

## Sermon 11, Blessed Are the Persecuted

When he is brought before kings, and the case is such that either he must suffer or the truth must suffer, here is a clear call to suffering, and this is reckoned for martyrdom.--Watson

[Some] would study rather to keep their skin whole than their conscience pure.--Watson  
Caesar, seeing a soldier whetting his sword when he was just going to fight, cashiered him.  
--Watson

He that is in love with the world will be out of love with the cross.--Watson

Cursed be that policy which teaches to avoid duty. This wisdom is not from above but is devilish (James 3:15). It is learned from the old serpent. This wisdom will turn to folly at last. It is like a man who to save his gold throws himself overboard into the water. So the politician to save his skin will damn his soul.--Watson

[Pseudo-Chrys.](#): For by how much any is pleased with the praise of men, by so much is he grieved with their evil speaking. But if you seek your glory in heaven, you will not fear any slanders on earth.

OT Reading: 2 Chronicles 24; Bulletin verse: Dan 7:27

What makes suffering blessed?

1. It's in a good cause
2. It's with a clear conscience
3. It's endured with patience
4. It's done with prayer for those inflicting it

Prepare for suffering

1. You must be righteous
2. You must be ready
  - a. Armed with the Word
  - b. Armed with the Spirit
  - c. Given to Self-Denial
  - d. Full of the "Suffering Graces:" Faith, Love, Patience

To be unrighteous and avoid persecution doesn't spare you from suffering

The distinction between "being a martyr" and being what Jesus describes here

Martyr--the emphasis is on the state of mind; what Jesus describes: the emphasis is on the objective condition of the sufferer.

**Proposition:** People with a Christian attitude toward suffering take real joy in the reward promised to their suffering for Jesus' sake.

## Outline

- I. Not What but Why: Why Are You Persecuted?
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  - B. Not for Loyalty to a “Cause”
  - C. For Conformity to the Law of God, v. 10a
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- II. What Is Persecution?
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  - B. Undergoing Direct Verbal and Physical Abuse, v. 11a
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- III. What Is the Blessing Promised to the Persecuted Righteous?
  - A. Possessing the Kingdom, v. 10b
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  - C. Showing Yourself a Faithful Servant of God, v. 12c
- IV. Application: Find Joy in Suffering!, v. 12a
  - A. You must be Righteous
  - B. You must be Ready [consider cutting this point]
    1. Armed with the Word
    2. Armed with the Spirit
    3. Given to Self-Denial
    4. Full of the “Suffering Graces:” Faith, Love, Patience
  - C. You Must Look to the Reward

## Manuscript

I read recently that transgender people commit suicide at a rate 20 times higher than that of people not suffering from transgenderism. The “party line” explanation of this fact, of course, is that poor transgender people receive so much hate and mockery from society that it’s no wonder they’re driven to kill themselves. Now, whether that explanation is accurate need not detain us here. Rather, I want to talk about a martyr complex. If you’re a persecuted transgender individual, it might be easy for you to say, “The world hates me. I can’t catch a break. I’m a victim.” And in a sense, whether those statements are true is immaterial. What I want us to see is the attitude behind them. We call this attitude a martyr complex. As Christians, it’s easy to get this same attitude, isn’t it? “Oh, our country was once so godly and so Christian-friendly. Now all that’s changed. Now Christians are persecuted and discriminated against everywhere.”

Again, the point is not to comment on whether this is factually accurate, but to talk about the attitude.

## Introduction--second version

We are all familiar with a martyr complex. We’ve all seen our children do it. We’ve all seen posturing celebrities do it. And we’ve all done it ourselves. What am I talking about? The

“everybody hates me, nobody loves me, guess I’m gonna go eat worms” kind of spirit that seems to take a twisted pleasure in being the object of everyone’s dislike. We can call it the martyr complex or the victim mentality, but either way, it’s a manifestation of the same thing. Now, the question before us this morning is, Does Jesus tell us to have a martyr complex? Does He command us to walk through life as victims, bewailing our fate? The obvious answer is “of course not.”

Look with me at the text. How many grammatical imperatives are in this passage? That’s right: two. What do they say? “Rejoice, and be exceeding glad.” Now, is anything more contrary to the martyr complex than rejoicing and being exceedingly glad? I don’t think so.

With a martyr complex, the emphasis is on the gloomy state of mind. But in what Jesus describes, the emphasis is on the joyful state of mind. People with a victim mentality take a twisted sort of joy in letting you know how mistreated they are. But people with a Christian attitude toward suffering take real joy in the reward promised to their suffering for Jesus’ sake. We’ll see that in four points this morning: persecution must be for righteousness, it consists in undergoing abuse and suffering, it receives a reward, and joy is the correct response to it.

### **I. Not the Agent but the Reason: Why Are You Persecuted?**

We begin with the obvious. The blessing Jesus gives, the eighth and last beatitude, applies strictly to those persecuted for a certain reason. The blessing is not across the board on all persecuted people. Two things especially are excluded from this blessing.

#### **A. Not for Sin**

The first thing Jesus doesn’t bless is persecution because of sin. If you are suffering because you insist on being a jerk, being a boor, being obnoxious in your presentation of the Christian faith, or suffering because you think you’re transgender and the world is mocking you, or because you think you’re homosexual and the world is mocking you, this blessing does not apply to you. That should go without saying, but I’m just putting it up front here because it’s so obvious.

But let’s dive a bit deeper. Suffering on account of the realities of life in a fallen world is also not blessed here. If your home is blown away by a tornado, or if your backyard falls under eminent domain and is stolen from you to build a nuclear power plant, God doesn’t bless you for that. That’s just the reality of life in an imperfect world.

#### **B. Not for Loyalty to a “Cause”**

Nor does Jesus bless sincere sufferers, political sufferers, sufferers for a cause. You may suffer for your political views or activities, or suffer simply because the prevailing views changed and left you a minority. But it is key to remember that though many political and social causes are direct outworkings of righteousness, many are so distantly related to it that suffering for political reasons is not necessarily suffering for righteousness.

#### **C. For Conformity to the Law of God, v. 10a**

Indeed, the real heart of the issue is here: blessed suffering is only suffering that directly results from conformity to the law of God. Thus, the obvious example is getting fired because you won’t lie to a client or vendor. Suffering for righteousness might also be going to jail because you

won't sleep with the boss's wife, like Joseph. Or it might be losing revenue because you won't open your business or sell your products on the Sabbath day--or, on the other side of that scenario, losing your job because you won't work on Sundays because God made that day holy and told us not to profane it by working. You might suffer for righteousness by having your Christian profession called into question by sincere Roman Catholic family members who think that if you don't have a crucifix on your wall, you must not love Jesus. You might suffer for righteousness by having your kids or your parents perceive you as uncool, a hopeless stick-in-the-mud, because you don't partake of certain entertainments or wear certain styles of clothing. In short, suffering for righteousness is suffering for conformity to God's law. It's having a negative consequence come to you when you refuse to break God's law.

#### **D. For Relationship to Jesus, v. 11**

Now, v. 10 lists suffering for righteousness, while v. 11 mentions suffering for Jesus. The two are parallel; Jesus is claiming that He is as important as righteousness. Now, that could only be possible if Jesus is the true and living God. Righteousness is what God requires. Loving Him by keeping His commandments is the greatest commandment. But Jesus says, "Being in relationship to me is just as important as keeping God's commandments." After all, if things are happening to you for Jesus' sake, it must be because you are affiliated with Jesus in their minds. None of you will say anything against me for the sake of General Electric or Bloomberg News. Why not? Because I don't have anything to do with those organizations. I don't sell their products or write for their news feed.

The other thing we need to see here is that relationship to Jesus is not only as important as righteousness, but is equivalent to righteousness. To be righteous is to be in relationship with Jesus. We could go all over the Bible to prove this. Suffice it to say that by the works of the law no flesh will be righteous in the sight of God. Simply keeping God's law, as you are now, is not enough to make you righteous. Just as Hitler could not have become a good person by simply changing his life around and starting to do good, so you, as a corrupt human being, cannot be righteous simply by keeping the law. First of all, you can't keep the law. Second, even if you could, your record is already black enough that any change now is too little, too late.

No, Jesus is our righteousness. In fact, that is His name, according to Jeremiah 23:6. His name is Jehovah Our Righteousness. So being in relationship to Jesus, whereby His righteousness is credited to your account, is necessary for your suffering to be blessed. If you want your suffering to mean something, to procure some reward for you, then you need to be in relationship to Him.

Now, what might it look like to suffer for Jesus' sake? Well, being rejected by your unbelieving family because you're a Christian. Or being passed up for promotion because you're a Christian. Or, perhaps, getting thrown in jail because you won't worship the Emperor, as our Christian brothers and sisters were in during the Roman Empire. In our day, the god is not the emperor but the god of Tolerance. Refuse to worship Tolerance, and you might find yourself fined hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But on the other hand, you will suffer in this world whether you suffer for Jesus or not. Thomas Watson relates the story of a man who recanted and rejected the Protestant faith because he could not face the thought of being burned at the stake. He was let go. The next week his house burned down and he perished in the flames. God's judgment on sin? Quite possibly. But also this also an illustration of the truth that whether you suffer for Jesus or not, you certainly will suffer in this world, and that's all there is to it. Suffering is inescapable. So don't you want to suffer in a way that has the promise of reward attached to it, if you're going to suffer anyway?

## **II. What Is Persecution?**

Jesus does not just use the word "persecution." He also provides us with examples of what He's talking about. I know I already gave a few examples of what it might look like to suffer for righteousness and to suffer for Jesus, but bear with me as we dive deeper into this concept of persecution.

### **A. Being Driven Off, v. 10a**

The first kind of persecution is the literal meaning of the word "persecute." I still remember this well as one of my Greek vocab words back in college. It means to "pursue, hunt, chase, drive away, banish." I'm not making this up. Persecution is being rejected and driven off. The fact of persecution is not what the blessing is attached to, according to Jesus. Rather, the blessing comes from the reason for persecution.

Just one example, something that all Christians need to be very much aware of, is new regulation about transgender people. This is from title 162-32-040, titled Harassment, from the Washington State Administrative Code. This is not law, but it is regulation, and it effectively has the force of law. These regulations were promulgated on Dec. 26 of last year--just a few months ago.

(2) Prohibited conduct. Prohibited conduct may include, but is not limited to, the following: (b) Intentionally causing distress to an individual by disclosing the individual's sexual orientation, gender expression or gender identity, transgender status, or sex assigned at birth against his or her wishes; (d) The deliberate misuse of an individual's preferred name, form of address, or gender-related pronoun (except on legally mandated documentation, if the individual has not officially obtained a name change) . . .

Do you see what this regulation requires? It mandates that if a woman wants to be called "he," you are, by law, required to call that woman "he." You are required to affirm through your language that it is possible and right for her to lie about her sex. In fact, *you are required to become an accessory to the lie*. Do you see it, brothers and sisters? Do you see how this regulation mandates that, on pain of civil penalty, you must affirm that a woman is actually a man or that a man is actually a woman? In fact, by law in the state of Washington, it is a crime to speak the truth. A similar law in NYC mandates a \$125,000 fine for a regular offense, but doubling to \$250,000 in the case of an aggravated offense.

All Christians, indeed all Jews and all people who believe that God has created us male and female and that no lie is of the truth should be afraid. We do not have in this law simply a

permission allowing those who wish to do evil to do evil. We have here a mandate that *everyone* who has any need to talk about a transgender person must do evil, must speak lies. A law allowing sin is one thing; a law mandating sin is a whole different ballgame. In one sense, we can see how a law like this drives off Christians. Who can afford to say, “Well, I will become an accessory to a lie?” But on the other hand, who can say, “I will just pay the financial penalties for refusing to lie?”

#### **B. Undergoing Direct Verbal and Physical Abuse, v. 11a**

This is what Jesus is talking about when He says, “Revile.” When someone just comes up to you and lets you have it, says a lot of mean things to you, or beats you up, or even tortures you, this also is persecution. Again, notice that the Lord doesn’t say “if,” but “when.” You can plan on this happening if you are really living in conformity to God’s law and really walking with Jesus.

#### **C. Being Falsely Accused, v. 11b**

This is a situation that some of you in the congregation have talked to me about. You are personally familiar with it. It is where someone tells lies about you. It hurts. All kinds of evil things, Jesus says--nothing will be off-limits. You may be accused of crimes so awful you’ve never even thought of them. And yet, this too is the lot of the righteous. All of these are ways of suffering that are specifically mentioned in the text. All of them have come to the righteous in the past, are coming to the righteous now, and will continue to come to the righteous until the Lord Jesus returns.

Thus, we see both that Jesus explains *why* you’re persecuted--because you’re righteous and because you’re affiliated with Him--and *how* you’re persecuted: by verbal and physical abuse, and by any and every attempt to reject you and drive you away.

### **III. What Is the Blessing Promised to the Persecuted Righteous?**

“Socrates discovered part of this eighth beatitude when he taught, ‘It is more profitable to suffer injustice than to commit it.’ But Christ goes even farther. He says it is more blessed, more profitable, to suffer injustice and persecution than not to suffer it! It is positively blessed to be persecuted.”--Peter Kreeft<sup>9</sup>

Now, the positive blessing here is not that you get to experience pain; rather, the blessing is that you get to experience three great rewards promised to the persecuted righteous.

#### **A. Possessing the Kingdom, v. 10b**

The first of these rewards is to possess the kingdom. What does this mean? Well, recall with me if you will the teaching of Daniel 7 on the Kingdom of God. As we read it about 10 weeks ago, it says that “the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him” (Dan 7:27 ESV). This is indeed a tremendous blessing. In some ineffable sense, we will own the kingdom! It will belong to us. Those persecuted for righteousness can say, “The kingdom of heaven is mine and will be

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<sup>9</sup> *Back to Virtue*, 185.

mine in its entirety.” It won’t be yours exclusively, but it will be ours to rule, ours to enjoy its greatness and dominion and its King who is our King too. What this promise means is truly beyond what we can ask or think. If you suffer now for righteousness, you have the promise of a reward so great you can’t take it in.

### **B. Receiving a Great(er) Reward, v. 12b**

But further, Jesus also promises a great reward in heaven. As John Piper asks, won’t we get this reward anyway, whether we suffer or not? The answer is that suffering is tied to reward--not as a way of earning the reward, but as a way of procuring the reward. Just as faith doesn’t earn salvation, but receives it, so suffering doesn’t earn a reward, but nonetheless receives it. And yes, the idea is not just that your reward is great in heaven, but that it is greater if you suffer than if you don’t. “For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory” (2Co 4:17 HCSB). Did you hear that? Paul says that our affliction is “preparing,” “working,” or “producing” (all three are valid translations of his word) a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory!

Do you want a greater reward in heaven? Again, this doesn’t mean that some people are second-class citizens in heaven. But nonetheless, it appears that there are grades and ranks even in heaven. God didn’t make us absolutely equal in every way on this earth, and it’s silly to think that He will do so in heaven. But He does say that one factor in the size of your reward is how much you suffered. After all, God is a just God. We’ll talk more about rewards in a minute.

### **C. Showing Yourself a Faithful Servant of God, v. 12c**

The third blessing promised to righteous sufferers in this passage is that they will get to be like the prophets who were before them. In what way will you be like the prophets? Well, they were persecuted for their faithfulness to God. When you are persecuted for your faithfulness to God, you will be like the prophets. You will have proof positive that something in you is alien to the world and is producing a reaction from the world. All the other beatitudes describe the Christian directly; this one describes him indirectly. You are shown to be a Christian when the world reacts to your righteousness and your relationship to Jesus. In fact, the fact that you are persecuted is a blessing because it demonstrates that the Kingdom of Heaven is yours, it produces additional rewards for you, and it makes you like the great servants of God in the past.

### **IV. Application: Find Joy in Suffering!, v. 12a**

Now, I started this sermon by talking about the martyr complex. Do you see any evidence of that in these verses? Does Jesus ever command us to mope and whine and be sad victims? No. Never. Instead, He tells us that when persecuted, we must find joy in it. We must be exceedingly glad, “leaping for joy” as some translations have it. And so, that’s the application I want to leave you with. Abandon the martyr complex. Instead, prepare to rejoice in suffering.

“How do I do that, preacher?” You may well ask. How can something so awful, so absolutely unjust as suffering for righteousness, be rejoiced in? Well, there are three background qualifications to rejoicing in suffering for righteousness. Without these, you will never rejoice in your sufferings. Not really. So what are the qualities required to rejoicing in suffering?

### **A. You must be Righteous**

This one would seem to be obvious. You must be righteous in order to suffer for righteousness. But I'm going to say it here anyway. In order to have this spirit of rejoicing, in order to avoid the martyr complex, you will have to be righteous.

### **B. You must be Ready**

But more than that, you must be ready. If you're not mentally prepared for persecution, it will not make you rejoice. Far from it. If suffering takes you by surprise, you will probably get depressed, get angry, or both. Psychologically, then, you must expect to suffer for righteousness. Take away the enemy's element of surprise. Show him that he can't catch you napping. When I discovered my food allergies in 2013, it wasn't a huge struggle for me. Why? Because my mother had had food allergies for more than a decade. I was mentally ready for the idea that some foods would be off-limits to me. Mom, on the other hand, took nearly four years to get used to the idea that she couldn't drink milk any more. So aside from recognizing that persecution is normal, how can you be mentally ready?

#### **1. Armed with the Word**

You must be armed with the Word. This is the Sword of the Spirit. This is the only offensive weapon in the Christian's outfit. This is what Jesus used on Satan. This is what will give you strength no matter what happens--the Word! The Word of God interprets reality for us. The Word of God tells us what's going on around us. The Word strengthens us to persevere on the path to heaven. You must be reading the Word, familiar with its contents, memorizing it, practicing it, studying it so that you can understand it better. Without a generous dose of God's word in your heart, you won't be able to know what righteousness is, and you won't be able to keep up a relationship with Jesus. After all, if you were physically separated from your spouse and never read her letters, you would grow apart. Same with your walk with Christ. If you don't read what He says, then you eventually won't know Him well anymore.

#### **2. Armed with the Spirit**

But also, the Spirit gives life. The Spirit is the source of strength. Without Christ you can do nothing, and certainly you can't endure fiery trials unless the Holy Spirit holds you up. You need divine power to endure tribulation--and you have access to it by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In other words, if you're going to be ready to rejoice in suffering, you need to have a strong prayer life whereby you maintain intimacy with the Father and the Son and continually ask for fresh supplies of the Spirit of God.

#### **3. Given to Self-Denial**

If rejoicing in suffering is going to be a reality for you, you need to already be practicing self-denial. If you give yourself everything you want, if you never withhold anything from your lusts, if you eat everything you can hold and buy everything you want, then suffering won't come easily to you. Indeed, unless you're making a habit of denying yourself, you won't be able to handle it when suffering prevents you from getting everything you want.

#### **4. Full of the "Suffering Graces:" Faith, Love, Patience**



Unless you believe God's promises, you won't believe that any reward is attached to suffering. Unless you love God, you won't be willing to undergo trials for His sake. Unless you have patience, you will never be able to endure. All these things are necessary if you would be ready to rejoice in suffering.

### **C. You Must Look to the Reward**

But finally, here's the biggest one of all: you must look to the reward. Jesus looked to the reward, and that's how He endured the cross (Heb. 12:2). Heaven and its rewards have to outweigh present sufferings for you. If they don't, then you will never obey this command. You will never rejoice in sufferings, because how you feel right now will be more important to you than any possible future reward. If you seek glory in heaven, then you won't fear suffering on earth. If you're enthralled with the thought of what Jesus promises to sufferers for righteousness, then the suffering itself won't seem so bad to you.

O, brothers and sisters, focus on the reward! Be ready for what Jesus promises. It will satisfy you. I promise. Amen.