

Blessed are Those who are Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake

Call to Worship: Psalm 95

Hymn #705- *Marvelous Grace of Our Loving Lord*

1st Scripture: 1 Peter 3:8-18, 4:12-19

Hymn Insert- *By Faith*

2nd Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

Hymn #487- *Faith of Our Fathers*

Introduction

This morning, we move on to consider the eighth and final beatitude listed here, in Matthew, Chapter 5: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” And as we have been doing all along, we will begin by considering the object of the blessing (the first portion of the verse), before considering the actual blessing itself (the second portion of the verse).

I. Blessed are Those who are Persecuted for Righteousness’ Sake

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake...” As we come now to this final beatitude, we begin by recognizing three unique aspects that are attached to it, which are worth noting.

1) The culmination of all of the other beatitudes listed, inevitably produce this reality for the true child of God. In other words, because the true Christian contains all of the other virtues that we have gone over (poverty of spirit, mourning the effects of sin in the world, meekness—all the way down to being a peacemaker), inevitably he will, of necessity, be persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

2) Unlike all of the other beatitudes we have considered, which have focused on the inward shaping of the Holy Spirit, upon the heart of the regenerated child of God (dealing with the character and disposition of the individual Christian), this beatitude focuses on the opposing forces, which will come against all who have been granted such godly virtues. In other words, the first seven beatitudes speak of what Christ’s true followers have supernaturally become, while this eighth speaks of the way, in which, those outside of the kingdom will respond to those, who, bearing these virtues, are part of Christ’s exclusive kingdom.

3) Finally, this particular beatitude includes a descriptive extension (in verses 11&12), describing some of the ways, in which, the followers of Christ will be persecuted, and how they ought to respond to such persecutions. We will consider the purpose of this extension, as well, shortly.

Suffice it to say, that this conclusive beatitude is unique for these three stated reasons.

All of that said, let us then consider specifically what this beatitude entails. What does it mean to be persecuted for righteousness' sake? Well, let us consider, first, what it means to be *persecuted*, before considering the phrase as a whole. To be persecuted, at the very basic level, is to be the object of intended harm, and generally, this harm is intended (and often comes) because of something that you believe. And so, one who is persecuted, for whatever reason, is not someone who happens to have been harmed in a fist fight or in some form of mutual combat, but rather, it involves one who is the victim of the one-sided aggressions of a pursuer/opposer, who intends harm because of the personal convictions of the one being pursued. To this end, persecution, in general, is not limited to "Christianity." Anyone, who is pursued and/or harmed for what they believe, can be the victim of persecution.

That said, this is why it is critically important that our Lord adds the clause, "for righteousness' sake," because by doing so, He attaches a specific identity to the person being persecuted, defining the specific reason, for which, they are persecuted. And so, the blessing here, belongs not to those who are general victims or who are even wrongly persecuted (in any sense), but rather, to those who are specifically persecuted "for righteousness' sake." Now, what then does our Lord mean, when He states, "for righteousness' sake." Well, this is clarified in the additional comments given in verses 11-12 [Read 11-12 again].

Here, we find, that our Lord identifies being persecuted for "righteousness' sake," specifically with being persecuted for "His sake." And so, what He means here is this: Those who are persecuted for the sake of the Gospel, and for their obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, in proclaiming His Gospel, are blessed. In other words, this persecution is directly tied to one's personal convictions and desires to remain faithful to Christ, in proclaiming the Gospel, and in living the Christian life that comes out of the Gospel. It is to be persecuted for your Christian

faith. Now, this is important, because, as I said, people can be unjustly harmed and wronged for many reasons, and for all kinds of convictions (other religious beliefs, political convictions, moral values...etc), but none of these have anything to do with what our Lord intends by this beatitude. [Ex: Not Ghandi or some great philanthropist...etc]

Now, before we move on, let me add a few important comments about the *nature* of this persecution, which I believe will help us gain a fuller understanding of all that our Lord intends here. While our Lord clearly intends physical persecution, coming from *personal* opposition from within and without the church (the context of Jewish opposition and His clarifying statements in verses 11-12, definitely affirm this), I also believe that this persecution can entail spiritual opposition, especially in contexts like ours, where religious freedom (at least presently) exists. In other words, the general sense involves all forms of intended harm (physical and spiritual) which come upon Christians, as they strive to persevere in their faith. The key is that their faithfulness to Christ and His Gospel, is the catalyst for whatever form of suffering they are called to endure. Such are the ones who are blessed.

In a nut shell then, Christians must and will suffer for their faith. This is a given. It is part and parcel for the Christian faith, and to teach otherwise; to teach some “prosperity and comfort in this world” gospel, is absolute heresy, and in contradistinction to what our Lord states here, and to that which is taught throughout all of the Scriptures. And so, contrary to the “health and wealth” teachings of some charismatics, the blessing is not upon those who are comfortable and prosperous *in this life*, but rather, the blessing belongs to those who indeed suffer persecution and harm, for the sake of Christ and His Gospel! The Christian norm is a life full of trials and tribulations; it is a very bumpy road, and sometimes the bumps are very painful and full of sorrow, but each bump is an indication of God’s blessing at the same time, particularly, when they come because of our faithful commitment to Christ, and not, on account of the consequences of our own personal sins (1 Peter). [Ill: Lung cancer to a smoker is not persecution; family hardship as a consequence of adultery is not persecution— these may be sanctifying blessings, but they are not forms of persecution, and therefore, do not have to do with what our Lord is specifically indicating here]. [Also preaching at work and fired is not...etc]

Let us then consider, again, one OT example and one NT example to help illustrate what we have gone over so far:

1) For our OT example, I wanted to especially consider someone, who could illustrate persecution coming most directly from a spiritual source. And so, to that end, we consider that great and faithful man of God, Job. While Job's afflictions did involve some physical opponents, such as the marauders who had stolen his livestock, we know that the great source of his affliction was satan himself. And indeed, Job suffered for righteousness' sake. You'll recall that, as the sons of God were appearing before God, that God presented Job, as His faithful servant, to satan. And it was then that satan had challenged God, believing that if he could afflict Job in various ways, Job's faithfulness to God would deteriorate. And so, satan used various means, first to attack Job's livelihood and family, and then, ultimately, to afflict Job with painful boils, from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, so as to attempt to cause Job to curse God. And so, Job's suffering was not for any particular sin/s that he had committed. He had suffered on account of his faith, leaving us an example of one who did not suffer directly from human opposition, but from the devil himself.

2) From a NT standpoint, we can consider the example of the Apostles of Christ, who after faithfully bearing witness to Christ and His Gospel, were whipped by the religious leaders. Indeed, they had applied our Lord's exhortation here, even rejoicing in their suffering, because they were counted worthy to suffer for His Name's sake [See Acts 5:17-20, 40-42].

Now, before we move on to consider the specific blessing which belongs to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, let me make a few comments about verses 11-12, from our main text in Matthew 5. I have already stated that I believe that these verses are added to verse 10, as a means of further explaining what our Lord meant in verse 10. However, let me further add, that while these verses most certainly can apply to any, who suffer persecution on account of their faith, I believe that our Lord especially added these statements, so as to indicate the specific ways, in which, His Apostles, would suffer, most particularly at the hands of the Jews. Recall again, that he speaks this entire sermon, first to His Apostles, and then, indirectly to the multitudes who watch on, as He does so. And here, he personalizes what He has just stated in verse 10, by stating, "Blessed are *you*...when they revile and persecute *you*, and say all kinds of

evil against *you* falsely for My sake.” Our Lord, as it were, is preparing them, specifically for the suffering that they would endure, in keeping with their Apostolic calling, and especially, at the hands of the Jews, for His sake. And He seeks to encourage them, stating, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

He states then, as it were, “Don’t be discouraged or alarmed when you suffer persecution for My Name. Indeed, rejoice, because it is an indication of your being blessed by God (and not cursed), and you are in good company...look at the prophets of old. They likewise had to endure such hardships and sufferings from their own people, and you know where they are now. Your reward will be great!” And so, these added statements are especially for the Apostles, although, the principle certainly follows, for all who suffer at the hands of persecutors, for the sake of Christ.

All of this, again, is particularly important and would have really struck our Lord’s audience, because remember, they had had an erroneous view of the nature of the Messianic Kingdom. The notions of suffering under the reign of the Messiah, and of following a once crucified Messiah, in personal cross-bearing, were far from the thinking of the Jews, who thought the Messiah’s reign would come with immediate world peace and freedom from all oppression. They had hardly a concept of the fact that the Kingdom of God would be built through much suffering, hardship and death, leading into His eternal Kingdom in glory, and not in this world. The Kingdom of the Messiah was never meant to be an immediate earthly kingdom. And so, this final beatitude, along with the additional clarifying statements, were meant to contrast this false notion, while providing Christ’s true disciples with great encouragement, so that, they might cheerfully endure all persecution for Christ’s sake, when it comes. The rewards would be great...but, they were not to be received in this life.

II. For Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

“For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Closing out this list of beatitudes, our Lord returns full circle to the first blessing that He had proclaimed upon the poor in spirit, namely, that the kingdom of heaven belonged to them. Here again, we find that great encouragement,

pronounced now, as a means of encouraging the true people of God, who are called to “lose this life” for the sake of a greater life.” It is, to borrow the words of Jim Elliot, “to give up what you cannot keep, so as to gain what you cannot lose.” What a precious and treasured reminder, to know that the sufferings and hardships and losses of this life, will ultimately spill over into an eternal glory, when Christ’s true people cross the veil of death, into the Celestial City!

“For the Kingdom of Heaven; that one and only eternal kingdom, which is unshakeable, undefiled and built to last forever; that one kingdom, where God forever dwells among His people; that one kingdom, where pain and sorrow and tears and death are known no more; that one kingdom, where unending, all-fulfilling joy is found...belongs to those who are persecuted, and who suffer and lose this life for the sake of Christ!” It belongs to the poor in spirit (not the independent and self-righteous), to those who mourn in this life (not those who rejoice in iniquity), to those who are meek (not the proud and arrogant), to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (and not after the treasures of this temporal life), to the merciful (not the unforgiving), to the pure in heart (not those with corrupt and pretentious motives), to the peacemakers (not the selfish and contentious), and to the persecuted for righteousness’ sake (and not the compromisers and ungodly). Blessed are you, if these virtues have been supernaturally installed in you, as evidences and fruits of a genuine faith in Christ, and in Christ alone!

III. Closing Thoughts

1) In many ways, brethren, it is hard to appreciate this particular beatitude, in a context, where we have enjoyed such religious freedom. But, I believe that there are three facts that come into play here, which can hopefully help us apply what we have gone over:

a- Where physical persecution is limited, due to favorable conditions that accompany religious freedom, we can assume that there will be the presence of intense spiritual warfare and spiritual persecution (at times), which will come against those who seek to faithfully walk with Christ. And while there are times of respite, it is absolutely impossible that any Christian will go long without facing some form of spiritual opposition. Those who seek to faithfully follow Christ will suffer persecution in this life. It is a guarantee. And again, while everyone will suffer in life (because we live in a fallen, dying world, with dying bodies), the people of God will

suffer, most specifically because they strive to remain faithful to Christ. They will and must suffer for righteousness' sake. And to that end, they will be blessed.

b- Some in our country are indeed facing persecution, from physical sources, as well. In fact, this is happening increasingly in our day and age, and it is progressively getting worse. For example, the Christian baker, who refuses to bake a cake that would show any form of support of a sinful practice. He is now facing his third legal battle. The opposition is "hell bent" on destroying this man, because he will not compromise his faith.

To this end, brethren, we can be certain that Christians will be facing various forms of persecution in this country, at increasing levels in the times ahead. That is a guarantee. We have already seen that those who wish to live in a way which is displeasing to God, are not merely content to live that way, but furthermore, they want us Christians to accept and support what they are doing. The pressure is building up, brethren, and here in New York State, it is going to get intense. Religious liberty has already been laid aside, over the vaccination issue. The door is open for a full swing push to compromise over far more serious moral issues. Buckle up for the ride, because more than likely, in your lifetime, you will see and experience some form of religious persecution, and this beatitude will become very relevant for you. And in many ways, it will be the stumbling block, which separates the true people of God from the mere professors.

c- I believe that one of the reasons that we are not facing the intensity of the type of persecution that our Lord describes here, is because many of us have lost our evangelistic zeal. There is no major threat where the Gospel is not being preached. The Gospel is the offense, which provides the catalyst for the type of suffering here described by our Lord. And if we are not, as a church, Gospel oriented, we will pose no real danger to the enemy, who insists on keeping lost souls from finding Christ. Especially in these times, if we push to spread the Gospel, we can expect significant opposition. It is no wonder that in 1 Peter, in the very context where he compels his audience to endure suffering for the sake of Christ, that he also speaks about judgment having to begin at the house of God. Our churches have to be shaken out of the slumber of spiritual indifference, and of getting lost in the cares of this life, before we will truly experience the blessed joy of suffering for righteousness' sake.

2) Let me close then by asking, are you in the battle? Do you experience suffering and trial and hardship for the sake of Christ? Can you describe yourself as being persecuted, in some sense? Does your life reflect any Gospel risk, which would provoke persecution? No, please understand, I am not saying that we should look to intentionally provoke persecution. We don't want to cause unnecessary offense, and sadly, there are some who think that it is a noble thing to do so. Such people intentionally and unnecessarily stir up conflict, and then when they are struck down, they boast in their heroic actions on behalf of Christ. I am not talking about that. But, I am talking about a settled determination to live for Christ, and to shine forth the light of His Gospel. Is it not interesting that in the very next portion of our Lord's sermon, He speaks of the importance of being a light to the world, and of being the salt of the earth? There's no coincidence there. It's an intentional follow-up, to what He is stating here. And if the "salt loses its flavor," if our Gospel fervor grows cold, what use are we then, to the Kingdom of God?" Lord willing, we will address this further next time.

To the unsaved, everyone suffers in this life, and you are dying, just like the rest of us. But, your life has no eternal investment...indeed, it leads to eternal condemnation. You see, Christians are destined to suffer in this life. It's guaranteed. But, it's guaranteed unto a good and profitable end! They are sanctified by it, and God is glorified through it. But you, remaining as you presently are, will die in your sin. And then, you will stand before God in the judgment. And what will all that you have invested in this life, profit you then? What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, at the expense of his never-dying soul? [The Gospel!!!]

Amen!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25