

Kingdom Attitudes

PART 8 • MATTHEW 5:10-12 • Blessed Are the Persecuted

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It is good to be back with you this morning! Thank you so much for the opportunity to be away for a bit, and thanks to Gary and Hans for preaching over the past two weeks. I had a very good trip to Denver to attend a series of lectures at the Bear Valley Bible Institute. I got to reconnect with two preachers from Minnesota as well as a preacher from New Richmond, Wisconsin. I see him more in Denver than I see him here in Wisconsin! This year's theme was "Clinging to Hope and Trust in Difficult Times," a very encouraging series of lectures. Two weeks ago, I got to worship at a large and very healthy congregation in Meridian, Idaho – a church of nearly 300 people. We had a great study from the word of God, there were babies all over the place, and it was just a wonderful experience. And then I took several days to visit my sister out in Port Angeles, Washington. I did some hiking and also helped her build a woodshed beside the house. They are installing a wood burning stove next month, and with the constant rain out there, they needed somewhere to store the wood. I then had the privilege of speaking at the church in Port Angeles, and spoke on the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8. There were several visitors in attendance, and after worship one of those visitors pulled aside one of the elders to study baptism. I got a text that she was baptized yesterday! It was a good trip, and I am very thankful for the opportunity to have been away over the past two weeks.

We are here this morning to worship God and to preach the good news that Jesus died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the first day of the week. And just in case you are joining us for the first time, and just in case you may need the reminder: We obey that good news by turning to God in obedient faith, turning away from sin, and then demonstrating our trust in God through our obedience to his command to be baptized, immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins.

And we do have several examples this week, starting with a man who was recently baptized down in Paragould, Arkansas. The post says, "Baptized at age 99 for the first time. It's never too late to 'Trust and Obey.'" Amen to that!

The next one comes to us from Tulsa, Oklahoma, where they say, "Welcome our new brother in Christ Roy! What a glorious day it has been! The angels are rejoicing!" Great news out of Tulsa today!

And then we have a post from the Eastland congregation down in Fort Worth, Texas. They say, "Congratulations to James Houser! He was baptized this morning at the Eastland Church of Christ." So good to see this! And we

share these three examples by way of encouragement, and as a reminder: What these men have done over the past several weeks, you can do right here in this building, today. If you have any questions, if you are interested in learning more, please pull me aside after worship today, or get in touch with Aaron or John. Our contact information is available on the front of the bulletin each week – on the wall, right inside the front door. We would love to hear from you.

This morning, we plan on wrapping up our series of lessons from Matthew 5, as we return to our study of the “Beatitudes” or “Kingdom Attitudes,” as found in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just started preaching that ***“the kingdom of heaven is at hand,”*** (in Matthew 4), and he starts this particular sermon (in Matthew 5) with a series of eight statements where he uses a word that we translate into English as ***“blessed”*** or ***“happy.”*** And one thing I really hope we’ve learned in this study is that Jesus came to this earth, not to make us miserable, but he came to this earth, to make us truly happy. He came to this earth to bless us.

And we’ve been working through these “Kingdom Attitudes” over the past two months...

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” And then where we left off several weeks ago,

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

Today, we come to the last of these kingdom attitudes with Jesus’ statement in verses 10-12, ***“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*** Obviously, this one is a bit different than the others, for several reasons! First of all, this is the only beatitude with a command. In verse 12, Jesus our King straight up orders us, ***“Rejoice and be glad!”*** Secondly, though, this beatitude is also unique because it is repeated. This one is longer than the others. I’m not sure why. Maybe because this one seems to be quite a bit more difficult than the others. Maybe because this one even more unbelievable than the others. Or maybe this one needs a bit more explanation than the others. But then there’s a third reason why this beatitude is unique, and that is: This is the only beatitude that seems to be addressed directly to us. I don’t know whether you noticed this, but in the others, Jesus blesses those who are merciful, and so on, but in this one, he shifts (in verse 11), as he says, ***“Blessed are YOU when people insult you,”*** and so on. This one is personal.

So, with this as background, let’s look at this double beatitude just as we’ve looked at the others, by looking at the blessing, and then by looking at the reward that is promised.

I. First of all, then, let's focus in on the BLESSING itself, as Jesus gives a blessing on those who are PERSECUTED."

And like the others, this one certainly doesn't make sense at all, at least from a purely human point of view, ***"Happy are those who have been persecuted," "Happy are you when people insult you,"*** and so on. No one loves getting picked on! And yet, Jesus explains that those who are persecuted are ***"blessed."*** And then we have the command, ***"Rejoice and be glad!"*** But I'd like to make several observations on the ***"blessing"*** side of this, starting with the fact that the eighth blessing is really a continuation of the others, and that all of these are really descriptions of Jesus. All of these blessings really describe our King. Just as our King is poor in spirit, just as our King mourns, just as our King is gentle, just as our King hungers and thirsts for righteousness, just as our King is merciful, just as our King is pure in heart, and just as our King is a peacemaker, so also we (as his subjects) will be persecuted, just as he was persecuted. Just as we begin to look and act like the one we love and admire, so also we will be treated just as he was treated. As Jesus will go on to say to his disciples on the night before he dies (in John 15:18), ***"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you,"*** and then, ***"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you..."*** (John 15:20). One of the first things we notice in this blessing, then, is that persecution is to be expected. As Peter will go on to say in 1 Peter 4:12-13, ***"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing...."***

Before we get too far into this, we should probably define the term ***"persecution."*** As I understand it, when Jesus refers to being ***"persecuted"*** (in verse 10), he uses a word that refers to being "on the run." It's the idea of being chased, or maybe harassed to the point where we feel the need to run. In verse 11, Jesus refers to being ***"insulted."*** And then he gives a blessing on those times when people ***"...falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me."*** And this is where Jesus gets specific. The blessing in this passage is specifically for those who are persecuted ***"because of"*** Jesus. This is persecution ***"for the sake of righteousness."*** All persecution is suffering (to one extent or another), but not all suffering is persecution. Sometimes we suffer for no apparent reason at all. Sometimes we suffer because we make bad choices. This is not what Jesus is blessing here! Sometimes we get what we deserve. Sometimes we suffer because we are mean or obnoxious. This is not what Jesus is blessing here! Maybe you've seen the meme on social media, "Everything happens for a reason – sometimes the reason is that you make bad choices." Jesus, then, is very specific: In order to be considered a blessing, the accusations against us (according to verse 11) must be ***"false"*** or must be ***"because of"*** Jesus. If I'm persecuted because I'm an American, or a Republican, or a vegetarian, that doesn't do it.

Going back to 1 Peter 4, Peter says (in verses 14-16), ***"If you are reviled FOR THE NAME OF CHRIST, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name."*** I hope we understand what Peter is saying here. It's almost like Peter was listening very carefully to what Jesus said on the side of that mountain many years earlier: We can suffer because we make terrible decisions, or we can suffer for Jesus. There is a blessing in suffering for Jesus. There is not a blessing if we suffer for doing what is wrong. As Peter said a bit earlier (in 1 Peter 2:20), ***"For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God."*** So, if I go to jail for murdering my neighbor, that's not persecution! If I try to smuggle hash oil into Russia and get caught and put in jail, that's not persecution. If I get a speeding ticket on my way to worship on Sunday morning, that's not persecution. If I get in an argument over politics because of something I post on social media, that's not persecution. We might think

of what King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 22:17 when he said, ***“Like one who takes a dog by the ears is he who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him.”*** As king, I’m thinking King Solomon had seen some things! If you go meddle in your neighbor’s business and get attacked for it, that’s not persecution, that’s like running up to a wild dog and grabbing it by the ears: What happens next is pain that you have created! Again, persecution is suffering, but not all suffering is persecution. Persecution is the suffering we endure because of our support for King Jesus. In another account (in Luke 6:22), Jesus says, ***“Blessed are you when people hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, FOR THE SAKE OF THE SON OF MAN.”***

And really, I think we understand that persecution may be the natural result of living up to those qualities the first seven beatitudes. If I am poor in spirit, if I mourn over sin, if I am gentle, if I hunger and thirst for righteousness, if I am merciful, if I am pure in heart, if actively work at making peace, I am different; I am weird in the eyes of the world. And in a sense, I am condemning the world around me by my righteous behavior. And isn’t that what Jesus is blessing here? If you live by these first seven beatitudes, you very well may be ***“persecuted for the sake of righteousness.”*** Me being poor in spirit condemns the arrogance we see in the world around us. Me mourning over sin demonstrates that everybody should be mourning over sin. Me being gentle (having my power under control) shows that everybody else is not self-controlled, and so on. In Hebrews 11:7, the Bible says that ***“By faith Noah... in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world.”*** Noah wasn’t necessarily out there shaking his finger at people, but through his obedience in building an ark, Noah showed the need for an ark. And the world around him got that message, loud and clear. Noah building an ark was an act of rebellion against the prevailing evil in the world around him. Noah was different. We might say the same thing about Cain and Abel. Cain killed Abel, not because Abel had sinned; far from it! Cain killed Abel because Abel was righteous, and Cain was not (according to 1 John 3:12). Those who live in sin naturally hate those who live in righteousness. This leads to persecution. If you are the only person who doesn’t cheat on a test in a class full of cheaters, you may very well be hated. If you are the only person on the job who refuses to gossip, to be the only one who refuses to go drinking after work, this may lead to you being harassed or insulted. As a commercial fisherman himself, Peter refers to this in 1 Peter 4:3-5, where he says, ***“For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”*** Righteous behavior often leads to persecution. Even something as simple as partaking of the Lord’s Supper might lead to persecution. When word got out that the early Christians were eating the Lord’s body and drinking his blood, rumor had it they were cannibals! Word got out that so-called “brothers and sisters” were married to each other: Ewww!!! Others overheard those early Christians talk about the world being destroyed by fire some day: Arsonists!!! And so on. Those are insults. Those are the false accusations Jesus refers to here.

False accusations and assumptions continue today, don’t they? When I was in Idaho for worship two weeks ago, a 7th grade math teacher spoke up in class, almost in tears. She has a few scriptures framed on the wall in her classroom, and she spoke of one of her teaching colleagues stopping by her classroom and making the comment, “You are a Christian? You are too nice to be a Christian!” What does that tell us about some assumptions being made? What does it tell us about the behavior of some Christians? But what an honor: To be identified as a servant of the King! No one has ever been as loving, and humble, and peaceable, and as kind as Jesus, and he was murdered based on false accusations and assumptions. Who are we to think we can expect any better? In fact, Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12, ***“Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”*** If we aren’t getting insulted for our righteousness here and there, we probably need to ask ourselves whether we are actually righteous.

I'd like to clarify by using a few examples: Many years ago, we baptized a wonderful woman down in Janesville who worked as a crossing guard. After a while, she came to me with a concern. She said, "The principal pulled me aside and asked me to stop passing out religious tracts to the kids as they were crossing the street." And the concern was: How do I react to this? Is this persecution? And my advice was basically: The City of Janesville is not paying you to pass out church material; they are paying you to get kids across the street safely. And in that case, I didn't see that as some kind of persecution. And thankfully, she found a better way. I don't know what she's doing now, but for years, she started hosting summer Bible classes for those children at a city park down there, which is awesome.

Here's another example: When I was in high school, a friend and I decided to go door-to-door with religious material down in Crystal Lake, Illinois. My friend was Steve Berlin. His parents were here a few weeks ago. We were several hours into this when we got stopped by a police officer who told us to stop what we were doing, because we didn't have the proper permit. Steve and I waited for the cop to leave, and we said to each other (quoting Acts 5:29), "***We must obey God rather than men,***" and we got back to it. In hindsight, we probably should have handled that differently, but it was a learning experience. To this day, when we go door-to-door as a church, I almost always call our local police precinct and let them know that we will be going door-to-door in the neighborhood. And that has been helpful. When somebody complains and threatens to call the police, I can let them know, "I have already called them, and they know what we are doing." The point is: There are often ways we can be wise and avoid persecution by using our citizenship wisely (just as Paul did in the book of Acts).

But persecution is very real. This past Thursday, as I was studying for today's lesson, a memory popped up on Facebook from 9 years ago, referencing a profanity-laced phone call we got on the church line at 3:30 in the morning. The guy was seriously upset at us for some reason, but in my comments on what happened that morning, I referenced the Lord's encouraging and prophetic words in Matthew 5:11-12. We were spoken against for the sake of Christ that morning. It happens. We had the death threat from Satan many years ago. We had the threat of a lawsuit from the Freedom from Religion Foundation many years ago. We got another profanity-laced call about two years ago from a guy yelling about Trump and Hitler and all the terrible things Christians are doing to America. He made a few assumptions there, didn't he? And he was using those assumptions to insult us as a congregation. But all of us face these things from time to time (at least we should). If not, we need to re-evaluate how we are living.

As it is, Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who are persecuted, and he reminds us that when we are insulted and treated harshly for his sake, we are in good company, "***...for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***" And I would add: For in the same way they persecuted Jesus. Nobody lived these beatitudes more perfectly than Jesus, but people reacted by accusing him of being a glutton and a drunkard and a blasphemer. His own family said that he had lost his mind. Others accused him of casting out demons by being in cahoots with the ruler of the demons. They accused him of threatening the kingship of Caesar. They accused him of speaking against the temple. And they used these false accusations to nail him to a cross. Blessed are the persecuted, for so they persecuted the great King who has gone on before us. And when we take this to the Lord in prayer, he says, "Congratulations!" doesn't he? "***Rejoice and be glad!***"

II. This leads us to the REWARD – we can rejoice and be glad, because 1.) We have been given the kingdom of heaven, and 2.) Because our reward in heaven is great.

As I see it, we have a bit of now and later in these verses. On one hand, we "***have been given the kingdom of heaven.***" That's now. Right now, we are citizens in the kingdom of heaven, and our citizenship is valuable. But

there's also a later here, ***"because your reward in heaven is great."*** As I see it, there's a part of this reward that's still coming at some point in the future. We are heading in that direction, but we're not quite there yet. There's a choice we make (based on the coming reward), the choice Moses made in Hebrews 11:24-26, ***"By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward."*** Moses grew up with a life of great privilege, but he gave up that privilege and lived in exile, because he was looking for something better. He made a swap. He made a choice. He had one thing, but he considered this other thing to be of greater value.

For several years, I had a Samsung Galaxy S9, and it was a great phone and had a great camera. And if somebody had wanted me to give up that phone, I would have had a hard time doing that. But you know what? I gave it up several months ago. I traded it for something better. The Galaxy S22 Ultra came out, and ooooooh, I will gladly give up the S9. I traded it back to Samsung gladly. I think they even gave me \$800 for it. I gave up one thing for something far more valuable. We do the same thing with persecution. We give up a life of complete comfort and ease, and we trade it in for citizenship in God's eternal kingdom – both here and now and in the future, for all eternity. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, ***"For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."***

Conclusion:

As we come to the end of this study, I would make just a few brief applications of what we've learned today. First of all, as we do face persecution, I hope we remember from scripture that there is often no dishonor whatsoever in avoiding it. Yes, there is a blessing on those who are persecuted, but let's remember that even Jesus "skedaddled," as I think I remember that word as I was growing up. In Luke 4:29-30, for example, Jesus is preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth (his hometown), and after the sermon the authorities try to throw him off a cliff, but Jesus basically disappears, he ***"passes through their midst"*** and escapes. Later, in John 8:59, Jesus has a particularly powerful exchange with the religious leaders in Jerusalem, and John says, ***"Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple."*** He skedaddled, didn't he? He had more preaching to do, and he couldn't preach if he was dead, so Jesus disappeared himself. We see the same thing with Paul several times in the book of Acts. Sometimes he would preach and leave. Even the early Christians ***"scattered"*** in Acts 8:1, in response to that persecution initiated by Saul. So, if we are threatened, we don't necessarily need to stick around to see what happens.

But the second application is: Let's not hold back, either. Let's not allow fear of what might happen to keep us from speaking up when we need to speak up. We think of Peter and John in Acts 4, arrested and threatened by the Sanhedrin for preaching the gospel. They reply to the Jewish ruling council, ***"Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."*** And again, we need to be asking ourselves: If we are not being persecuted, why? Why is that? Is it possible that we've been protecting ourselves by going somewhat undercover with our Christian faith? Remember: As Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12, ***"Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."*** If we are not being persecuted, if we aren't being insulted for our faith, it is possible that people may not even know about our faith. And that is a problem. So, let's not hold back. As I was reading for today's lesson, someone asked an interesting question, and that is: What have you done in the last month that has caused anyone to challenge your faith? When have you risked speaking out for Jesus? Have you defended the

cause of Christ? Have you identified yourself as a Christ follower? If I haven't been persecuted or insulted for my Christian faith, it's possible nobody knows about my Christian faith. And that is a real problem. So, let's not hold back.

And finally, when we are persecuted, if we do get insulted for what we believe, I would give the encouragement: Let's not take it personally. On one hand, let's definitely make sure we don't return evil for evil or insult for insult (as Paul warns in Romans 12:17-21); let's leave the revenge to God. But at the same time, let's remember: This is not about us! This is a spiritual battle, not a physical battle, and this battle is not about me personally. As Jesus says in Luke 10:16, ***"The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me."*** So, as we are persecuted or insulted for what we believe, I would encourage us not to take this personally.

As we come to the end of this series, I am thankful for your attention to what we've studied. And I would ask: Where are we in this list of blessings. As I said two months ago, this isn't a matter of choosing. We can't take 2 and 7 and leave the rest. No, all of these come together. These are truly Kingdom Attitudes.

- Are we poor in spirit? Have we seen our own spiritual poverty before the Lord?
- Do we mourn over sin in our own lives and in the lives of others?
- Are we gentle? Is our power under control?
- Do we truly hunger and thirst for righteousness?
- Are we merciful, forgiving others as we ourselves have been forgiven?
- Are we truly pure in heart?
- Do we work at making peace?
- And are we living in a way that attracts persecution? Are we enduring the world's resistance to Jesus in our lives?

If so, the kingdom is ours, and heaven will surely be worth it all!

Before we continue with the Lord's Supper, let's close our study by going to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for making us a part of your kingdom. As we live for you, we pray that you would give us courage to express our faith with boldness. We pray that we would live as kingdom people, in a way that is worthy of your name. Bless us as we walk the narrow way and as we head for that narrow gate. We pray for a sense of great happiness as we live for your Son.

We come to you in the name of Jesus, the King of kings and our Savior. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com