

Blessed are the Persecuted

From the Series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe

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Introduction

Let me start off with a bad joke. This was a pretty good joke years ago, but today, maybe not so much. They say if you have to explain a joke, it's not funny. Never the less, I'll explain it. Read on, and you'll see why I'm doing this.

Lots of people like pizza. Everyone has a different idea of what they want on their pizza. Some like pepperoni or other meats. Some like veggies. Some like pineapple. We'll forgive the pineapple people.

Some people like all different kinds of toppings all at once. They want all different kinds of meats along with all different kinds of veggies. So, years ago, when those people ordered a pizza, they would say, "I'd like a pizza with **everything** on it."

So, here's the joke: Have you heard about the new cannibal pizza? That's a pizza with **everybody** on it. I don't have a picture for it. I would normally leave it to your imagination, but in this case, I'll discourage you from attempting a mental image.



Believe it or not, that fits our message today - Just not right away. File that joke away while we introduce today's topic.

We're working our way through the Gospel according to Matthew, and we're still in chapters 5 through 7, which I'm calling the "Christian Manifesto". In this session, we're finishing up the Beatitudes, those nine statements that start with the word, "Blessed". The word "blessed" means people who match these statements are very happy - They've arrived at a wonderful place. Here's the last of these statements:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:10)

As we've been reading these nine statements, we've understood that they appear to be out of tune with the world's way of thinking. For example, the world might say, "Blessed are those

who are happy.” Jesus on the other hand said, “Blessed are those who mourn. (Matthew 5:4)” The world says that the powerful are blessed. Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek (5:5).”

Today’s statement might be hardest of all to understand. Jesus says, “Blessed are the persecuted.” Persecution doesn’t sound good at all. How could Jesus say something like that? Let’s dig in and find out.

I. What is Persecution?

Let’s look at the standard dictionary definition. This is from “Lexico”, the online Oxford Dictionary of the English language:

Persecution

Pronunciation /,pərsə'kyooSH(ə)n/ /,pərsə'kjuʃ(ə)n/

NOUN

Hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs.

‘her family fled religious persecution’

That’s a good start. I think though, that we need to go a little deeper. We need a definition that fits the Biblical model of discipleship Jesus is presenting in his Christian Manifesto. The current definition is a little too broad for that. Let’s bring it back a bit.

We’ll start with just “hostility”. Why are people sometimes hostile towards others? Let’s say one person injures another. For example, someone steps on another person’s foot. It’s an accident (at least we’ll say that for the sake of our example). If someone has been injured, they might react with anger or hostility. Though we can argue that anger may not be the best response based on the previous beatitudes we’ve been studying, at least we can say that anger would be normal if someone has been injured. It might be considered justified. So, persecution isn’t just someone being angry and showing hostility because they feel real pain. It’s something more.

Now, we add the word, “ill-treatment” or “mistreatment”. The word “mistreatment” implies something unjust. Someone is not being treated fairly.

At this point, we have parallel concepts: 1) Hostility or anger that might be considered just. – There’s a real injury. 2) Hostility or anger that’s considered unjust. There’s no real injury to explain bad treatment of a person. Because there’s no real reason, we can add “irrational”.

Persecution is #2. So, why would a person do #2? Why would one person persecute another? Why would they show hostility to someone when they haven’t been hurt? Let me suggest an answer to that.

There are two reasons for showing hostility. 1) Someone thinks they've been hurt. 2) They think they might be hurt.

To really nail down our definition of persecution, we need to do one more thing. We need to ask, "What does hostility accomplish?" Answer: People show hostility to **protect** themselves and what they care about. When someone shows hostility towards another, it has a purpose. Hostility is meant to keep others away, or to drive them away. It's meant to remove a threat. It can also be a form of **revenge** - You hurt me, so I'll get you back.

Having said all this, here's a fuller definition for us: ***Persecution is when one person shows hostility and mistreatment to another person who they wrongly believe to be a threat. It's meant to take away the threat.***

So, to understand persecution, we need to understand what a person or group considers to be a threat and why. We need to identify the target of persecution.

II. The Target of Persecution

Let's return to our original statement: Blessed are those who are persecuted ***because of righteousness...***

"Persecuted because of righteousness." How could righteousness be a threat? Here's an important point: it is to many people. Why?

Once again, we need to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. We've been there many times, so I'll quickly review. If you want to learn about the section of Scripture in detail, I'll invite you to go to the church web site (www.TrinityTeaneck.org) and look up the message, "Life Answers In Genesis - What Went Wrong?" For now, we'll just look at the main point.



God is the Creator of the universe. He is the ruler- the rightful King. On top of this, he's incredibly generous with humans. He cherishes us. So, he created the first humans, Adam and Eve, and placed them in a garden paradise. There, he made them rulers over the whole planet. God could not have been more generous. There was only one rule: Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Enter the Serpent. The Serpent presented three temptations to Adam and Eve. The first two temptations were meant to soften up Adam and Eve. It was the third that brought them down:

“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:5)

This temptation attacked God’s character. It implied that God was holding back on Adam and Eve. According to the Serpent, there were good things that God wasn’t giving to Adam and Eve. Here’s an important point: Adam and Eve had no idea what those things were, really. However, they imagined those things to be valuable.

We can look at this in a lot of ways. One way is to say the Serpent convinced Adam and Eve that God was a threat. There was something they wanted. They didn’t understand what it was, but they wanted it badly. Whatever it was, God, in their minds, was in the way. *He became a threat.* And so, they disobeyed - They sinned.

This is the core of sin: ***Sin is what people do when they want the things of God, but they don’t want God.***

That’s a terrible shame. It’s a shame because the most valuable thing there is can’t be found anywhere in this universe. The most valuable thing is God. He shares himself freely with anyone who accepts him. He does this ***because he cherishes us.***

Now, if you want the things of God, but you don’t want God, you have two options. 1) You can attempt to control God. 2) You can attempt to remove God.

Sin is a terrible thing. One reason it’s terrible is what it does to us. When Adam and Eve sinned, they didn’t just sin for themselves. They started an infection of sin that affected everyone who would follow. Because of their act, we are all born in sin. “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. (Psalm 51:5)”

We are born sinners. This causes us to be born with a distrust of God. We are born believing that God is a threat. So, we try to control him or remove him. This is another important point: We can’t help ourselves. We’re born this way.

When lots of sinful people get together, you get what we keep seeing in Psalm 2. Let’s read it again:

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, “Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.” (Psalm 2:1-3)

One sinner equals one person trying to control or remove God. Lots of sinners equal a whole world at war with God. People want the things of God without God, so God is in the way of

those people getting what they want. He's a threat to them. Because of this, they attempt to kick him off his throne.

This is why those who want God; those who want righteousness, will be persecuted. A sinful world sees God as a threat. If you're one of his, if you work for God, if you represent him, you're a threat, too. And so, the world will be hostile towards you. ***The world will persecute you.***

III. The Reward for Persecution

So, why would anybody want to be persecuted for righteousness? Because, like the other statements in the Beatitudes, there is a reward:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Over the last two sessions, we've discussed the role of peacemakers in the Kingdom. Peacemakers, we learned, are people who understand that the world is at war with God. They understand that God offers us peace through Jesus Christ. Peacemakers start by accepting that peace. They defect from the armies of this world. They begin to pursue God. They begin to pursue righteousness. For those people, there is a place in God's Kingdom.

The Kingdom is a wonderful place. A place where we enjoy not just the things of God, but God himself. And we enjoy those things for all eternity.

Eternity will happen someday. However, we're living in the here and now. So, we ask: What does persecution look like?

IV. What does persecution look like?

What does persecution look like? We'll look at this in four ways:

- A. What did Jesus say in general about persecution?
- B. How was he persecuted?
- C. How were his followers persecuted?
- D. What might it look like for us to be persecuted today?

A. What did Jesus say in general about persecution?

This is the only beatitude with an expanded explanation. Let's read on in Matthew's book:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-23)

We don't need to go too deeply into the meanings of these words. There will be insults. People will say all kinds of terrible things. Insults are meant to cause pain. I'm sure you can fill in the blank on the kinds of hurtful things that people say when they want to hurt others.

Some of the insults will be things that have some truth, but they're exaggerated. Others will be totally false - People will just make things up.

We've already looked at persecution. People show hostility. Hostility might involve exclusion. That's a failure to be invited to events like parties, or any other kinds of celebrations. Other kinds of hostility involve a lack of help when someone has a problem. It might be a silent treatment.

We all say, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me." Sometimes hostility moves over into things that can cause physical harm. Hostility crosses the line to violence.

Maybe persecutors will try to hurt another's means of making a living? People persecute by refusing to hire.

B. How was Jesus persecuted?

What did this look like in the life of Jesus? Here are some examples:

For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' (Luke 7:33-34)

John the Baptist led a very disciplined lifestyle, with practices like fasting. His enemies said, "he must be crazy – he has a demon." Jesus didn't see the need for fasting during his lifetime, so his enemies said he was a glutton. This are only minor cases of the lies told about Jesus.

Let's read about what happened after Jesus was arrested.

The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophecy! Who hit you?" And they said many other insulting things to him. (Luke 22:63-65)

So, here are people who don't even know Jesus. We're told they beat him and mocked him and insulted him. Then, he was horribly whipped. He had a crown of thorns driven into his head. Finally, he was nailed to a cross.

So, Jesus went through all the things he said would happen to others. Here's another important note: ***Jesus does not ask us to do things that he is not willing to do.*** He is our example.

C. Persecution of the followers of Jesus

The followers of Jesus through history have at times suffered persecution - sometimes, terrible persecution. Most of the apostles of Jesus died violent deaths. Paul was beheaded. Peter was crucified. He asked to be crucified upside down because he didn't feel worthy to die the same way his Lord did. James was executed with a sword. Thomas travelled to India where he had a powerful ministry. Sadly, he was killed by soldiers who ran him through with spears.

In the Roman empire after the time of Christ, Christians suffered terrible persecution. At minimum, they had lies told about them. One lie said that Christians had a practice called "communion" where that "ate the body and blood of Jesus". So, people said that Christians were cannibals. Another practice that Christians had was "Greeting one another with a holy kiss". Along with that, they called each other "brother" and "sister". So, people said that Christians practiced incest.

Some were arrested and had their homes and possessions confiscated. Others were tortured. Some died horrible deaths: They were thrown to wild animals in front of crowds. Some were covered with oil and set on fire to provide light for garden parties.

D. What might it look like for us to be persecuted today?

Sadly, there are people all over the world who suffer persecution in the name of Christ today. According to an article from the British Broadcasting Corporation, the British government did a study on persecution. Here's what it said: "The persecution of Christians in parts of the world is at near 'genocide' levels..." (May 3 2019 - Christian persecution 'at near genocide levels') This study found that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world. I've read that in other places as well.

All over the world, Christians are having property confiscated. They're accused of false crimes. They're sent to jail. While in jail, they're treated horribly. They're unable to be hired. If you type "Christian persecution" into any search engine, you'll be confronted with a lot of horrendous material.

Right now, many people in America say, “Well, thank God that kind of thing isn’t happening here!” Yes, thank God it isn’t happening here. However, I’m sorry to say that there is no promise it won’t happen here someday.

We started off our talk today with a joke: The cannibal pizza – the one with everybody on it. Recall that early Romans accused the Christians of being cannibals. Imagine that they had TV back then. You turn on a late-night comedy show. The host starts his monologue. He says, “Hey everybody, have you heard about the ‘Christian Pizza’? That’s a pizza with everybody on it!”

While you watch this, you think, “How stupid - That’s not true!” However, everyone around you is laughing hysterically. *They’re laughing because they believe the lies.*

What would it be like to turn on your TV and see late night TV hosts making joke after joke about Christians? What would it be like to watch TV, and on a regular basis, you see Christians lied about, mocked, and laughed at?

My wife and I went to see a Broadway show about 10 years ago. During the show, one of the characters made a comment that was critical of evangelical Christianity. ***The audience broke out in cheers and applause.*** I noticed that my wife and I were about the only people in the crowd who weren’t clapping.

In some ways the persecution has arrived. Right now, it’s not as bad as other places in the world, and at other times in church history. Sadly, I can’t promise that we will avoid persecution in our lifetime.

V. Our Reaction to Persecution

What is our reaction to all this?

A. Accept and follow Jesus

One reaction is to accept what Jesus says to us. If we choose to pursue righteousness, if we choose to become followers and representatives of Jesus, we will at some point in our lives face persecution. If we do, we can rejoice. Jesus tells us that people are persecuted because of righteousness are blessed. They’re happy. They’ve arrived in a wonderful place. They’re blessed because they will be handsomely rewarded.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven... (Matthew 5:12)

If you can accept this, you will receive a reward of unimaginable value someday.

B. Deny

Or you can reject all of this. Persecution is no fun. Sometimes, life on earth can be pretty good. Sometimes, we'd like to hang on to our possessions, rather than have them confiscated. Sometimes, we like being invited to the parties. This list goes on.

Each of us faces a choice. We can accept or deny. Denial is alarmingly easy to do. It happens on a number of levels.

1) Complete Rejection

Some people completely reject Christ. There have been countless times in history when people have made a profession of faith. They might come to church for a while. But, when their lifestyle is threatened, they throw in the towel. This simply reject Jesus in favor of whatever the world has to offer.

2) Partial Rejection

Some people reject in part. In the days of the Roman empire, the emperors, the supreme leaders, decided that they should be worshipped as gods. Failure to worship Caesar as god was seen as rebellion against the empire.

So, every so often, the authorities would come to your home with a piece of paper. The paper simply said, "I recognize that Caesar is god." If you signed it, you could go back and worship whomever you wanted. You see, the Romans believed in something called a pantheon. That's a word that means, "collection of gods". Many different gods lived in the pantheon.

Romans preferred their gods, but they allowed the residents of conquered territories to worship other gods. The Greeks could worship Diana or Apollo or any Greek god they wanted. The Egyptians could worship Ra or Anubis or any Egyptian god they wanted. All you had to do was sign a little form once a year recognizing Caesar as god. Then you could go back to your own god or gods.

Christians refused to do this. They believed that there was only one God. That led to persecution; all the things we discussed earlier.

Did I say Christians refused? Not all Christians refused. Some signed the form. You see, sometimes the world wants you to completely reject Jesus. At other times though, the world is not so strict. If you're willing to demote Jesus to a level where he is just another God, one of many, equal to all the other gods of this world, you might be able to fit in. You might be able to escape persecution.

Conclusion

What will you do?

Jesus has warned us in his Christian Manifesto that those who follow him will at some point see persecution. They will see unjust hostility and mistreatment. This happens because the world is at war with God. They don't trust God. They see God as a threat. If you follow God, if you follow Jesus, you will be a threat, too.

If you accept this, if you choose to continue as a disciple, Jesus says that you will be richly rewarded. You will have a place in his kingdom.

If you deny, it follows that there is no reward.

Will you follow Jesus? If you do, then the words of Jesus apply to you.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

