

MATTHEW 5:10-12

INTRODUCTION

Of all the beatitudes this last one seems the most contrary to human thinking and experience. The world does not associate happiness with humility; mourning over sin, meekness etc but this is even more so when it comes to this last beatitude. How can anyone who is persecuted be blessed or truly happy?

Some years ago a national magazine in the USA took a survey to determine the things that make people happy. According to the responses they received, happy people enjoy other people but are not self-sacrificing; they refuse to participate in any negative feelings or emotions and they have a sense of accomplishments based on self-sufficiency.

The person described by Jesus as happy is the completely opposite to the person described by that magazine. Jesus says a blessed person is not one who is self-sufficient but one who recognises his own emptiness and need. One who comes to God as a beggar, knowing he has no resources in himself? He is not confident in his own ability but is very much aware of his own inability. Such a person Jesus says is not all positive about himself but mourns over his own sinfulness and isolation from a holy God. To be genuinely happy, a person must not be self-serving but self-sacrificing. Now the Lord's teaching in the Beatitudes climaxes with this great and sobering truth.

Those who faithfully live according to the first seven beatitudes are guaranteed at some point in their experience to know the truth of this last Beatitude.

Those who live righteously will unavoidably be persecuted for it. Godliness generates hostility and antagonism from our world. There is a price to be paid for being holy.

1. THE PERSECUTION CHRISTIANS FACE

Blessed are all who are persecuted says Jesus. And one reason why we are blessed is that persecution because of Jesus is a mark that we belong to him and are seeking to walk with Him in daily fellowship. Paul tells us in Timothy that all who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12).

Before writing those words Paul had just mentioned his own persecutions that he had faced (2 Timothy 3:11). Although he sought to live a holy life, the consequence of such a life was to face persecution. Of course as long as we live unholy lives, that is lives that do not please God then we have nothing to worry about when it comes to persecution.

But once we identify ourselves with Jesus Christ and begin to live like him then like our Saviour we will face the persecution of the world. In reality you see to live for Christ in our world is to live in opposition to our world and therefore that will bring upon us the persecution and sufferings of the world.

All people who live like Christ know something of the persecution of the world. Jesus knew it; the Apostles and the early church experienced it and so will we if we are seeking to live godly and Christ like lives.

You see Christ righteousness is confrontational even when it is not preached it confronts sinfulness by its very contrast. Godly lives are a constant rebuke to ungodly people, which is why godly people will always know something of the anger and rebuke of this world. But surely my dear friends it is better to suffer for Christ than to enjoy the short-term pleasures of this world.

To be persecuted because of our allegiance to Christ is one of the surest evidences that we belong to Christ. Persecution you see is not incidental to faithful Christian living but it is certain evidence of it. This is the consistent teaching of the New Testament (1 Thessalonians 3:3-4); persecution is part of the normal Christian life (Romans 8:16-17).

If we never experience ridicule, criticism rejection or name calling because of our faith in Jesus Christ then we have every reason to examine the genuineness of our faith. Persecution for Christ's sake is a sure sign of our salvation in the same way that those who do the persecuting is a sure sign that they do not belong to Christ and are therefore perishing (Philippians 1:28-30).

Whether Christians live in a country where freedom of religion is protected or tolerated or whether we live in a country, which has a totalitarian regime, the world will find ways to persecute Christ's church. To live the Christian life in a way that is consistent and pleasing to the Lord will invite resentment and we must expect the world to react to our godly lifestyle for as I said before it confronts the ungodliness within the world.

If you find professed believers who are popular and praised consistently by the world then we must realise that the world has not raised its standards but that those who call themselves Christians have lowered theirs. When Christians are not facing persecution in some way within their society then it means that they are reflecting the world by their life rather than confronting it by their godliness.

Jesus says we are blessed when we are insulted and persecuted and the word "when" can also mean "whenever." The idea conveyed by this term is not that believers will be constantly opposed, persecuted and accused but that whenever those things come upon us because of our faith we should not be surprised or resentful. Jesus was not constantly opposed persecuted or falsely accused nor were the apostles.

There were times of peace and even popularity. But every faithful believer will at times have some resistance and opposition from the world in which we live. Some Christians might endure extreme persecution like our brothers and sisters in North Korea while others of us will suffer minor irritations and frustrations and difficulties because we are Christians.

But whenever and wherever persecution comes to a believer we must always remember that our God will be with us at those times and he will be with us to encourage and to bless. It is our responsibility not to seek persecution nor avoid it, but to be willing to endure whatever trouble our faithfulness to Jesus Christ might bring. We should see it as normal, expected and confirmation that we are indeed real Christians who are seeking to live for God in our world.

The way to avoid persecution is obvious and easy. Live like the world that will cost us nothing. Mimic the world's standards and never criticise it for that will cost us nothing. Keep quiet when it comes to gospel truth and gospel proclamation, never rebuke sin and never speak of punishment or hell. Go along with the world, laugh at its jokes, and enjoy all its entertainment smile at it when it mocks God or takes his name in vain.

Be ashamed to take your stand for Christ and you will never face persecution. But remember all those are the habits of sham Christians, those who claim to be Christians but have no real evidence to back up their profession.

Jesus made it clear in his teaching that following him would be costly and we must be honest with our fellow Christians and with those that we are speaking to about Christ and point out that if they follow Christ with faithfulness then they will pay a price. That price will vary from person to person but everyone will suffer for Christ.

Many of our brothers and sisters throughout the world know what it is to suffer in a greater measure than we do but we do know a measure of it in our own land if we are living for God. Here is a Christian builder. His company asks him to cut corners in his work to the extent that the client would be cheated by not getting what they paid for. The company wants to make more money out of the job so the pressure to cut corners is great.

Perhaps there is even a big financial incentive for the Christian builder if he will do so. But because of his conscience and in obedience to His Lord he refuses to do so and he loses his Job a few months afterwards as a result. He is made redundant and other builders employed instead. That, my dear friends, is persecution for being a Christian.

Then a young mother refuses to listen to the crude jokes at the Mother and Toddler group and comments on the misuse of the name of the Lord. She finds herself out in the cold with nobody wanting to talk to her or be in her company. That is a form of persecution for Christ's sake.

In the early days of the church the price paid for being a faithful Christian was often the ultimate. To choose Christ might mean choosing death. Christians were put to death by stoning or by being used as human torches under the rule of Nero. Sometimes Christians were wrapped in animal skins and then thrown to vicious hunting dogs.

To choose Christ could mean torture by any number of excessively cruel and painful methods. But then that is what Jesus meant when he calls upon his disciples to take up the cross and follow him. He was literally meaning be prepared to die and follow me, live for me.

In resentment against the gospel of Jesus Christ the Romans invented charges against Christians such as accusing them of being cannibals because of the Lord's Supper. They branded believers as revolutionaries because they called Jesus Lord and King.

Jesus here mentions three different types of persecution so let us look at each one.

a) Physical - The word translated "persecuted" has a basic meaning of chasing, driving away or pursuing. However from that basic meaning developed the connotation of physical persecution. All of the other beatitudes have to do with inner qualities, attitudes and spiritual character.

But this one speaks of external things that happen to believers; however it seems to me that the teaching behind this Beatitude has to do with attitude. The believer who puts all the previous beatitudes into practice will have the right attitude towards persecution. They will be willing to face persecution for the sake of Christ.

Such a person will have the attitude of self-sacrifice, they will be willing to pay the price and bear the pain for Christ's sake. The Greek verb here is very interesting for it is in the passive tense, which means it could be translated "allow themselves to be persecuted."

But it is also in a tense known as perfect, which indicates a continuous thing, and in this case it means a continuous willingness to endure persecution if it is the price of godly living. This beatitude speaks of a constant attitude of accepting whatever faithfulness to Christ may bring. It is in this beatitude that our genuineness to all the other beatitudes is severely tested. It is with this one that we are most tempted to compromise the righteousness that we have hungered for. It is with this one that we find it convenient to lower God's standards to accommodate the world and thereby avoid conflicts, suffering and pain that will come with refusing to compromise.

But God does not want us to change his gospel or principles simply because we are facing the prospect of physical pain. There might well come a day in our land when we will face physical

suffering because of our refusal to compromise God's gospel and we must understand that being persecution may well involve physical pain.

The simple question is, are we prepared to endure it for if we are then when that time comes we will be truly blessed that is happy, a happiness that does not depend on personal well being or circumstances?

b) Verbal Insults - Jesus promises blessing to those who are insulted. The Greek word carries the idea of reviling or seriously insulting and it literally means to cast in one's teeth. To be insulted is to throw abusive words to cast one's teeth in the face of an opponent, to mock viciously. So this is not the sort of joking insults that you sometimes get but this is nasty and deliberate and premeditated. To be a faithful Christian means that we will face nasty verbal abuse, Jesus faced insulting words (Matthew 26:67-68) and so will all who follow Him. Faithfulness to Christ may even mean that friends and family may say things that will hurt us deeply even our spouses might insult our faith mockingly.

Words do hurt especially when it comes from ones that we love deeply. But we must always remember that to love God and to follow in the path of Christ will mean even our nearest and dearest turning against us at times and saying things that will pierce our hearts. But such people are blessed says Jesus.

Now although there may be times when we will have to face physical suffering and pain it is more than likely that we will suffer this sort of pain more than any other. In fact the more we become like Christ and the more this church becomes like Jesus then we should expect people to insult us because of our faith.

Sometimes those insults will even come from people who once professed faith but have either fallen away or have never been true believers. People, with whom we once worshipped, now mock us and insult our faith. Those wounds are hard to heal and the pain at times can be unbearable but that to be honest is the price for living a godly life in Christ. It is a sure sign that we are living a life that pleases God for it is clear by the insults that we are confronting the world with all its sin.

So my dear friends don't be surprised when you hear people insult our church or individual people within our church. That is simply the price that we are paying for seeking to be a gospel church in an age when pluralism is rampant and true gospel churches are seen as narrow minded and bigoted. Remember we are blessed when we are insulted, so rejoice rather than being overly alarmed.

c) False Accusations - Finally Jesus promises blessing to those who are spoken about falsely. It is true that unbelievers are prepared to say anything about true Christian people. They will not stop at any evil. Whereas insults are abusive words, which are said to our faces these evil things that are mentioned are primarily abusive words said behind our backs.

Of course once again Jesus was spoken about behind his back they called him a drunkard (Matthew 11:19) and so we who are his followers will likewise have things that are untrue spoken about us and some of the things that people say about us will be evil. Slander behind our backs is harder to take partly because it is harder to defend ourselves at least if people insult us to our face we can respond to it.

But when people are saying things behind our backs then it is harder to do anything about it. Slander can be so easily spread and be believed and before we even find out about it untold damage may well have been done. Much harm has been done to a person's reputation before that person has even become aware of what is being said.

However we must realise that such things happen because of our commitment to Jesus Christ and often there is nothing we can do to stop the false accusations. We must not worry about such things but we should simply call ourselves blessed, because the slander is not really a personal attack upon us or upon our character but upon the one whom we serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is because of Jesus we are told in our verses that people will falsely accuse us and when that happens then we will be blessed indeed.

Of course there will be times when we are physically persecuted or insulted or falsely accused when it has nothing to do with our Christian faith and commitment to Christ. At such times there is no promise of blessing but Jesus makes it clear that when these things come upon us because of our faith and our commitment to Christ then we have much to rejoice about as we will see next week for we are blessed people.

We must also remember that when we are persecuted, insulted or slandered because we are Christians that the real hostility is not against us but against Christ. Satan is Christ's great enemy and therefore he will stir people up against us because we belong to Christ if we were not Christ's he would not bother with us.

Christ is in us so when his people are persecuted then Christ is being persecuted, when we are despised and rejected by the world then in truth it is Christ that they are despising and rejecting. This is why it is easy to avoid persecution for all we have to do is make sure we do not identify with Christ and life will be easier. Compromise what you believe and lower your standards and you will find the world accepting you rather than rejecting you. Love the world and it will love you. However we are called to love Christ. He did not reject us; he did not refuse to face the suffering for us. He was willing to be persecuted insulted and slandered for us. He went to the cross for us.

He gave his life for us. Are we then prepared to follow in his footsteps and give our lives for him? That is what it means to be a Christian. If you are a Christian then you will be persecuted insulted and falsely accused. Are you prepared to pay that price? If you are tempted not too then just pause and think about the price that Christ paid for your salvation.

But if you are not a Christian then you have nothing to worry about. You will not be persecuted for Christ's sake. You will not be insulted or falsely accused. You will be loved and accepted by the world. However you have everything to worry about because to be accepted by the world is to be rejected by Christ. To be accepted by Christ is to be rejected by the world. Which one is it going to be for you? Remember the difference is heaven or hell.

Christian many of your brothers and sisters in the past and at present are willing to pay the price of being a follower of Christ. Are we like them, prepared to suffer for Christ? I trust we are. Unbeliever if you become a Christian you must be prepared to suffer for Christ in some way. If you are not prepared for that then do not trust Christ.

But remember those who reject Christ will one day be rejected by Him. So trust Him, be prepared to pay the cost and you will be blessed.

Amen