

- h. Over the course of the Beatitudes Jesus referred to dispositions that are purely inward (5:3-6, 8) as well as those that invariably express themselves in outward behaviors (5:7, 9). But whether the emphasis is on inward qualities or their outward expression, in each of the first seven beatitudes the individual's state of blessedness has its point of reference entirely in the person himself; it has nothing directly to do with other people. In the final beatitude, however, the opposite is true: Here a person's blessedness derives from the way others perceive and treat him – "*blessed are those who are persecuted...*" (5:10-12).

Of first importance in this beatitude is the meaning of persecution. Whereas Americans tend to use this term loosely to refer to any undesirable or unwelcome treatment, it carries a much more precise meaning. The Greek verb has the general sense of pursuing or driving away, and in the New Testament is used almost entirely of hostility directed against God's people (exceptions include Romans 9:30-31, 12:13, 14:19; 1 Corinthians 14:1; Philippians 3:12). The term *persecution* is an apt one for the biblical circumstance it addresses since it pertains to a particular form of relational difficulty that arises from perceived or actual differences between individuals or groups. *It is the opposition that attends the perception – if not the reality – that a person or group falls outside of an acceptable standard.* Persecution is a natural human response to deviation from a non-negotiable norm. It may be illustrated by considering an object acted upon by a river current. As long as the object floats with the current, neither it nor the water in contact with it experiences any relative movement and, therefore, any pressure. But as soon as it manifests any motion difference relative to the current, the object instantly experiences the current's resisting and redirecting pressure.

So it is with the human dynamic underlying persecution. For human beings, non-conformity (at least in arenas deemed sacrosanct) sets up a tension that must be resolved. Functioning like the redirecting current of the above illustration, persecution is a universally employed device for resolving that tension.

- Just like a leaf in a stream, as long as a person or group meets the inviolable expectations and demands of his respective culture (whether family, social group, society, etc.), he experiences no "pressure." He is at peace with his surroundings; there is no persecution.
- But let him differ at those points, and he will feel the pressure to conform, with the strength and fervency of that pressure being proportional to the degree and resoluteness of his deviation. Unacceptable deviation provokes persecution, which can extend all the way from ostracism to murder.

Understanding what persecution is and the powerful psychological motivation behind it, it's easy to see why people go out of their way to avoid it.

- The most common way they do so is by conforming (at least outwardly) to the expectations and obligations imposed upon them.

- Notably, where there is refusal to conform, the “non-conformist” will seek to separate himself from those who oppose him, seeking instead the community of like-minded individuals – those to whom he *will* conform.
- But in instances where a person is effectively a total non-conformist, he finds himself withdrawing – or being pushed away – into total isolation; he becomes a “community” unto himself.

Despite their differences, each of the above responses reflects the human compulsion to avoid or alleviate persecution. *This compulsion is as true of those who persecute as those who are persecuted*; ironically enough given its universality, persecution indicates the presence of anomaly within the “kingdom of this world.” That is, it points to a disturbance respecting the normal psychology of human community. A fundamental characteristic of all human social structures is that they cannot tolerate divergence from those cultural features regarded as fixed and non-negotiable. Where such deviation exists, persecution arises to remedy it so that there can again be the “peace” of universal conformity.

This compelling need for uniformity is precisely the reason that cultural communities are marked by common religious belief (social community as co-extensive with religious community). This is true even in Western culture, where the overarching “religion” of pluralism is demanded of all members of society. So ancient Rome permitted the peoples it conquered to continue their own indigenous religious beliefs and practices as long as they submitted to the imperial cult. A person could worship whatever gods he pleased in whatever way he chose so long as he also recognized and faithfully worshipped at the altar of the religious faith that unified the Roman Empire, namely the deity of Rome’s caesar.

The human compulsion toward communal uniformity is also the reason that every culture – whether familial, ethnic, national, etc. – has its *taboos*. Part of being a bona fide and recognized member of a given community (whatever its basis of organization) is abstinence from certain forbidden practices.

Persecution is a universal phenomenon in human society, and so is the reluctance to suffer it. While those who endure persecution may be lauded for their integrity or unwavering conviction, no one wants to take their place. Persecuted individuals may be praised, but they’re hardly considered privileged or enviable (“blessed”). Jesus’ pronouncement becomes all the more knotty when blessedness is understood as God’s distinct favor toward an individual; how do the suffering and grief that attend persecution accord with divine favor? In the judgment of the natural mind, God’s blessing is evident in comfort, earthly provision and ease.

The second thing to observe about Jesus’ final beatitude is the singular provocation behind the persecution He spoke of: Blessed are those who have been persecuted *for the sake of righteousness*. This qualifier is key to the overall meaning of the beatitude, and several things about it are important to note:

- 1) The first should be immediately evident: Persecution always arises from deviation from a demanded norm, yet, in this particular instance, it is a person's *righteousness* that provokes the outrage and opposition. At face value this is a startling assertion, but it speaks powerfully to the very nature of the gospel and its rejection by men.

The righteousness Jesus referred to isn't the mere doing of what is right and good; the context shows that this righteousness has to do with a person's association with the Lord Himself: *persecution for righteousness' sake is persecution on account of Jesus* (5:11). This righteousness is a person's rightness as a human being; it is his conformity to Jesus, the Last Adam, through the renewing and transforming work of His Spirit.

The reason this particular righteousness provokes persecution is expressed by the truism that men love righteousness but hate the gospel. That is, all men recognize and uphold – in principle if not in practice – a personal standard of righteousness (that which is “right”). So also they believe that deity (if it exists) demands “righteousness” of them, but they perceive that obligation in terms of their own definition of righteousness and their personal satisfaction of its demands.

- People are inwardly drawn toward “righteousness” in that self-defined, self-effecting sense; they embrace and exalt righteousness as long as they can define and establish it themselves.
- *What they find absurd and staunchly reject is the notion that true righteousness is beyond the practical and even the conceptual capabilities of human beings and must, therefore, be effected in them as a supernatural work of God Himself.*

- 2) The second thing is the inseparability of righteousness and persecution. When righteousness is understood in terms of conformity to Jesus upon the basis of His new creation expressed in His “gospel of the kingdom,” it is easy to see why it goes hand-in-hand with persecution:

- This gospel of an alien righteousness effected as a sovereign work of God is antithetical to the universal human premise of self-righteousness. And because this message constitutes an unacceptable deviation at the level of fallen humanity, opposition to the gospel isn't confined to certain cultures or historical contexts. All people in every place and time instinctively reject it.
- This is the reason Paul could assert without any hesitation or qualification whatsoever that “*all who determine to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Paul was speaking of what the “righteous” must expect in the age of fulfillment in Christ, but the same relationship between righteousness and persecution has always existed: “...so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (5:12). Israel’s prophets didn’t live in the time in which righteousness was fulfilled, but they saw it from a distance and called God’s covenant people to repent of their self-righteous and self-serving idolatry and embrace God’s righteousness through faith. This gospel was first openly proclaimed to Abraham (cf. Genesis 15:6; Galatians 3:8) and was perpetuated in the message of the prophets (cf. esp. Habakkuk 2:4); not personal works in conformity to legal prescription, but submissive, trusting faith was Israel’s obedience and covenant righteousness.

3) From this it is evident that the persecution Jesus referred to is itself a component of the promise-fulfillment dynamic of salvation history: What the prophets and other holy men endured during the time of preparation was now coming to its ordained fulfillment in the “fullness of the times.” This advance from promise to fulfillment must, however, be understood in qualitative rather than quantitative terms.

- Though the spread of the gospel has broadened the scope of persecution against God’s people, it hasn’t heightened its intensity. The faithful of the Old Testament era were hounded, abused and murdered as much as those of the Christian age (cf. Hebrews 10:32-34 with 11:32-38; also 1 Kings 19:10; Matthew 23:37). The core issue in the matter of fulfillment with respect to persecution isn’t intensity or scope, but *salvation-historical context*.

That is, the persecution of Christians fulfills its Old Testament counterpart by virtue of its christological, new-creational nature and orientation: Persecution in the “fullness of the times” is directed against those who share the life and likeness of the incarnate Christ. *In that way, it is directed against Jesus Himself* (cf. John 15:18-25 with Matthew 25:31-46 and Acts 9:1-5).

- The prophets and holy men during the time of preparation endured persecution as those who looked to and spoke of the coming day of the messianic kingdom (Matthew 13:16-17; 1 Peter 1:10-12; etc.). The holy ones living in the “ends of the ages” endure Jesus’ own persecution because they are His tangible presence in the world. The hatred and opposition of God’s people has now, in the realized kingdom, become hatred and opposition of His Son.

Finally, as the persecution Jesus spoke of has a very specific sense, so also does its reward: “*Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for your reward in heaven is great.*” Jesus attached a great reward to the persecution that comes upon the sons of the kingdom, but one that is “in heaven.”

This doesn't mean, however, that He was relegating this reward to the next life in a place called *heaven*. Many have interpreted Jesus' promise in this way, and so have likewise made the blessedness of this beatitude a matter of hope for the future. The idea is that those who are persecuted are blessed because they will one day inherit the kingdom of heaven and the great reward waiting for them there.

But, as with the other beatitudes, this concluding one first implicates the here and now: The blessed condition of those who endure persecution derives from their *present* share in the kingdom of heaven, which is the reality and realm of the new creation grounded in Jesus' resurrection (5:10b). This doesn't deny a future aspect in Jesus' words; it simply recognizes that they contain a present one as well.

This understanding highlights a corollary problem with the "future hope" view, namely a faulty assumption regarding a cause-and-effect relationship between persecution and its reward. When Jesus' promised reward is assigned to the next life, it's easy to begin to think of it as God's *recompense* for enduring persecution in the present one. Thus Jesus is thought to be saying that those who are persecuted now ought to rejoice because their suffering is earning them a reward in the life to come. But the truth is He was saying something very different. Persecution is associated with a heavenly recompense, but not in a causal way.

First of all, Jesus specifically associated the persecution of the sons of the kingdom with their present blessedness; the connection between their persecution and a promised reward is only secondary and indirect. Moreover, Jesus declared that this blessedness resides in having a share in His kingdom, not in receiving a future reward (ref again v. 10). Jesus' argument, then, is this:

- Being persecuted for righteousness' sake testifies that the persecuted one is truly a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. *He is blessed, not because he has a future reward in a place called heaven, but because he already inhabits the kingdom of the new creation.*
- But citizenship in the kingdom means sharing in the life and likeness of the Last Adam, and it is this union with Christ that provokes persecution. Such ones are persecuted *on account of Jesus* – not primarily because of their doctrine or ethics, but because of their life: The Christian is persecuted because men detect in him the fragrance of Christ Himself (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:14-16, 4:1-11; also Matthew 10:16-25; John 15:18ff).
- *Thus the persecution Jesus was referring to is opposition that first and finally is directed toward Him.* It confirms the believer's share in the kingdom of heaven precisely because it testifies to his union with the King. He is blessed because his life is hidden with Christ in God. That reality – not his suffering under persecution – is the ground of his great reward. He enjoys that reward even now as a blessed son of the kingdom, and his present reward is the surety of its fullness in the consummation.