**” There is certainly a supernatural joy that comes from being persecuted. How else can you explain it? In Acts, the disciples are flogged and threatened by the Sanhedrin (the Jewish court), and they go out rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer on behalf of the Name (Acts 5:41).

There are countless other examples throughout the Bible and history. Samuel Rutherford, the Scottish pastor wrote, “I never knew by nine years of preaching so much of Christ’s love, as he taught me in Aberdeen by six months imprisonment.” He also said, “Christ’s cross, is such a burden as sails are to a ship or wings to a bird.” The Lord reveals himself in a special way to those who suffer for his sake. But that doesn’t mean it’s without reason.

In verse 12 Jesus gives the reasons. The first reason to rejoice is the great reward in heaven. When J.D Rockefeller died, the public wanted to know the size of the fortune he left behind. A reporter secured an interview with one of Rockefeller’s highest aides. He asked the aide how much Rockefeller left behind. The aide answered, “He left it all.” Not so for those who have been persecuted for righteousness sake!

Jesus literally says the reward is immeasurably great. They might lose it all in the world’s eyes, but in Jesus eyes they gain it all. The Apostle Paul got this when he wrote, “For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory.” (2 Cor. 4:17).

The second reason is there at the end of Matthew 5:12, when Jesus says "... **that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**" You should rejoice if you are persecuted because you are numbered with the greats. With the likes of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Elijah. These and many more are the great cloud of witnesses looking down on us, cheering us on towards the finish line (Hebrews 11). We might lose everything on earth, but we gain everything in heaven. And not as a reward for merit, but as John Calvin said, 'the promise of the reward is free.' This leads us to conclude on with one final and all-important point.

3. The King of Persecution

If you face persecution for following Jesus it's a sign that you already belong to the kingdom. That's why Jesus says those who are persecuted because of righteousness are blessed (v. 10): "**theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**" Not that they will gain entrance into the kingdom by their suffering, but they're already in the kingdom and their persecution for Jesus sake testifies to this fact.

This takes us to one of the most crucial doctrines of Christianity: you are something before you do something. The Christian life is becoming who you already are. You are not saved by your grief but by God's grace. We can't earn our way into the kingdom by being persecuted. That's not what Jesus is saying. In the Beatitudes he is teaching the character of a Christian. All his followers will manifest all eight Beatitudes. Why? Because the Beatitudes are snap shots of Jesus character, and a disciple is like their Lord. A Christian is in union with Christ. We inherit the kingdom by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We inherit the kingdom through the cross. We are saved because of Jesus persecution, not because of our own. He is the Righteous One who suffered for us. It's only when you worship and follow a crucified Messiah that you will be able to bear the cross. You can only let go of your personal reputation when you see that Jesus let go of his for you. You can only die to self when you see how much the Son of God loved you and gave himself for you.

Mary had a little lamb its fleece was white as snow. And everywhere that Mary went the Lamb was sure to go. You might know the next verse about the lamb following Mary to school. But not many people know the final verse, which tells us why the lamb followed Mary everywhere: "What makes the lamb love Mary so?" the eager children cry. "Oh! Mary loves the lamb you know!" The teacher did reply. And isn't that true of a Christian? What makes a Christian willing to follow Jesus anywhere? His love for you of course. His cross. That's what allows you to say in your suffering, "Christ's cross is such a burden as sails are to a ship, and wings to a bird."