

## Happy Are the Persecuted Matthew 5:10-12

### INTRODUCTION

- These Beatitudes are the declaration of present and future aspects of the kingdom of heaven under Jesus' ministry. They are **the gospel of the kingdom**, announced by the Messiah in fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy. They reveal the eschatological blessings, both present and future, of God's kingdom citizens. They are the **entrance requirements** for kingdom life. They cannot possibly be lived by human effort. You cannot secure your entrance into the kingdom by mere **ethical, outward conformity** to these standards. These Beatitudes address the inner longings and desires of the heart and peer deep into the motives of why we conform our lives to Scriptural standards. Only those who have been transformed by God from within have any hope of being obedient on the outside.
- They address those who already are kingdom citizens and invite those who are not to desperately cry out for the mercy of God. To those who respond out of desperation, who are **poor** in spirit, **grieved** over their sin, **meek** in their spiritual disposition and **desperate** for the righteousness of Christ – to these and these alone belong these promises. The purpose of this entire sermon, and especially verses 1-12, is to bring us to spiritual bankruptcy and humble us before the Messiah that we may cry out for His saving grace.
- And we will receive **the magnanimous blessings of God** if we come to Him with these attitudes. The promises in these twelve verses are among the greatest in Scripture. There is **spiritual life and identity** for the bankrupt, **comfort** for grief over sin, a **beautiful and everlasting inheritance** for the meek, an **eternal satisfaction** for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. **Beyond that** there is **mercy** for the helpless, **spiritual sight** for the pure, and **Divine son-ship** for the peacemakers. And finally, for those who are persecuted because of righteousness, there is **blessing, hope, heavenly rewards and earthly joy**.
- **My purpose in preaching is to help us desire the blessings and joys of persecution.**
- **These verses teach us two astonishing truths about persecution.**
- This eighth and final beatitude serves as a test for all of them. Jesus spends an additional two verses expanding on it for that purpose. He wants us to see how central and important and normal this should be for God's people. **This is a heart searching truth**, because **if the believer never experiences any persecution, it may well be asked if there is any righteousness at all displayed in his life**. Righteousness always meets with opposition. Those who follow Christ will follow in His sufferings and persecutions.
- **ILL:** **John MacArthur** spoke on a college campus of 26,000 students in an open forum where several thousand students gathered. He was supposed to speak on Christianity and culture, he did do that for ten minutes and then spent 40 min on the deity of Christ and the gospel message. He reported that God gave him words and the preaching went beautifully. One young man came forward and received Christ, and another came to his office days later and received Christ and later went to seminary. But that wasn't how everyone responded. The campus responded by banning all Christians from the campus, closing the open forum and removing all Christian books. When John spoke on a campus nearby, students from the previous campus came over and screamed and shouted the

entire time so that people would not hear the message he was speaking. People threatened to bomb the church and threatened John and his family. They received calls in the middle of the night with similar threats. John said he never felt more identified with the apostles than in that experience, remembering that Jesus told them “**you will be hated by all on account of My Name**”<sup>1</sup>

- **Jn. 15:18-20** - 18 “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 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**, because of this the world hates you. 20 “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.
- That’s pretty clear don’t you think? If you are worldly, the world will have no problem with you. But if you are **elect** – **but I chose you out of the world** – then you will live a righteous life and the world hates righteousness.
- **Phil. 1:29-30** - 29 For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, 30 experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.
- **2 Tim. 3:12** - Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.
- **1 Thes. 3:2-4** - 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, 3 so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that **we have been destined for this**. 4 For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know.
- **STAT**: Freedom House, which tracks persecution worldwide says that **160,000 Christians** are killed every year for their faith.<sup>2</sup>
- **QUOTE**: The Voice of the Martyrs indicates that “More Christians have been killed for their faith in the 20th century than have been martyred in the total history of Christianity.” One estimate puts the number martyred at **45 million**.

[read 5:1-12]

**Mt. 5:10-12** - 10 “**Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**”

THESE VERSES TEACH US TWO ASTONISHING TRUTHS ABOUT PERSECUTION.

### I. THE BLESSING OF PERSECUTION

**“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.**

<sup>1</sup> Grace to You Radio, John MacArthur, *How to Witness Pt 1*, aired on 10/16/07

<sup>2</sup> Micheal Harmon, “Persecution of Christians is Growing – in Sweden and Canada,” *Press Herald*, 30 July 2004; quoted in Janet L. Folger, *The Criminalization of Christianity* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2005), 16.

- The phrase “**have been persecuted**” is one word, which occurs as a **perfect passive participle**. What the form of that verb indicates is that persecution is an ongoing series of events that began in the past and have continuing effects into the present time. And the persecution is done by others – its not solicited. So the form of this particular verb indicates that we should expect persecution as a normal and ongoing reality, which guarantees our blessing and which comes because of our righteousness.
- **for the sake of righteousness,**
- This is incredibly important. This appeals to the **motive** of our suffering and witnessing activity. We are not blessed just because we are persecuted. We are blessed when we are persecuted because of righteousness. When God’s glory is the primary reason for our witness of righteousness which leads to suffering and persecution, then we are blessed. We are not blessed if we suffer for a **political or social cause**, or for being **offensive** in our manner, or for being **reckless**, or for anything other than righteousness.
- This righteousness that we are persecuted for involves both **gift** and **demand**. It is clearly a **gift** because it is an impossible human standard. The standard of God’s righteousness is absolute perfection (Mt. 5:48), which is precisely why we need the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. Yet righteousness is also a **demand**. We are to hunger and thirst for it. We are to desire it and pursue it. But fulfilling the demand is not a prerequisite for receiving the gift. It is just the opposite. We are enabled to fulfill the demand because we have received the gift of Christ’s righteousness. And that righteousness lived by the Christian is an evidence, a fruit (Mt. 7:16-20), of God’s sovereign rule in your life. So this righteousness that we are persecuted for is **ethical** – it effects out behavior because we pursue a life lived in conformity with God’s revealed will. But it is also **Christological** – Christ-centered – in that we receive the gift of righteousness from Christ and live out that righteousness through Christ.<sup>3</sup>
- **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**
- **The assurance of kingdom life is sealed by the persecution of its citizens.** Far from being a depressing prospect, the suffering under persecution of believers for the glory of Christ becomes a triumphant sign that the kingdom of God is theirs. **How do they know that they are saved, that they belong to Christ, that they have eternal life?** Because they are persecuted for their righteousness!
- Then Jesus personalizes this general truth directly to the disciples and we should see this coming right at us as well. **11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.**
- Sometimes persecution is not physical, but begins as **verbal slander** and **social isolation**. This is certainly the primary mode of persecution in America. People are rarely jailed, beaten or killed for being Christian, but they are often ridiculed, slandered and insulted by the world.
- Again, notice the reason – **because of Me**. This insult is due to our giving glory to God and proclaiming His truth. **This is the great controlling motive of the Christian life** – to do all things because of Christ and for His honor. It is especially true in suffering, that we must be controlled and dominated by this desire, to do everything for the glory of

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<sup>3</sup> A helpful discussion of this righteousness can be found in Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX.: Word Books, 1982), 84-87. I am indebted to his insights for this paragraph.

God. For then suffering transforms into something glorious and the great promises of Scripture come alive and cause us to be joyful rather than sorrowful.

first [The blessing of persecution](#), second...

## II. THE JOY OF PERSECUTION

**12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”**

### A. The command to rejoice

- **Rejoice and be glad,**
- Notice first what we **don't do** in response to persecution. We don't **retaliate**. We don't **fight back**. We don't **get even**. We don't even feel resentment or bitterness. We don't throw a pity party over our suffering and bring attention to it. We don't get depressed by it. We don't resent persecution and suffering. That's amazing! How is any of this possible apart from the new birth? It isn't!!!
- Here we have **two simple commands**. These are absolutely stunning considering the context. The only commands in this opening section of the Sermon on the Mount are right here. They are simple and straightforward, but impossible for the natural man who is outside of God's kingdom. The commands are to rejoice and be glad for your own persecution.
- God commands our emotional response to spiritual trials. We rarely think of commanding our emotions, but that is precisely what God is doing here. He is not telling us to **hope** to feel a certain way or to **pray** that we do feel a certain way. He is **commanding us** to feel joyful in persecution! This is only possible when we are controlled and enabled by the grace of God.
- **1 Pet. 1:6-9** - 6 In this you **greatly rejoice**, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by **various trials**, 7 so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though **tested by fire**, may be found to result in **praise** and **glory** and **honor** at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 8 and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you **greatly rejoice** with **joy** **inexpressible** and full of **glory**, 9 obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

### B. The basis for joy

**for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”**

#### 1. Heavenly rewards

- **for your reward in heaven is great;**
- The promise of future reward is intended to comfort and encourage us in the midst of persecution.
- **2 Cor. 4:16-17** - 16 Therefore **we do not lose heart**, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,
- **Heb 11:13-16** - 13 All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. 15 And

indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, **they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.** Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

- **Heb 11:24-26** - 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 **choosing** rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, 26 **considering** the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; **for he was looking to the reward.**

## 2. Earthly examples

- **For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**
- **Ac. 5:40-42** - 40 They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. 41 So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.
- **1 Pet. 4:12-16** - 12 Beloved, **do not be surprised** at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, **keep on rejoicing**, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may **rejoice with exultation.** 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are **blessed**, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to **glorify God** in this name.
- We should not be surprised when hostility against the gospel rises. In fact, the opposite is true. We should be both **surprised** and **concerned** if there is not open opposition – that would mean that true righteousness in the gospel is not being declared. **The universal popularity of false teachers is the stamp of their counterfeit gospel.** By stark contrast, teachers of God's Word, both ancient and modern, have always walked the road of persecution.
- **ILL:** When American Christian, **Cassie Bernall** admitted to believing in God, she was shot and killed at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999 in Colorado, during the deadly rampage instigated by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. **Later**, while 150 teenagers attended a youth prayer rally at **Wedgewood Baptist church** in Fort Worth on September 15 the same year, a gunman burst in and fired at the crowd. Eyewitness reports say that he loudly ridiculed their religious beliefs. Seven people were killed, and seven more injured before he turned the gun on himself. **More recently**, 24-year-old Matthew Murray of the Denver, Colo. area barged into **New Life Church** in Colorado Springs just as services had ended, killing two and wounding three others. Hours earlier, Murray had killed two and wounded two others at a Youth With a Mission facility in Arvada. A New Life security guard shot Murray, helping stop his murderous rampage against Christians.

- Battle wounds and martyrdom are medals of honor in spiritual warfare.<sup>4</sup> But the reward is far greater than a human commendation – it is eternal life and joy and comfort in the presence of Christ!

#### CONCLUSION

- **1 Pet. 3:13-16** - 13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, 15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; 16 and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.
- Our prayer this morning should not be how we can help those who are being persecuted, but rather how we can be more like them in their witness and share in the glory and blessings of ridicule.

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<sup>4</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. The Bible Speaks Today, gen. eds. J. A. Motyer and J. R. W. Stott (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 52.