



CALLED TO SERVE A PERSECUTING WORLD

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 Matthew 5:10-16
 Eighth Message
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SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

I frequently run into believers who express surprise that their Christian life is difficult. They were under the impression that circumstances would improve, that God would go soft on those who had “left everything” to follow him, and that life would get easier as they grew in the Lord. For some, this is an article of faith. But God doesn’t affirm that creed. He promised to safeguard our souls. He never said he would save us from the hard times.

It is a fact that Christians suffer. Oftentimes, crosses, arenas, and scaffolds have been the earthly reward for a job well done. Painful, mortifying, expensive things keep happening to believers. “Sorrow upon sorrow” is the lonely, invisible burden of every Christian worker, and at times the hardest tests are farther along.

Listen to these moving verses by William Blake:

*Joy and woe are woven fine
 A clothing for the soul divine,
 Under every grief and pine
 Runs a joy with silken twine.*

The Bible is quite clear that both joy and woe are part of the fabric of the life which God weaves and lovingly fits as perfect clothing for his children. This is a mysterious and paradoxical thing, but what a great comfort it is know that God is the weaver.

This our topic this morning as we examine the eighth and final beatitude of Jesus, from Matthew 5:10-12:

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matt 5:10-12, NASB)

It may seem strange that here Jesus moves from talking about peacemaking to persecution, from the work of reconciliation to the experience of hostility. Yet, however diligently we may try to make peace with some people, they refuse to live at peace with us. Indeed, some take the initiative to oppose us, to revile and slander us. This occurs, not because of Christians’ foibles or idiosyncrasies, but for “righteousness sake,” and “on account of Me”; that is, because the enemies of the cross find distasteful the righteousness for which we hunger and thirst, and they have rejected the Christ whom we seek to follow. The persecution that Jesus speaks of,

then, is the clash between two irreconcilable value systems.

Notice that Jesus does not say, “Blessed are those who persecute because you because you are obnoxious.” And some Christians are downright obnoxious. Ray Stedman used to quote this jingle on occasion,

To live above with saints we love,
 Oh that will be glory.
 But to live below with saints we know,
 Well, that’s another story.

Some Christians are hard to live with, because they are uptight and self righteous. Jesus is not talking about that kind of person. He is referring to people who live the truth and suffer for it.

How does Jesus expect Christians to react under persecution? Here are his words: “Rejoice, and be glad,” he said. We are not to retaliate, like an unbeliever. We are not to sulk like a child, to lick our wounds in self pity, to grin and bear it, like a stoic, or pretend we enjoy it, like a masochist. We are to rejoice as a Christian should rejoice, and even “leap for joy.”

Why? First of all, Jesus says, “for your reward in heaven is great.” We may lose everything on earth, but we shall inherit everything in heaven. Persecution is a token of our genuineness, a certificate of Christian authenticity. Jesus goes on to say, “for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” If we are persecuted today, we belong to a noble succession. But the main reason we ought to be rejoicing, according to Jesus, is because we are suffering, as he says, “on account of Me”—on account of our loyalty to him and his standards of truth and righteousness. The apostles learned this lesson. They knew that wounds and hurts are medals of honor.

The righteousness for which we are being persecuted is the righteousness set out in the preceding seven beatitudes. The world cannot tolerate such a life. Poverty of spirit and brokenness run counter to the pride of the unbelieving heart. It is the self sufficient who are admired by the world.

When we began our series eight weeks ago, I shared with you a modern man’s version of the beatitudes, which is the exact opposite of the lifestyle Christians are called to follow. Let me read it to you again:

Blessed are the self made and the self sufficient, because they did it all by themselves.

Blessed are those who play it cool, because they avoid being hassled by life.

Blessed are those who demand their rights, because if they don't, someone else will.

Blessed are those who go for all the gusto, because you only go around once.

Blessed are those who show no mercy, because anyone dumb enough to get caught deserves it.

Blessed are those who bend the rules, because after all, everyone is doing it.

Blessed are those who intimidate others, because if you don't, someone else will grab your chips.

Blessed are those who despise the good, because everyone knows that good guys finish last.

The values and standards of Jesus are in direct conflict with the values and standards of the world. The world says it is the rich that are blessed, not the poor; the happy go lucky and the carefree, not those who take evil so seriously that they mourn over it; the strong and the brash, not the meek and the gentle; the full, not the hungry; those who mind their own business, not those who care enough to show mercy and make peace; those who attain their ends even, if necessary, by devious means, not the pure in heart who refuse to compromise their integrity; those who are secure and popular, and live at ease, not those who have to suffer persecution.

Notice that this reference to persecution has the distinction of being a double beatitude. Jesus states it, first, in the third person, like the other seven ("Blessed are those"), and then he repeats it in the direct speech of the second person ("Blessed are you"). Matthew Henry, the Puritan commentator, thought the reason Jesus repeated himself was because the statement is so incredible. He may be right. The repetition of the beatitude, its personalization, and its position at the end of the list highlight its supreme importance.

Since all the beatitudes describe what every Christian disciple is intended to be, we conclude that the condition of being despised and rejected, slandered and persecuted, is as much a normal mark of Christian discipleship as being pure in heart or merciful. Every Christian is to be a peacemaker, and every Christian is to expect opposition. Those who hunger for righteousness will suffer for the righteousness they crave. Jesus said so here and elsewhere. So did his apostles Peter and Paul. It has been so in every age. We need to remember the complimentary woe which Luke records: "Woe to you when all men speak well of you." Universal popularity was as much the lot of the false prophets as persecution was of the true.

This is a difficult truth, and this is why Jesus took time to prepare his disciples before he left. In John 15, he warned them: "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before {it hated} you." If you get the cold shoulder from the world, if you feel its hostility,

you are in good company, because the world didn't like the Lord, either. Jesus was put to death for living perfectly. We should not expect any better treatment. So don't be surprised if the world doesn't like you, appreciate you, reward you or promote you for your behavior. They didn't do any of those things with Jesus, either.

Isn't it odd that the kindest, most thoughtful Man who ever lived, who never wronged anyone, was so hated by the world that they put him to death? Jesus says that if you are experiencing hostility, know that he experienced it as well—so don't take it personally. New Christians are often surprised at the turn their lives take when they become believers. They expect their old friends to be happy for them now that they have become Christians, but they are not. It is because they don't understand.

I have spent some of my most rewarding years in ministry working with high school students. It is such an exciting ministry, to be able to make a difference in students' lives at such a critical time. I remember a particular girl who started coming to our group some years ago. This young woman was pretty wild. She was into partying and alcohol, and she was doing some drugs. But she was attracted to what she saw in the lives of some kids in the group, and she was very responsive to truth. She came regularly, and the truth began to make an impact in her life. One day, her mother telephoned me and said, "I don't know what you are doing to my daughter, but I don't like it. I want her to have fun and enjoy life. I don't want her to become a religious fanatic."

As I hung up the phone, I was reminded of Peter's words, which parallel what Jesus is saying: "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in sensuality, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you."

In Isaiah 57:4, the prophet says that unbelievers will stick out their tongues at you. He actually uses that expression. They will hiss at you. That is the first thing to remember in understanding the hostility of the world. Don't be surprised; don't take it personally; they treated Jesus the same way.

Jesus continues, in John 15:19:

"If you were of the world, the world would love 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 slave 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." (John 15:19-20)

Another reason we experience hostility is that we are different from what we once were. The world loves worldly people. If we become authentically Christian, and begin to operate as Jesus did, the world is not going

to like us. If we do nothing wrong, they are still going to hate us, because the one unrelenting pressure of society around us is to conform.

Jesus is saying that if we are authentically Christian we are going to act in ways that distress people in the world. So don't we surprised by their negative reaction.

Few people who have lived in this century have understood and expressed this better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian martyr who was executed in the Flossenberg concentration camp days before it was liberated following World War II. Here is part of what he wrote about suffering:

Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master... That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church, and one of the memorandas drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the church as the community of those "who are persecuted and martyred for the Gospel's sake" ... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians are called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of His grace.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon went through a very depressing period once when he was subjected to virulent abuse for the things he was preaching. His wife took these words of Matthew 5:10-12, and wrote them in large letters and pasted them on the ceiling above their bed, so that the first thing the great preacher saw in the morning was the words of Jesus.

And what is to be our response to this persecuting world? We are to witness to it. Matthew 5:13:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (5:13-16)

If the beatitudes describe the essential character of the disciples of Jesus, these "salt and light" metaphors describe their influence for good in the world. And yet the very notion that the Christian described in the beatitudes can have a significant influence in this tough world is a bit shocking. What lasting good can the poor and the meek, the mourners and the merciful, and those who try to make peace not war have upon the world? They will be overwhelmed, won't they? What can be accomplished by a people whose only passion is an appetite for righteousness, and whose only weapon is purity of heart? Aren't such people too feeble to achieve any-

thing, especially because they are such a small minority in the world?

It is evident that Jesus did not share this skeptical viewpoint. The world will undoubtedly persecute the church, yet it is the church's calling to serve this persecuting world. Rudolf Steir put it this way, "This must be your only retaliation—love and truth for hatred and lies." Incredible as it may sound, Jesus referred to that handful of Palestinian peasants as the salt of *the earth* and the light of *the world*, so far reaching would their influence be.

We are like salt and light when we act as Jesus has described here in these beatitudes. Salt was used in that day as a preservative. The only way to preserve meat and arrest the spread of corruption was to salt it. Jesus says that is how the spread of evil is arrested in our world—by living as he has described in the beatitudes. Do you want to make an impact upon your community, neighborhood, office, or school? Then live this way. It doesn't take many people living like this to have an effect on society. Salt can exist in small amounts in a very large medium—and it does its work far beyond its size. One or two people working in an office and living this way can change the whole climate of a company. I have seen this happen where men and women determine to be righteous and they arrest the spread of corruption.

Likewise, says Jesus, Christians are like light. No one puts light under a bowl to hide it. They let it shine, because light dispels darkness. According to the apostle Paul, "the god of this world has blinded the eyes of unbelievers." They really believe that the way to get ahead is to push and shove and demand their rights. If you assert yourself, they say, if you are hard fisted and hard headed, you will make it to the top. But they are living in the darkness—and the way to dispel the darkness is to live as Jesus describes in the beatitudes.

What Jesus is doing here is giving us the key to evangelism. Do you want to have an effect on your campus or your neighborhood? Then live like this! He tells us, in verse 16: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and *glorify your Father who is in heaven.*" I believe that is the most significant statement in this section. When we live like this, people will see that there is something different about us, something that can't be attributed to our personality, education, intellect or cultural background. People will recognize that it is supernatural, that it comes from another source.

The wording is very significant here. Jesus says that Christians (and Christians alone) are the light of the world. Modern man is only contributing to the darkness by his efforts to dispel it. We, and only we, because we know the King, and we have his light, are the means by which corruption is arrested, darkness dispelled, and people are brought into a loving relationship with God.

These metaphors make it obvious that the church and

the world are very distinct communities. The world is a dark place, with little or no light of its own. It talks a lot about its “enlightenment,” but much of its boasted light is, in reality, darkness. The world also manifests a constant tendency to deteriorate; it cannot stop itself from going bad. Only salt introduced from the outside can prevent that. Christians are that salt—but our effectiveness depends on our saltiness.

Jesus’ assertion that the church is the earth’s salt and light sounds audacious in a society where so few take churchgoing seriously anymore. But that is what he said: God’s people are the element that arrests the spread of corruption in the world. We alone are the substance that dispels illusion, and its offspring, despair. The church is still the only agency in society that can cleanse the world and correct the lies that debase it. Christians are the only ones who can make visible to the world the invisible Jesus.

The real business of the church is done by men and women whose inner lives are characterized by truth, righteousness, humility, and servanthood, and who love each other as God loves us, with a fierce and determined love.

The devil wants to thwart that business if he can. That’s why we often are subjected to a hard time from the most unexpected place—within the church itself. That’s why we sometimes rub each other the wrong way, and why even committed Christians have problems getting along. If you were the devil and wanted to subvert God’s plan to salvage the world, whom would you try to trip up? The agents by whom he plans to salvage it, of course!

So the devil penetrates by finding willing agents within the church, and he indoctrinates them, suggesting ungodly ways and means of dealing with their difficulties with one another. He makes them want to be noticed, so they get hurt when they’re overlooked; they smart when they’re crossed, corrected or criticized; they harbor grudges, nurse grievances, and wallow in self-pity; they gossip about others and blame them for their pain rather than recognizing God’s hand in all things. They choose their own kind rather than the lowly and the unlovely. They insist on being the center of attention rather than serving on the edge.

That happens all the time, doesn’t it? Those who are seduced in this way forget that God was once a Lamb, and that he overcame injustice by humility and meekness. They forget about giving up their rights to control things and be in charge, and about loving those who don’t love them, as our Lord did. Unlike him, they look for the inside track, the special favor. They search for selfish advantage rather than someone to serve. They forget what it means to be concealed and content, without praise or notice, to be undervalued and sometimes slighted. When this happens, relationships break down, the church begins to break up, and our influence on the world disappears.

That is Satan’s strategy, to get a church to go bad from within, so that God himself has to judge it. The people may gather, the piano may play, the preacher may pray, but the lights have gone out. May we not be ignorant of Satan’s devices. These eight beatitudes of Jesus are the Christian’s hope for affecting this world. Let us remember, then, our own brokenness and poverty, and allow God’s Word to penetrate our inner life, so that we may not lose our saltiness.

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