

“#Blessed: The Happiness of Persecution”

Matthew 5:1-12 • 1 Peter 4:12-19

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Psychologists tell us that it is a basic fact of human nature that we are hard-wired to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. You don't even have to think about it. Your brain will automatically do what it can to get you out of a painful situation or to get you into an enjoyable one. If you accidentally touch the hot stove your brain will make you pull your hand away automatically. Thankfully you don't have to think about it.

So it's rather startling to hear Jesus say something like, "happy are those who are persecuted. You are very fortunate when people hate you and hurt you and treat you badly." I think perhaps of all the beatitudes, this one is the hardest for us to even hear. Your brain tries to minimize your exposure to the pain Jesus mentions here, even though he says it will lead to your greatest happiness.

We are now at the end of our study of the Beatitudes and in many ways we end where we began, with the upside-down nature of God's Kingdom in relation to our world's values. The world says get all that you can. Take care of number one. Jesus says, "blessed are the poor in spirit and the merciful." The world says do whatever makes you happy. Jesus says, "blessed are those who mourn." The world says climb your way to the top. Jesus says, "blessed are the humble who hunger for righteousness." The world says if it feels good do it. Jesus says, "blessed are those who are persecuted for their faith."

If we take the Bible seriously then we have to take the fact of persecution seriously. There are some Christian traditions that would try to have you believe that once you become a Christian all your troubles are over. This theology at its worst is known as the "prosperity gospel." It's the idea that when you become a Christian God will automatically give you all the best things in life. If you're not receiving those, they tell you, it's because you don't have

enough faith or your not giving enough money or who knows what else. The truth is that the Bible is very clear that becoming a Christian does not mark the end of your difficulties. In fact it marks the beginning of them.

Jesus spoke quite a lot about the difficulties that his followers would have. The simplest is in John 16:33. Jesus says, "In the world you *will* have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world." In John 15 Jesus had explained why we would have trouble. "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 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. 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."

Peter tells us something similar in our reading this morning. He says, "do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." The history of Christianity has proven these warnings to be true. The Roman Emperor Nero persecuted Christians ruthlessly, including using them as torches in his garden during parties. Sadly, much of the persecution suffered by Christians has been at the hands of other Christians.

Unfortunately persecution for Jesus' sake is not ancient history. Today more Christians are tortured and persecuted for their faith than at any time in history. According to Open Doors, a ministry that works to serve persecuted Christians around the world, one out of every twelve Christians in the world experiences high levels of persecution, with the worst being North Korea and parts of the Middle East such as Iran and Syria.

Most of us in the United States have never experienced that kind of persecution. You probably haven't been arrested or had your

property taken simply because you are a Christian. But that's what happens in many places. For most of our history the United States was overwhelmingly Christian, which kept persecution to a minimum here, although that seems to be changing some.

I've mentioned a couple of things but let's look for a moment at some of the forms that persecution can take. But first we need to see what Jesus is not saying here. Not all persecution is good. Just being persecuted does not make you blessed. Some people suffer because of their own actions or words. No one benefits from that. According to Jesus it's persecution for "righteousness' sake" that is of value. In other words, it's when you are persecuted or mistreated *because* of your faith in Jesus that is supposed to make you happy.

So what does persecution look like? In the Middle East and Asia Christians are arrested, tortured, and killed because of their faith. But in other areas, such as our country, persecution may be much more subtle. It could come in the form of ridicule. Because you're not willing, as a follower of Jesus, to do something potentially illegal or harmful, you may not get promoted. Or you might even get fired. It might mean your kids aren't invited to play on a sports team because the games are on Sunday. Some of you remember the story of Eric Liddell, the runner from Scotland in the 1924 Olympics who didn't run in his strongest race because it was held on a Sunday. Where we see more persecution in our country these days on account of Jesus is against those who take a stand for unborn children or in the area of sexuality.

So far we've seen that Jesus told us we'd be persecuted for following him, and we've seen that history proves he was right. That leaves us with the hardest part – enjoying it. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad." Endure it, maybe. Put on a brave face. But rejoice? Be glad? Peter says the same thing. Verse 13 says, "rejoice insofar as you share

Christ's sufferings." And verse 14 says, "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed." How do we learn to have that kind of attitude?

Remember that persecution is still bad. It's people hurting other people. That means we aren't rejoicing because persecution is good. Because it's bad we are not to seek out persecution or rejection. We are not to *want* to be mistreated. Instead, Jesus is telling us how to respond when it *does* happen and we are to respond by rejoicing. I think the secret is understanding what it really means when we are mistreated for Jesus' sake and then letting the persecution point us to something better.

First, persecution for your faith in Jesus is the proof that you belong to God. You are being persecuted because you are identified with Jesus. It's clear evidence that God is at work in your life, and that's a reason to rejoice. Second, your response to persecution proves your faith, your motives. Responding joyfully demonstrates that your faith is genuine. You really do mean what you say you believe. You may find that you surprise yourself by the way you respond and that should also make you happy.

Third, the way you respond to being mistreated because of your faith serves as a witness to other people. Your actions demonstrate the power of Jesus to other people, even to the ones doing the persecuting. This was the effect of the martyrs in the early church. Often times their executioners were moved by the way the Christians confidently faced their deaths. Fourth, when you endure mistreatment you are becoming more like Jesus, which is the goal of all of our lives.

And finally, Jesus says, "rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." We can gladly endure suffering for Jesus because we know that this life is only temporary. This is just training for eternity. The Apostle Paul said, "For me, to live is Christ but to die is gain." In other words, he's saying that dying is not the worst thing that can happen to you. We have to

keep our focus on the eternal joy waiting for us, which will help us to get through tough times now. I pray that you will make following Jesus the most important thing in your life so you can have that kind of peace and joy no matter what happens.

Amen.