

"The World's Reaction to the Blessed Life"

Matthew 5:10

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We have today come to the eighth beatitude, which is the last of the beatitudes. We see evidence that we are at the end of the beatitudes in that Jesus in the eighth beatitude repeated the promise He had first given in the first beatitude, the promise "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This repeated promise serves like a pair of bookends to enclose the beatitudes as a literary unit. The first beatitude says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And the last beatitude says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The beatitudes begin and end with this promise that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the blessed as Jesus of Nazareth has defined blessedness.

This emphasis on the kingdom of heaven and its citizens is understandable. Jesus had come preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Then in the beatitudes, Jesus defined the citizens of the kingdom of heaven and thus told us the essential nature of that kingdom which was even then coming near through the Person and preaching of Jesus. This careful definition of the kingdom and its true citizens was necessary because that generation of the Jews had such a misunderstanding of the kingdom of heaven. They were looking for a nationalistic kingdom established by a political Messiah

using military force. They were looking for a Pax Judaica under the Jewish Christ to replace the Pax Romana under the Roman Caesar. Jesus in the beatitudes is saying, No, No, No. The kingdom Jesus is bringing in is not that sort of kingdom at all. It is a spiritual kingdom established by God's grace through the conquest of sinful human hearts. In the beatitudes, Jesus defined the blessed man, the man who is the true citizen of this kingdom, according to this spiritual understanding of the kingdom of heaven.

The first seven beatitudes are descriptions of the heart character of the born again Christian, and the key to understanding their order is the fourth beatitude, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." Beatitudes one, two and three describe this hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and beatitudes five, six and seven describe the filling with this righteousness until it overflows in one's life.

In our fallen state before our conversion, our hearts were calloused, cold and hardened. We would not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they were foolishness to us. Our carnal mind was at enmity against God. Then the Holy Spirit worked in our hearts in conjunction with the Gospel message. He applied to our hearts the saving power of Jesus' redeeming work. Our hearts which were dead in trespasses and sins came to life, and our first righteous sensation was the spiritual pain of this hungering and thirsting for righteousness. We recognized the spiritual bankruptcy of our sinful condition, we grieved over it with heart-felt sorrow, and we meekly looked to Christ for forgiveness and deliverance. Blessed are the poor in spirit;

blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek. Which is to say, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Then Christ filled us with righteousness. He transformed us into merciful, forgiving people. He transformed us into spiritually pure people who are no longer slaves of sinful living. He transformed us into peacemakers, those who not only are at peace with God but who know how to live at peace with our fellow man.

Notice that the blessed man is filled with the righteousness of Christ, filled with the righteousness of the one who is called the Prince of Peace, and the climax of this filling is that the blessed man is a peacemaker.

Then we get to the eighth and last beatitude, which is of a different nature. It does not directly describe the character of the blessed man but describes the world's response to the blessed man. The world's response to the Christian peacemaker is not peace but persecution. That seems a bit ironic and a bit surprising. Perhaps we were expecting a little appreciation and a little praise. But Peter reminds us:

1 Peter 4:12-13

12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; ...

And Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room on the night before His crucifixion,

John 15:20

20 "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."

Let's now look at the eighth beatitude, and I want to cover three points: the reason for persecution, the roots of persecution, and the response to persecution.

We will begin by looking at the **reason** for persecution, and I mean here the proper reason. You see, Christ didn't say, Blessed are those who are persecuted for any and every reason. No, Jesus said, Blessed are those who are persecuted for a very specific reason. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Not everyone who is persecuted is proclaimed blessed by Jesus. The Chinese may persecute the Buddhists in Tibet, but that doesn't mean that Christ is proclaiming Tibetan Buddhists to be blessed. Hitler may have persecuted homosexuals, but that doesn't mean that Christ is proclaiming homosexuals to be blessed. Christ is proclaiming blessed only those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; that is, those who are persecuted because they have been living Christ-like lives.

Not even all persecuted Christians qualify as those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. A few years ago, I remember seeing a news story about a young boy, a minister's son, who was a student at a public school. He would yell at other students on the playground at the top of his voice, telling them they were going to hell. The boy got into trouble but not for righteousness' sake. He got into trouble for rude and obnoxious behavior.

A few years ago, the Associate Press had an article on a young man in the armed forces who faced a court-martial because he insisted on carrying his Bible on guard duty, even after he had been forbidden to do so. According to the Associated Press, the base commander explained that he was not opposed to the Bible. He said, "It simply is against regulations for anyone to be reading on sentry duty. We don't want his senses distracted from guarding the base." Here a believer was suffering not for righteousness' sake but for insubordination.

If we are suffering discrimination and persecution, we need to ask the reason why. The Apostle Peter left us with an admonition that when we are persecuted, we should make certain it is persecution for righteousness' sake and not for some other less noble reason.

1 Peter 4:12-16

- 12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you;
- 13 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.
- 14 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 He is glorified.
- 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters.
- 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

OK, let's assume that a Christian is being persecuted for what I have called the right reason. Let's say that a Christian is being persecuted for righteousness' sake. Then let's look at our second point, the **root** of persecution. What is the root reason for this persecution?

To begin with, the Christian no longer lives as the world lives, and the world is uncomfortable with that. In John 15:19, Jesus said:

19 "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."

1 Peter 4:3-4 provides a similar explanation:

3 For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles -- when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.

4 In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.

Let me give you a practical example. A Christian employee tries to conduct himself at work in a Christ-honoring way. His boss asks him to make some misleading statements to customers about materials and costs, and he respectfully says that he cannot in good conscience do that. The other workers, who have

all compromised themselves on this point, now resent the Christian because his stand speaks ill of them. And the boss passes over the Christian for promotion or even fires the Christian because he is not a team player.

The world persecutes the Christian for not fitting into its morally distorted way of thinking and operating. The Christian won't laugh at its obscene joke, look at its obscene magazines, go to its obscene movies, etc., etc., and the world is offended. The Christian shines as light in the Lord and thus exposes the darkness, and the darkness for that reason always hates the light.

I am reminded of a short story by H.G. Wells, "The Country of the Blind." In this story, a man stumbles upon an isolated area in the South American Andes where everyone is blind and has been for generations. The gift of sight is totally unknown to them, and their culture is totally oriented toward living in darkness. Their houses have no windows to let in light, and they work their fields at night when it is cool. This intruder stumbles around in their dark world, and they all assume that something is wrong with him. They assume that they in their blindness are normal, and that this intruder who can see is afflicted with some strange malady called sight. They conclude that the compassionate course of action is to blind the intruder, to put out his eyes, so that he will become normal like them.

That's the way it is with the world and the Christian. The world loves the darkness and hates the light, and assumes there is something wrong with the Christian who loves the light.

The world is not only going to persecute the Christian but is also going to revile the Christian and say all sorts of evil against him falsely. The world does this because it needs to convince itself that its persecution of the Christian is justified as something good and noble and right. Jesus said in John 16:2:

2 “They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.”

It's not a simple world out there where the good guys all wear white hats and the bad guys all wear black hats. It's a complex and confusing world where the devil masquerades as an angel of light and where false prophets call what is good, evil, and what is evil, good.

Jesus called the devil a liar and the father of all lies. The devil doesn't come up to people and bluntly say, I want you to do something bad. No, he first tries to convince them that the good is bad and that the bad is good. That is what the devil did when he deceived Eve in the garden. He called the good, bad, and the bad, good. The devil told Eve that God's good creation was bad because it had that one tree whose fruit she couldn't eat. And the devil told Eve that rebellion against God by eating the forbidden fruit was good. He told Eve that eating the forbidden fruit was good to make her wise, to enable her to know good and evil and to be like God. That is the way the devil always works, trying to deceive people and to confuse them into thinking that the good is evil, and the evil is good.

There was an unusually severe persecution of the Christians in Lyons, France, in 177 AD. The Christians in the city were arrested, and then their pagan servants were tortured until they were willing to falsely say that their Christian masters engaged in incest and cannibalism. The pagan authorities then martyred the arrested Christians by throwing them to wild beasts in the arena for a public spectacle. But first they had to make it appear that the Christians were evil and their persecution was good.

So the world hates Christians because Christians can't go along with the world's sinful ways. And the world convinces itself that persecuting the Christians is a good thing by saying all manner of evil falsely against them.

That brings us to our last point, and that is our **reaction** to this persecution. Jesus said to rejoice and be exceedingly glad. We are to rejoice because our persecution puts us in good company. The world has always hated the true prophets and loved the false prophets who were willing to tickle its ears.

So persecution gives us something in common with the godly prophets of old, and even more importantly something in common with Jesus. The world persecuted Jesus. If the world is persecuting us, perhaps it is because our lives have become Christ-like to the point of being a threat to the world.

Jesus also said to rejoice and be exceedingly glad because we will receive great rewards in heaven. That is going to be a great incentive to a genuine Christian, because a genuine Christian has set his mind on the things above, not the things on earth.

The genuine Christian is heavenly minded, and he is more concerned about treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not corrupt and where thieves do not break in and steal, than he is about any treasure on earth.

Romans 8:18 says:

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

2 Corinthians 4:17 says,

17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory ...

That is to say, the afflictions of this life are light and momentary when compared to the exceeding and eternal weight of glory which will one day be ours.

The modern missionary martyr Jim Eliot, who was killed by the Auca Indians of South America in 1956, said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." We cannot keep the things of this world. 1 Timothy 6:7 says:

7 For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.

And our heavenly reward is an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that does not fade away. "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."

Beloved, let me close with this thought. Do you really know Jesus? Do you really have a faith relationship with the Savior? One evidence that you do is that if you have to choose between being on good terms with Jesus or the world, you will choose being on good terms with Jesus.

Beloved, if the sun of persecution does not dry up our commitment to the gospel, then that means that our hearts are not stony ground, which has no depth of commitment to the gospel message. And if we are more attracted to heavenly rewards than we are to the material rewards of this life, then that means our hearts are not thorny ground where the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and make our lives unfruitful. By the grace of God our hearts are good ground in which the gospel message prospers and perseveres and bears the fruit of godly living.