

The Beatitudes' Worship Series: "Blessed are..." (Matthew 5:1-12)

"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

(Verse 10-12)

Matthew 5:1-12; 2 Chronicles 24:17-22; Psalm 119: 81-88; I Peter 3:13-18

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Today we are finishing up the Beatitudes with the last and longest of the eight. "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble" (Peterson's *The Message*). We hear of stories of Christians being persecuted, but have you ever been bullied in any way for your faith? Have you lost any friends because of your belief in Christ? Have you ever not received a promotion because of your Christian values? If you have, then you experienced a type of persecution for being a Christian.

The word, persecute, means to hound, oppress, harass, maltreat, bully, torture, tyrannize, and intimidate. We as humans will find reasons and methods to persecute another. The reasons can be race, social status, gender identity, tribal identity, nationality, religion, or anyone or group that is different. The methods can range from name calling to the most horrific torture. The range of persecutors can be from one person persecuting another to a law or decree to annihilate an entire people. When Jesus mentioned persecution in this Beatitude he is specifically referring to those who are living their faith, doing what is good and just, for righteousness' sake. Jesus knew that his followers would be singled out for loving God and loving others. He was upfront with them. He told them what to expect. He knew he would be hated and his followers would be hated, too, because doing what is good, doing what is just and right, working for peace is different. It's countercultural and counterintuitive.

For the first three hundred years those who followed Jesus, those in the early church, were persecuted because they were different. They would not conform to the social standards of the Romans. For instance, in the Greco-Roman culture one's social life revolved around the festivals and parties that honored the Greek gods. Christians refused to attend these functions and to pray to the Greek gods. They were viewed as being discourteous when they didn't eat, drink, and participate in the orgies honoring the gods. Because they didn't worship the many Greek gods and met in homes, rumors spread that they were a secret society of cannibals because they ate the Body of Christ and drank his blood. Another way in which they set themselves apart was their view of slavery. Slaves were common. Although Christians did not emancipate their slaves, they viewed slaves as part of their families and not as non-humans. This enraged the non-Christians who in turn taunted and harassed the early Christians. Because they stood firm in their faith in Jesus, the early Christians lost friends, family, and jobs. Then things went from bad to worse.

When the Roman Empire was seeking a way to unite the many nations they conquered, the public worship of Caesar was instituted. Each person was to bring to the Temple of Caesar and burn a pinch of incense and proclaim, "Caesar is Lord!" For Christians, there is only one Lord and he is Jesus. So they refused to proclaim Caesar as Lord, but would publicly proclaim, "Jesus is Lord!" Yes, "Jesus is Lord" was a statement of protest against Caesar and was considered treason. Thus, the extreme persecution began. Christians were disemboweled, torn apart, grilled, and fed to the lions, to name a few extreme methods. Nero, the insane Caesar, had Christians wrapped in pitch, set afire, and used as torches to be light for his all-night parties. However, these martyrs did not cower. They went to their death rejoicing, singing hymns, and proclaiming their faith in God. The word, martyr, means witness. Each witnessed their faith as they faced their death. Perpetua, a young noblewoman with a baby, was asked by her father to recant her faith as her execution

approached. Her response was, “Can a vessel change its name? No, nor can I call myself other than I am, a Christian.”

Why didn't these early Christians claim their allegiance to Caesar and worship Jesus quietly? Had they done that, they wouldn't have been tortured and killed. However, they followed a Savior who stood courageously before the Temple authorities and Pilate. If Jesus could accept his execution on the cross and witness his faith as he forgave his executioners, they could, too. They also witnessed each of Jesus' disciples including the Apostle Paul martyred for their faith. These men became the “gold standard” for martyrdom. In addition, just as the Beatitude mentions, persecution drove them deeper in their faith. They held onto the hope that the promise of eternal life was real. And with that hope they could face anything.

Did you notice that the early Christians did not seek revenge, retaliation, or use force to defend themselves? As their faith grew deeper, they realized just how important it was to witness their faith by how they lived. They continued to do good to everyone, to share love where there was hate, and to offer peace to everyone, including those who persecuted them. The first letter of Peter instructs them to continue to do good even in the midst of suffering. Another way in which they witnessed their faith was to be able to speak intelligently about what they believed and why they believed it. Again, the first letter of Peter instructs them to be ready to defend your beliefs, your hope in Christ with anyone who is interested and share it with gentleness and reverence. In the midst of this persecution, the church continued to witness through their actions and with words. Even though those in the church were persecuted, the church flourished.

If only we could say that persecution ended in the fourth century, but it did not. As Christianity gained power, Christians have persecuted non-believers as well as other Christians who believe differently. In addition, Christians are being persecuted and martyred for their faith throughout the world today, but we are not the only religion being persecuted: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs are, too. China is once again banning all religions. Churches and mosques are being destroyed and their leaders are being fined and jailed. For more information about current Christian persecution, check out the website for a nonprofit, interdenominational Christian organization called The Voice of the Martyrs.

Here in the United States we have been blessed by Thomas Jefferson's vision for religious tolerance. He made sure that our Constitution would include freedom of religion. However, many in our world are promoting freedom from religion. As the Christian church continues to decline in America, Europe, and other places in the world, Christians are experiencing persecution in various forms. For instance, think about your life. Do you have family members, friends, or neighbors with whom you are not allowed to talk about your faith in Christ? Can you talk about your faith at work? We live in a time similar to the early Christians. We live in a time in which Christianity is not accepted. So what do we do? Throw up our hands and say, “Oh, well.” My hope is that we will grow deeper in our faith by living the Beatitudes. Can we be selfless enough to be poor in spirit? Can we share in the suffering of others? Can we be meek in humility to the will of God? Can we be merciful to the needy? Can we hunger and thirst for goodness? Can our hearts be pure so that we have single-minded loyalty to God? Can we make peace where there is discontent? If we can live like this, then we will be able to do good deeds for everyone, to share love where there was hate, and to offer peace to all. In addition, I hope that we will know what we believe and why we believe it! Then feel comfortable to talk about it and be able to share how our faith in Christ has transformed us to love even those who hate us.

No matter what the future holds for our faith, we will be blessed. Jesus tells us to rejoice and be glad because he promises us an eternal reward!

Reflection Questions: If we were tortured for our faith, would we have the courage to stand up for our faith and not retaliate in some way? Would we be able to rejoice by singing hymns and share the love of Christ with our persecutors?

Resources: *The Beatitudes and Lord's Prayer for Everyman* by William Barclay; *Beatitudes from the Back Side* by J. Ellsworth Kalas; *Finding the Meaning in the Beatitudes* by John Redhead; Richard Rohr's Daily Devotions-Sermon on the Mount: Week 2.

