

Happiness Through Persecution

Matthew 5:10-12

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I want to read Matthew 5:10-12. Follow with me in your Bible.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

We’ve come in our study of the Beatitudes to Beatitude 8. It is the last of the great Beatitudes of Christ. We are immediately struck by its paradoxical nature. Verse 10 says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” How paradoxical is that! It’s certainly not the view the world has. “Blessed...”—or “happy” or “to be envied”—“...are those who are persecuted.” That isn’t what the world sees as being blessed or happy. So it’s a reminder that living in the kingdom of heaven is different than living in the kingdom of this world. Following Jesus Christ puts you in conflict with the world. Basically, what persecution is, it’s two irreconcilable value systems: the world’s and God’s, that are clashing.

Remember John said in his first epistle, chapter 2, verse 15-17, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”

The word “world” here is the Greek word “cosmos,” which doesn’t mean the physical world, the universe in which we live, but it means the evil world’s system, of which Satan is the prince and the power. We have the evil world’s system, which is controlled by the lust of the flesh—your passions; the lust of the eyes—your possessions and the pride of life: “Look at what I have accomplished.” That’s the world. But as a believer, you are taken out of the world. This world is not your home. Your home is in heaven.

Notice that the Beatitudes open in verse 3 with “...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” and they close in verse 10 with “...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The fact that the Beatitudes are bookended with the same statement means that everything in between that is a description of a person who lives in the kingdom of heaven. This is a description of the true children of God.

Being a persecuted individual or Christian is just as much a mark of true Christianity as being “poor in spirit,” being “pure in heart” and being a “peacemaker.” Jesus said it like this in John 15:18-20: “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet 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. If

they kept My word, they will keep yours also.” So Jesus makes it very clear that we, as His people, are not of the world. We live in a world that is hostile to God’s kingdom, it’s going to bring us into conflict and we will be persecuted.

Not only are God’s people “pure in heart,” not only are they “poor in spirit,” but they are “peacemakers.” Isn’t it interesting that the Beatitude of “peacemakers” came just before “persecuted.” Not everyone wants to get along. Not everyone wants to be reconciled. You do your best to bring them into peace with God and to be a peacemaker, but some people are peace-breakers. Some people are hostile to God and to the things of God. Because they hate Christ and don’t know God, they will persecute God’s people. Some people translate this Beatitude as “Happy are the harassed.” How interesting.

We’re going to see what God has to say about the subject of persecution. There are three things I want to point out. Number one, is the reason for the persecution. The reason is “for righteousness’ sake.” That’s the reason we are blessed when we are persecuted. Notice that at the end of verse 11, He uses the phrase “for My sake.” In another place He says, “for My name’s sake.” In John 15:21, Jesus said, “But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me.” They don’t know the Father and they hate Jesus, so for Jesus’ name sake, they are going to persecute you.

So it’s important to understand that we not blessed simply because we are persecuted. If you’re a Christian, but you’re habitually late for work and you get fired, it’s not “for righteousness’ sake.” It’s for being late to work, you dumb!

“Oh, it’s because I’m Christian. I have a Christian sticker on my car. They don’t like me.”

“No; it’s because you’re late for work every day.”

So if you are a Christian, be on time for work. Be early to work. Work hard. Put in a good day’s work and be honest and be a person of integrity. Jesus didn’t say, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for being stupid.” He didn’t say, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for being weird,” which a lot of Christians are. God, have mercy! Why are Christians so weird so often? So you’re not blessed for being persecuted for your own sin. If you suffer for righteousness’ sake and are persecuted, that is commendable and you are blessed. Jesus said it’s “for My sake” or literally, “on My account.”

I believe in living for Jesus and living like Jesus. If you live for Jesus Christ, the world will not be happy with you. Your own family may not be happy with you. Your spouse may not be happy with you. Your friends certainly will not be happy with you; you don’t do the things you used to do. When you become a Christian, “Old things pass away. Behold, all things become new.” People get upset with you. “You used to be the life of the party. Now all you want to do is read your Bible and go to church. What happened to you? You’re ruined.” You found the truth, and your life has been changed.

So it’s living for Jesus and living like Jesus. It’s living out the Beatitudes. Verse 3 says,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” That’ll bring you in conflict with the world. They think that admitting you’re a sinner is wrong. Verse 4, “Blessed are those who mourn”—you weep over your sin, and you have a broken and contrite heart. You’ll be comforted by God, but you’ll be opposed by the world. Verse 5, “Blessed are the meek” or “gentle.” That isn’t what the world views as blessed. They think the blessed are the strong, assertive and confident. Then notice verse 6: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they...”—and they alone—“...shall be filled.” You hunger for God and seek His will, you get in His Word, you fellowship, you live for the Lord, and you’ll be brought into conflict with the world. Notice those who are “merciful”—gracious and kind to others. Notice those who are “pure in heart.” They will be brought into opposition with the world. Then trying to be a “peacemaker,” you will be in conflict with the world.

So in context, when you are living out the Beatitudes—when you are poor, mourning and meek, hungering and thirsting and being merciful and pure and a peacemaker, that will bring you into conflict with the world. You’re going to be going against the grain, and you’re going to be running into opposition. Persecution is simply the clash between two irreconcilable systems.

Both Peter and Paul confirmed what Jesus is teaching here in the Beatitudes. In 1 Peter 3:14, Peter said, “Even if you should suffer for righteousness’s sake, you are blessed.” If you suffer for living for Jesus and living like Jesus, you are blessed or happy. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” If you live a godly life, it is inevitable that you will experience persecution. It will come in different forms, in different degrees and at different times.

We live in the United States, and as such, we are not subject to a lot of open hostility. It is growing in intensity and will get worse—it’s not going to get better—but to be a Christian around the world, in many places it could mean persecution or death or martyrdom.

I think this is one of the most convicting verses in the Bible. “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will...”—not “might,” not “maybe”—“...suffer persecution.” In some way, some shape, some form, if I’m living a godly life, I’m going to be brought into opposition with the kingdom of darkness. Attest yourself to that.

Secondly, I want you to notice, in verse 11, the nature of the persecution. First, the reason for our persecution is that we are living righteously; it’s for His name sake, because we are believers. Now the nature of our persecution can differ. Jesus describes it in verse 11: “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.”

I want you to note that of all the Beatitudes, this eighth and last Beatitude, on persecution, is the only one with a double blessing. It’s found in verse 10: “Blessed are those,” and then it’s found again in verse 11: “Blessed are you.” These are not separate Beatitudes. It’s one Beatitude with two blessings. It’s a double blessing on those who are persecuted. It’s interesting that Jesus changes from the third person in verse 10, “Blessed are those,” to the

second person in verse 11, "Blessed are you." All the other Beatitudes are in the third person: "Blessed are those," but when we get down to verse 11 where He adds that second blessing to the Beatitude of persecution, He says, "Blessed are you." He makes it more personal. It's important that we see that He is predicting there to those who were listening to the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount that they will be persecuted.

We know that many people have been persecuted down through the church history. In the first century, the early Christians were tortured and suffered martyrdom. The first Christian martyr, in Acts 7, was Stephen. It's quite interesting that his name is Stefanos. Stephen or Stefanos means "crown." It's a victor's crown; it's not a diadem, which is the kingly crown. Stephen was put to death by being stoned because he was preaching Jesus Christ. The crowd grew angry. They ground their teeth, ripped their clothes and threw dirt in the air. I've had people look at me pretty angry, but they never ground their teeth or ripped their shirts. They never threw dirt in the air.

But they rushed upon Stephen and stoned him. And the Bible says that when Stephen was being stoned, his face shone like an angel's. I call him the man with the angel face. They looked at this man with the glowing face. Stephen looked up to heaven as the stones were hitting his body, and he prayed. He said, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." Then he died.

Now there was a man by the name of Saul, before his conversion, who we know as Paul. He was watching and listening. He saw Stephen's face and he heard Stephen's sermon. I believe that when Saul was on that Damascus road and the Lord asked him, "Isn't it hard for you to kick against the pricks?" or "the goads," the conviction of the Holy Spirit came. I think it goes back, perhaps, to Stephen's sermon and the message he heard and the glow he saw on Stephen's face. It must have had an impact on Saul's life as he saw Stephen put to death.

And it's interesting that Stephen looked into heaven and saw Jesus at the right hand of God the Father. But Jesus wasn't seated, as He normally is; He was standing. Could it be that He was standing to welcome home this first martyr? He was welcoming Stephen. We're going to see in a minute, "great is your reward in heaven."

So we are to understand that we will be persecuted or maybe even lose your life if you preach the Gospel. In our country today, it doesn't usually happen, but in other parts of the world it does happen. It did happen to the early believers. All of the apostles, except for John, were martyred. Read Fox's Book of Martyrs. You can read about the ways all the other apostles were put to death and executed. John, in his later years, was banished to the isle of Patmos by Domitian, the Roman Emperor, and John suffered greatly.

Then we know that in 64 AD, Rome began its persecution of Christians under Nero. He set fire to Rome and blamed it on the Christians. The Roman government poured out all its wrath in persecuting Christians. Nero had Christians covered in the skins of animals and had them thrown to wild dogs to be devoured. He threw them in the lions' den. He had them covered with pitch and put on poles and made them human torches for his garden. Millions of Christians

died under Nero's persecution. It's part of history. The Bible tells us very clearly that the early church suffered. Tertullian, an early church father, said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." How true that is. Jesus said in Luke 21:16, "They will put some of you to death."

Now I realize that we live in America, "one nation under God." We don't have open, hostile persecution, but it is becoming more and more evident in our culture. To stand for truth and to stand for righteousness means we're going to be ostracized or persecuted.

In our text in verse 11, Jesus describes a subtle kind of persecution, but it's persecution nevertheless. It is something that we do see and experience even here in the United States. Notice Jesus says that men shall "revile" you. That's the nature of our persecution. The word "revile" literally means "to cast in one's teeth." It means to be angry right in the face of somebody, to yell at somebody, to harass them. It was used of Isaac when he was weaned and Ishmael mocked him.

Maybe your family mocks you in your Christianity. Maybe you're the only believer in a family of unbelievers. They mock you and put you down. Maybe your friends mock you. I remember when I first became a Christian, it was right out of high school. I got up enough courage to put a Christian sticker on my car. I came out of the house with my friends one day, and they were still unbelievers. They asked, "Is that a Christian sticker on your car, John Miller?!" My first thought was, Oh no! Some Christian put it there. I was freakin' out. I'll never forget I said, "Yeah, that's mine." That's the first time I told them, "I'm a Christian."

"What?!" They freaked out. They started laughing at me and mocking me and putting me down and talking about Jonah and the great whale and all the stories in the Bible. They just attacked me. I went home that day, and I felt so bummed out. I felt like, "Lord, why did You let this happen to me?" Like I was something special. Sometimes we get upset with God, and we sulk and we complain. But persecution is part and parcel of the Christian life.

If you're in a school or a secular college, you will be persecuted. And in the workplace you try to live for God and work hard. But workers will say, "You're making us look bad, because you're working so hard. Come on, let's take a break. Let's goof off. You have to be part of it, or you're going to make us look bad." You put people to shame, so you're persecuted.

So number one, they shall "revile" you. Number two, they will "persecute" you. The root idea of the word "persecute" means "to chase" or "to pursue." It has the idea of harassing you. Number one, they're going to verbally attack you; and number two, they're going to harass you and attack you, as well.

Then thirdly, in verse 11, they are going to "say all kinds of evil against you falsely." Number one, they will revile you or mock you; number two, they shall chase you or harass you; and number three, they shall "say all kinds of evil against you falsely." That is so difficult to handle. It's hard for me to be passive and kind when someone lies about me or spreads rumors about me or slanders me.

The early Christians were slanderously accused of being atheists by the non-believing world. You ask, "Well, how does that work? Atheists?" It was because they didn't have any idols. They didn't have any statues or tangible gods. They worshipped the true and living God that is unseen, so they were called atheists by the unbelievers. They were also called cannibals. Jesus said, "You will eat My flesh and drink My blood" in the communion service. So the believers were accused of being cannibalistic. All these slanderous lies and rumors were spread about them, as well, because of their love feast and their koinonia or fellowship that they had with one another. Jesus said that they shall "say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake."

So living for Christ in the workplace can be very, very difficult. Or on the college campus. Or in this world. If we are "salt" and "light," we will come into conflict with this world. We will be mocked, harassed and slandered.

I want you to notice the third and last issue, in verse 12. How shall we respond to persecution? Maybe you have an unsaved spouse, and they make chide remarks. Maybe you have unsaved parents. I've actually seen young people come to Christ, and their life changes and they're studying the Bible and are transformed, but their parents say, "I would rather have my kid on drugs than reading the Bible," or "I would rather have my kid being promiscuous than being a Christian." So maybe you are persecuted by your own parents.

Jesus said, "I did not come to bring peace but a sword." It also says, "A man's enemies will be those of his own household." Maybe you don't get invited to family gatherings anymore. You find out there was a family reunion, but you weren't invited, because you're a Christian and they don't want you around; you don't laugh at their jokes, and they can't do things when you're there. You're ostracized or put out.

How should we respond to persecution? It tells us in verse 12: "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Notice what we're not to do when we are persecuted: we're not to retaliate. Sometimes I think wouldn't it be neat if there was a verse of Scripture that said, "If someone bugs you, punch them!" We do believe in laying on of hands in the church; right? "Come on, Lord! Just let me lay hands on them one time! In the name of Jesus!" We're not to retaliate. We're not to sulk and complain. We're not to get mad at God. We're not to say, "Why would God let this happen to me?!"

We are to "rejoice and be exceedingly glad." Jesus could have said just "rejoice." That would have been enough. He could have said, "Be glad," and that would have been enough. But He said, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad." Amazing to think about.

I want you to note that this is a command or an imperative in the Greek. And it's in the present tense. So God is commanding us to "rejoice and be exceedingly glad" habitually, continually

and ongoing. You say, “Ah, I don’t know about that. It sounds pretty crazy. How can I ‘rejoice and be exceedingly glad’ when I’m persecuted?”

In Acts 5:41, “They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.” That’s something you can remember: when you’re being “persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” you were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. That’s why you can be “exceedingly glad” and “rejoice.”

In 1 Peter 4:12-14, Peter said, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part...”—as a believer—“...He is glorified.” That’s another way that you can rejoice. I’ve been counted worthy to suffer for His name. God is being glorified in me and through me.

How about Daniel 3 when Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, the three, young Hebrews, were thrown into the fiery furnace? King Nebuchadnezzar erected an image of himself and commanded everyone to bow down and worship his image when the music started to play. Everyone in the nation bowed down except three, young men. (I love this picture.) You see a sea of people on their faces all bowing down, and then out in the middle of this crowd you see these three, young Hebrew boys standing up erect and tall. You talk about standing out in a crowd!

So the king called these Hebrews in and said that he would give them one more chance to bow down to his image. If they didn’t bow, they would burn. And I love their reply—“Know this, O king. We’re not going to bow. We’re not going to worship your golden image. And our God is able to deliver us from your fiery furnace. But if not...”—that’s in the Bible—“...we will not worship that image. We will not bow down.” So the music struck up again, and everyone hit the ground. They bowed down—all except for these Hebrews. They stood tall and strong. Maybe they joined hands with one another. Maybe they put their arms around one another, standing strong together.

Then the king had the furnace heated seven times hotter than normal. The young Hebrews were bound with ropes and were thrown into the fiery furnace. The men who threw them into the furnace were consumed by the fire, because it was so hot. The king came to check out what was happening—three, fried Hebrews here. But the king asked his counselors, “Didn’t we cast three men into the furnace?”

“True, O king.”

“Well, I see four, and the form of the fourth looks like the Son of God” or “a son of the gods.”

I actually believe that this is what’s called a “Christophany” or an appearance of Christ in the Old Testament. Pre-Bethlehem, Jesus came down from heaven. It’s not an incarnation; it’s a

manifestation. Jesus Christ appeared with Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, and they were walking around in the fiery furnace. The only thing that burned on them was their ropes. And the king said—and this is an amazing thing—“Can you guys come out so I can talk to you?” So they came out.

If I got thrown into a fiery furnace and my robes weren't burned, I'd say, “I'm outta here!” I'm not going to stick around. But when Jesus is with you, you want to hang out. These three Hebrews were experiencing the glory of God, the presence of God and the power of God. I believe with all my heart that whatever God calls you to go through—if you must suffer and you must endure—that God will be with you, God will strengthen you and God will give you His peace.

Are you having trouble on the job? Are you being persecuted? e He wHe will be with you. Jesus said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” He said, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Maybe it's in the home where you're being persecuted. Maybe it's in your school where you're being persecuted. Jesus will be with you.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were put in prison, because they were preaching the Gospel. They were whipped, beaten, put into stocks, and put in an inner-prison dungeon, but at midnight, they sang praises to God. They didn't sulk, complain or gripe. And the other prisoners heard them singing.

Could you sing a song while in prison? When you've been lied about and put down, when you've been mocked, when you've been harassed, when you've been slandered, do you sing worship songs to the Lord? Do you worship the Lord?

The Bible says that the Lord sent an earthquake, and the prison doors were opened. The Philippian jailer was converted to Christ and saved, and God did a mighty work. Why? Because they rejoiced in their sorrow, and they rejoiced in the dungeon. God gave them songs in the night. God can give you songs in the night.

My mother was an amazing Christian. She loved the Lord. When she was a teenager, she got saved. No one in her family was a believer. She grew up in Wisconsin. She got on a bus and left Wisconsin for California at 17 years old to attend Bible college. She found that Scripture in the Bible that says, “When thy father and mother forsake you, the Lord will take you up.” Her parents kind of wrote her off. “You're going to California and go to Bible college? Why would you do such a thing?!” She went to Bible college and met my Dad. They got married. I was born. And here I am, preaching God's Word.

My mother actually said that when I was born, a nurse came to her and asked, “Is that your little boy, John Paul?”

She said, “Yes.”

Then the nurse said, “The Lord spoke to my heart and said that he's going to be a preacher.” My Mom didn't tell me that until after I was saved and became a Christian and was preaching

the Word. What an awesome thing!

To think that when your mother and father forsake you, “the Lord will take you up”! It may be your family or your friends or other people who forsake you, but God will give you strength. And remember that “Yours is the kingdom of heaven.”

When you are being persecuted, there are three things to remember. First, remember that “Yours is the kingdom of heaven.” That’s confirmation that you are God’s child. Secondly, remember that “Great is your reward in heaven.” Keep an eternal perspective. It’s so very important. I love it where the Bible says in Hebrews 11:25-27 that Moses chose “rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.”

When you are being persecuted, you need to look to heaven. You need to realize that’s where your home is. This world’s not our home. Heaven is where my rewards are: “great is your reward in heaven.”

In 2 Corinthians 4:17, Paul said, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” So you need to have an eternal perspective. That’s why Jesus said, “Great is your reward in heaven.”

Thirdly, remember that you are in good company. Verse 12 says, “For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” You are in good company. They persecuted Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel. Think about that: when you get to heaven you can say, “Hey, Jeremiah. How ya’ doin’? I was persecuted like you. Except they just laughed at me, but they threw you in a pit.” You can meet Isaiah and say, “Hey, Isaiah. What’s happenin’? I was persecuted too. You were sawed in two, but they just mocked my bumper sticker.” He’ll ask, “What’s a bumper sticker?”

But just think! You’ll be hangin’ out with Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel! “Hey, Daniel. What’s up? That’s crazy—those lions you got thrown in the pit with! That’s insane! I worked with a bunch of lions—angry lions.” But God protected Daniel, and God was with him. The king came to the pit and asked, “Daniel...has your God...been able to deliver you from the lions?” And Daniel cried out, “O king, live forever. My God sent His angel and shut the lions’ mouths.” Isn’t God amazing?!

By the way, the whole epistle of Peter is about persecution and suffering. In 1 Peter 4:14, it says, “If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you....He is glorified.”

When Paul wrote to the Philippians in chapter 1, verses 20-21, his desire was expressed that

“Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death, for to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

Someone came to an early church father and was complaining because he was finding it difficult to live for Christ on his job. He said, “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I must live.” Wisely, this church father said, “Must you?” Good question. “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

Jesus said in Matthew 10:28, “Do not fear those who kill the body.” After that, there’s no more they can do. Think about that: don’t be afraid; all they can do is kill you. But Jesus told us who to be afraid of. He said, “But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Fear God.

I think what we need is a fear of the Lord so great that we fear the face of no man. If we fear the face of God, we will not be afraid of what man can do to us. That’s what we need: we need that underlying principle of the fear or reverence for God.

Someone put it like this:

“Our fathers, chained in prisons dark,

Were still in heart and conscience free;

How sweet would be their children’s fate,

If they, like them, could die for Thee.”

Let’s pray.