

PERSECUTION BECAUSE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

MATTHEW 5:10, MATTHEW 10:16-39

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott
Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey
September 8, 2002

Today we are going to look at the very last of the Beatitudes listed in MATTHEW 5:3-12. It is different from the first seven of the Beatitudes in that it is not a virtue. But it is the same as the other seven in that it describes for us a fundamental characteristic of every true Christian.

Being persecuted because of righteousness is not a virtue. It is not something that we are; rather, it is something that happens to us because of who we are. The other seven Beatitudes all emphasize who a Christian is. They tell us that a Christian is poor in spirit and that he is sad about his spiritually poor condition and that he responds with meekness when treated badly. He is one who seeks salvation from his sinful condition, the kind of salvation that results in righteousness. And when God saves him and fills him with righteousness, the Christian becomes merciful and pure in heart. All this makes him a peacemaker, willing to give up his own rights in order to help men and women find peace with God. These seven virtues all describe who a Christian is. But now, in the last Beatitude, we are told that the world will always hate Christians. In fact, we can even say that if the world does not hate who we are, then we are not true Christians. So this Beatitude is just as much a test of our Christianity as the other seven.

Please notice the promise that goes along with this Beatitude. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for **theirs is the kingdom of God.**” This is the same promise given with the first Beatitude. It is the promise that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are persecuted because of righteousness. This promise links this beatitude to the other seven in a very intimate way.

When Jesus listed these eight Beatitudes, He started with the kingdom of God and He ended with the kingdom of God. The other promises in between are important, but the overall emphasis of the Beatitudes is to make a statement about people who belong to the kingdom of God. Jesus is describing characteristics of people who belong to His kingdom. He wants us to recognize what His kingdom is and how we can become members of it. And being persecuted because of righteousness is just as necessary a characteristic as the other seven when we are trying to understand what it means to be part of God’s kingdom.

So let us think for a moment what it means to be persecuted because of righteousness. We will first

consider what it doesn’t mean, because people often mistake this Beatitude with other things that have nothing to do with being part of God’s kingdom.

For example, being persecuted because of righteousness is sometimes confused with being persecuted because we are objectionable. Many people who do not believe in God are persecuted because other people find them to be offensive. Some of these people don’t deserve to receive the persecution they receive, so we feel sorry for them. Nevertheless, these people are not necessarily the ones Jesus is talking about when He said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted.”

When I received basic training in the Marine Corps, there was a man who received persecution on a daily basis from those in charge of the training. He was tormented both mentally and physically until he finally couldn’t take it anymore. But the reason for his torment had nothing to do with being a Christian; rather, it was because of his inability to participate in the rigorous physical training that was part of the program. When we went out on runs, he always fell behind. When we did push-ups and pull-ups, he could only do a few. As a result, certain of the trainers punished him for his lack of ability. That man suffered both mentally and physically because he was offensive to the trainers. I personally felt the persecution he received was unwarranted.

But I have also seen people who receive persecution when they are objectionable and felt that they asked for what they got. Even people who profess to be Christian sometimes are offensive because they are over-zealous in their attempts to give witness to their faith. But Jesus did not say, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are over-zealous.” In fact, when it comes to witnessing, He said in MATTHEW 10:16, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” That means that we are to exercise great wisdom and care when it comes to sharing our faith with others. Many people are not careful and come across like they are trying to force or threaten others to accept their point of view. Those people deserve the persecution they receive.

Jesus said we are to rejoice in our persecution, but there is nothing to be proud or happy about when we are persecuted because we have done something wrong or because there is something wrong about us.

1 PETER 2:15 says, “If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.”

So this Beatitude has nothing to do with receiving persecution because we are offensive to other people, unless that offensiveness has to do with our righteousness. The people who are blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.

We must also not confuse being persecuted because of righteousness with being persecuted for religious or political reasons. In the news these days it is common to read or hear about people who are martyred because they believe in some political or religious cause. The word often holds these people in great honor. The late Israeli leader Yitzhak Rabin was slain because he believed in promoting peace with the Arabs. Now, after his death, he is viewed with great honor and respect by the world. But what happened to Yitzhak Rabin is not what Jesus was taking about when He said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted...” Being

persecuted or martyred for a political cause is not what characterizes a person as being part of God’s kingdom.

Nor is being persecuted or martyred because we belong to a certain religion. People of all religions are persecuted by people who belong to other religions. Some of the worse persecution recorded in history has taken place at the hands of people who profess to be Christian. But this Beatitude is not talking about those who are persecuted and martyred just because they belong to a certain religion.

This Beatitude is not even talking about those who are persecuted for being good, noble, or self-sacrificing. As a matter of fact, people are not persecuted for those reasons. The world praises people for being good, noble, and self-sacrificing. But we should question anything that the world praises as being a true characteristic of Christianity. Mother Teresa was recognized and honored by the world for her self-sacrificing work of treating the poor and the dying. But that noble activity should not be considered the most important thing that characterized her as a Christian.

The world tends to love those who are good and noble. The world only persecutes the righteous. This does not mean that the righteous should not be good and noble. They should. But the righteous will be hated by the world, not because they are good, but because they are different. Something about them

makes those who are outside of God’s kingdom feel very uncomfortable. The world feels condemned around the righteous, and the world hates that feeling. In order to eliminate the feeling, people will attack those who are causing them to feel condemned.

Probably the best way to describe what it means to be righteous is to say that it means to be like Jesus. Those who are like Jesus will be persecuted. Jesus said this Himself in JOHN 15:18-20. Listen to the words of our Lord. “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of

the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

No one was more good, noble, and self-sacrificing than Jesus. But when He was around people, they felt uncomfortable. Jesus made the righteousness of the world look cheap, and

that made people mad.

The same thing happened with the Old Testament saints whose stories are recorded in the Bible. Take a look at the story of Cain and Abel for instance. There was something different about Abel that made his brother Cain feel that his own attempts to be good were cheap. Abel did not have to say a word. It was more than just what he said and did that made Cain jealous. It was who he was.

The same thing is true when you look at the lives of people like Moses and David and Elijah and Daniel. These people were criticized and attacked, not because they were difficult or over-zealous; rather, it was because they stood for the truth, and truth condemns those who are living outside of the truth. And we should not think that people living outside of the truth are all outside of the organized church. Nominal Christians, that is people who call themselves Christian by name, will often be the first to persecute those whose lives represent truth and righteousness. Jesus Himself received much persecution from the religious leaders of His day.

Non-Christians, whether they are in the church or outside of the church cannot really admire Jesus. If they admire Him, it is because they really don’t understand who He is. If the non-Christian really knew who Jesus is and understood His claims, he would either yield to the claims or he would hate Jesus. If he

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just admires Jesus, it is because he does not know Him.

In the same way, when the world really knows the Christian and understands the message he is preaching with his life and words, then he will either yield to the message or he will hate the Christian. Our view of the ideal Christian should not be a nice, popular person who never offends anyone. 2 TIMOTHY 3:12 says, “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted.”

In conclusion, we must understand that persecution is not something that we should seek after or desire. In that way this Beatitude differs from the others. The other Beatitudes all talk about virtues that we should desire and seek after.

Nevertheless, being persecuted remains an important characteristic belonging to all Christians. It is the mark of the new birth. We are persecuted when we are like Christ, and the only way we can be like Christ is if we receive a new birth. If we try to imitate Christ, the world will praise us. If we become like Christ, the world will hate us.

The last question is a personal one. “Do we really know what it means to be persecuted because of righteousness?” In PHILIPPIANS 1:29, the apostle Paul wrote, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him...” Does our Christianity make non-Christians uncomfortable, or do we come across as being agreeable to all people?

I do not like confrontation, and I usually do what I can to avoid it. But I am coming to realize that confrontation is necessary if there is ever going to be change. Who we are and what we say must make certain people feel uncomfortable; otherwise, they will never recognize their need to change. The confrontation that results in our receiving persecution

very well may lead to the salvation of those doing the persecuting.

Jesus was persecuted and martyred so that we can be saved from our sins. All that He suffered was necessary for there to be change. The gospel of Matthew tells us that two robbers were crucified with Jesus, one on the right and one on the left, with Jesus in the middle. MATTHEW 27:44 tells us that both those robbers heaped insults on Jesus while they hung on the cross. But the persecution Jesus received was not in vain. In LUKE 23:40-43 we see that one of those criminals who persecuted Jesus changed just before he died.

Christ’s righteousness made people feel uncomfortable. But people must first feel uncomfortable if they are ever going to change. Those who hate the truth about who they are will hate those who bring that truth to light. But some of those people who hate the truth will be convicted that they need to change. And the persecution we receive because of our righteousness will be rewarded by souls being added to the kingdom of God.

We don’t want to seek persecution, but we should not be unhappy when it comes our way. In MATTHEW 5:12 Jesus said, “Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven.”

Application: Most of use need to be challenged to enter into more conflict or encouraged to persevere in the midst of personal conflict. We either need to become more serious at being a witness for Christ or we need prayer and words of encouragement to continue in our witness. Please share your circumstances and allow others to minister to your needs.