

Blessed Are Those Persecuted for Righteousness

Matthew 5:1-10

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¹⁰ *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

On March 17, 2022, Shankar's family peace was shattered when he heard yelling at the gate of his home. Shankar was having an evening meal with his family. But six masked men entered the courtyard of his home and were shouting insults about his Christian faith. This is what a report said about what happened next. *“They struck Shankar in the face, bound his arms behind his back and forced him to kneel. Then they stabbed and shot the respected pastor before fleeing. Kamla Yalam, who rushed to her husband's side and held him as he died, said his last words were a prayer. The attack was over in minutes, but the murder of a beloved husband, father, grandfather and pastor was not the end of the story. He had taught his family and the believers he led and disciplined to be faithful until death. His example in life and death led many others to a deeper faith in Christ.”* - Recent article from Voice of the Martyrs. Shankar was a pastor serving in north India. The world is not worthy of people like him. He now has a crown of glory.

Did you know that Christians are the most persecuted people in the world today?

One report says that Christians are harassed for their faith in about 145 countries. That number is the higher than any other harassed religious group.

Last week, I said that the test of discipleship is a *desire* for Christ and his teaching. We gather to hear the preaching of the Word because of the desire for the Word of Christ. That is how your faith is built up. By hearing the word of Christ.

And, today, in the last Beatitude, Jesus tells his disciples “Blessed are those who are persecuted”. For what? For Righteousness sake!

Here is another true test of discipleship? What should you expect for pursuing Christ-like character? Applause, approval from people? Not necessarily.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ wanting to be like Christ, expect *criticism*. Expect being *sidelined*. Expect being *canceled*. Expect *persecution* if you desire Christ-like character.

In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said this to his disciples.

“Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets” Luke 6:26

Years ago, I heard someone say, “So and so is so nice but he is also pretty much useless to anyone”. There are many nice people, many noble people in this world. And perhaps they are applauded by the world for their deeds. But the minute you stand for righteousness, you are hated. You are called names. They called *Jesus* all kinds of *names*. They accused Jesus of being “*possessed by the Beelzebul*”, the prince of demons. (Mark 3:22).

Do you know Jesus set very *low* expectations for his disciples *from* the world?

“If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” Matthew 10:24.

Expect *great* love and *high* approval from God as you follow Christ but low approval ratings from the world. You can expect to be insulted if you belong to the household of God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ began the Beatitudes with teaching that the humble belong to the kingdom of heaven. Now, in the last beatitude, our Lord teaches “*Blessed are the those persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*”. His teaching began with the kingdom of heaven, his teaching ends with the kingdom of heaven. Those who belong to the kingdom of heaven are *humble*. They are *meek*. They *mourn* for their sin. They *receive* the comfort of God. They *seek* after righteousness. They *seek* purity of heart. They *make* peace. They also are insulted for the sake of Jesus.

Before we look into what our Lord specifically means by this Beatitude, let’s see what he does *not* mean.

1. First observation – If you denounce certain things you don’t like in society, and as a result, you are being harassed or ill-treated or even persecuted our Lord does *not* mean you are being persecuted for righteousness sake. For example, if people living in Communist regimes denounce everything about their leaders, and they receive persecution, that is not to be treated as suffering for righteousness. Surely, we are to pray for those who oppress others and those who are oppressed. Paul tells we ought to pray for leaders that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life.
2. Second observation – Jesus did not say you are to think that you being persecuted if someone wrongs you when you obey the law of the land or doing good or even noble things. Let’s say you are driving on the road safely and speed limit and someone cuts you off and puts you in harm’s way, that is not persecution for righteousness sake.
3. Third observation – Jesus did not say you being persecuted for righteousness sake if you are a very sacrificial person and as a result you suffer lack of basic needs or creature comforts you otherwise could have or afford. Self-sacrifice is lauded by the world but rarely are you

persecuted for being that kind of person. You probably heard about a Savior complex. Not every cause needs to be your cause. We have limitations on what we can do.

4. Fourth observation – Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes that we should be careful not to bring unnecessary suffering upon ourselves. Some people indulge in what you could call fanaticism. A sense of being over-zealous. When our Lord faced rejection in a Samaritan village, he kept moving on to another village. There is no sense in trying to overdo things.

So, if these are observations on what our Lord does not mean by this Beatitude, what does our Lord mean when he says “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake?”.

The answer is to look at Christ himself, his character and the nature of righteousness.

Here are a few observations:

1. We covered this in the Gospel of John, but is what our Lord told his disciples.
“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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” John 15:18-20.
 Why did they hate Jesus that they had to send him to a brutal death? It’s because they loved sin and hated true righteousness. They hated being *exposed* for their *unrighteousness*. John 7:7 *“it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil”*. This world loves wickedness and sin. And it’s very easy to be loved by the world. Just love what the world loves and craves for - the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and pride of life. This is all that is in the world. And the world turns its back on its own very quickly. But what a privilege it is to be loved by God, to be cherished by God, to be known by God, to be saved and sustained by God. God is faithful. What God promises, he will keep.
2. Second observation - Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy these words.
“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” 2 Timothy 3:12-13.
 If you look at some of the most righteous people in the Bible, all of them were persecuted people. At the beginning of the New Testament, John the Baptist called out Herod for having another man’s wife and what was the outcome? He paid with his life. Paul was a persecutor of Christians but when he turned to the Lord, he became the persecuted. This is how Paul describes his own persecution *“imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned.”* 2 Corinthians 11:23-24. Paul lived for Christ and proclaimed Christ at

all times. Hear what is wrote to the Philippians - *“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”* Philippians 1:29.

3. Another observation - The Apostle Peter gives some practical instruction how to live a righteous life. *“Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. ³ For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. ⁴ With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; ⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”* 1 Peter 4:1-5. See that word in verse 5? They will *malign* you. they will *slander* you. For what? When you don’t take part in the things that this world loves.
4. Last observation – We should note that the source of persecution is most times from the *inside* than the *outside*. If you look at the Abel, his own brother killed him for his righteous deed. Saul persecuted David. The prophet Jeremiah was persecuted by the king of Israel. And our Lord Jesus Christ was persecuted by his own. John 5:16 *“And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath”*. What did Jesus do? He healed a man who had been disabled for thirty-eight years and told him not to sin. Jesus was betrayed by an insider. Jesus went through much agony. But he endured it. Why? For the joy that was going to come. (Hebrews 12:2).

What should we say about persecution in light of this Beatitude?

1. Think about suffering in light of Jesus Christ. *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.* 2 Corinthians 4:7-10
2. Suffering is momentary in light of God’s glory - *“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”* 2 Corinthians 4:17

“He always said that we are Christ’s witnesses, and the day we are persecuted we will become stronger witnesses. He said people around us will know why we are persecuted, and this may cause people to search for Jesus.” - A Christian martyr’s wife.

----- Discipleship Questions-----

MESSAGE SUMMARY: Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness. Matthew 5:1-10

HEAD: These questions help you examine the truth of God's Word.

1. As a disciple of Jesus Christ, what does practicing righteousness look like? Matthew 6:1-5, 16, 23:5

HEART: These questions help you wrestle with what you believe.

2. Do you believe you should expect trials, criticism or even persecution for being a disciple of Jesus Christ pursuing righteousness? Go around and share? John 15:18-19,24, 1 John 3:13, 4:5
3. What is God convicting you of and to believe in light of this message?

HANDS/HABITS: These questions help you bring the truth into your everyday life and develop behaviors that change your habits.

1. For personal reflection: What are some ways you can promote the righteousness of God?