

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 9: Blessing and Persecution

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Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you (Mt. 5:10-12).

In the eighth and last beatitude, our Lord turns his attention from what true believers are (i.e. their character) to what genuine disciples will experience as a consequence of their righteous condition and behavior. As all the beatitudes were shocking to worldly logic and current Jewish sensibilities, this beatitude was the most shocking of all. After a series of statements that would have perplexed most Jews in Jesus' day, this would be akin to a knockout blow. It would have had a tremendous impact on the hearers who believed that the Messiah would bring great prosperity and the enjoyment of peace, wealth, happiness and honor. After setting forth what a disciple must be, the Savior says that people who follow Him and conform to His teaching will suffer persecution. Instead of honor they will receive hatred. Instead of wealth, luxury and ease the disciples can expect slander and opposition.

By way of introduction, there are a number of things to note regarding this last beatitude. First, (as noted) this beatitude is somewhat different than the rest in that the others speak directly of Christian character, while this one describes what happens to those who possess this character. It is amazing how our Lord places the cost of true discipleship in the forefront of this sermon. He strongly discourages pretenders and those who do not really believe in Him. This methodology is totally contrary to today's message of easy-believism and the prosperity gospel.

Second, the fact that this beatitude follows upon the one about peacemaking is noteworthy. The Christian works and prays to bring peace in this world. Yet, the message of the gospel and a sanctified life often bring conflict, hatred and persecution. The Christ we follow is rejected and hated by this world. The clash of two opposite, irreconcilable world and life views leads inevitably to persecution.

Third, the promise of blessing in this beatitude (possession of the kingdom of heaven) is identical to the first beatitude. Jesus starts with the kingdom of heaven and also ends with it. This stylistic device (called an "inclusion") shows us that all the blessings that Christ gives us ultimately flow from being a member of His kingdom. The Savior emphasizes the spiritual nature of His kingdom because everyone must understand what the kingdom really is if they are going to trust the Mediator and accept the sacrifice and suffering that true discipleship entails.

Fourth, unlike the other beatitudes, this beatitude contains two verses of application. In verses 11 and 12 Christ suddenly introduces the second person plural to remind His disciples that this benediction especially applies directly to them. This would remind the apostles that all the beatitudes are not merely theoretical, but immensely practical; that persecution is what they must

expect if they continue in his service. “This full elaboration of the final beatitude casts a special glamour over it making one welcome persecution when it comes.”¹

As we study this beatitude, we want to examine: why believers are persecuted; what this persecution involves; and the blessing that attends the persecution of the godly.

Persecution for Righteousness Sake

The persecution that Jesus speaks of is not just any persecution, but persecution that is particular to Christians. It is persecution “for righteousness sake.” The term “righteousness” refers to obedience to God’s revealed will that flows from a regenerate heart dedicated to serving Christ. It is godliness that is a result of a saving relationship to the Redeemer. Unbelievers may engage in good works outwardly, but such works do not flow from a sincere love of the Savior. Thus, to “‘suffer for righteousness’ sake, is synonymous with suffering for Christ’s sake; suffering ‘for the Gospel’s sake;’ ‘suffering as a Christian.’”² This assertion is supported by our Lord’s elaboration on this point in verse 11 where the persecution and slander received is “for My sake.” The righteousness that comes from the gospel divides men. Men are either drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit and are sanctified, or they express hatred and hostility toward the Savior by hating His saints. Thus our Lord taught, “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant 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” (Jn. 15:18-20). Similarly Paul writes, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12).

Given our Lord’s reason for persecution, there are a number of things that we must not confuse with suffering for righteousness sake. First, we must not regard suffering for being obnoxious, purposely objectionable and unlawfully zealous as persecution for righteousness sake. For example, the man who has been hired by a company to do a certain task, but instead spends his time disrupting work to witness about Christ and thus is fired has not really been persecuted for obedience to the gospel. The company is in business to be productive and make a profit and any person who interferes with productivity is not submitting properly to authority or doing his job. Many of us have met people who have been fired from a number of jobs for disrupting work by witnessing. These people usually think they are being persecuted as Christians, when the reality is that they are a bad witness for Christ. A good witness does a good job at work and then finds time to witness at the appropriate time.

Further, the person who speaks about the gospel to people in an insulting, obnoxious manner is not commended by the New Testament. The believer is to be humble, meek, gentle and kind as he presents the truths of Scripture. If unbelievers are to be offended they should be offended by the gospel and not our arrogant or objectionable presentation of it. This point, of course, does not mean that boldness and admonition is to be avoided, but that our own defects, sins and anger must not obscure the message of the gospel that we want to convey. The person who witnesses to the local chapter of the Hell’s Angels and tells them that they are stupid idiots is not using wisdom or discretion.

¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 194.

² John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:144.

Second, this beatitude does not speak about people who are persecuted for various non-Christian causes. This would include the persecution of all non-Christian cults (e.g., Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.) and persecution for various political causes. For example, people who work for democracy in China or Cuba are often imprisoned and tortured. These people, however, are not being persecuted for Christ's sake. People who are killed while working for the Peace Corp or for famine relief in war-torn Africa are not blessed by God. This does not mean that famine relief is bad, but only that the enmity must be directed against Christ and His cause, not some secular humanistic organization. People often attempt to make martyrs out of people like Robert Kennedy or Martin Luther King. Neither man, however, was serving Christ; neither man's death had anything to do with Christianity. They were martyrs to secular humanism and pluralism, not the word of God.

Third, this beatitude certainly does not apply to Christians who suffer because they have done something wrong. As Peter says, "If you are reproached for the name, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter" (1 Pet. 4:14-16). When a prominent minister is caught in adultery and the matter is repeatedly shown on television and the internet, he only has himself to blame. Professing Christians who suffer because they have done something wrong and attribute it to persecution are guilty of blame-shifting.

Now that we have removed some of the confusion regarding suffering for righteousness sake, let us return to the reason for persecution and examine this topic in more depth. Why is it so common for unbelievers to hate and persecute Christians? What is it about Christian righteousness that so offends unbelievers? There are a number of things regarding the Christian that unbelievers dislike and even despise.

First, unbelievers hate a sincere believer's holy life of separation from the world. Peter writes, "For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lust, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you" (1 Pet. 4:3-4). Because Christians have repented and turned their backs on their old unconverted lifestyle of scandalous sins, vices, perversions and idolatry, the heathen are perplexed and angered. They believe that Christians are complete fools, giving up what they regard as great pleasures. They no doubt are angered because such repentance implicitly condemns the heathen manner of life as vain and wicked. When a person decides to follow Christ, he will no longer run with the crowd. He must part company with old friends. He must repeatedly refuse invitations to go out and party as before. This leads first to astonishment in his old companions and astonishment soon turns to hatred and rage. Throughout history Christians have been accused of being unsociable, boring snobs. The Puritans especially have been vilified as people who just refused to have any fun. "[W]hen the Christian prefers cleanness to filth, righteousness to sin, the people of the world speak evil of him."³

Persecution arises because the heathen do not like it when men part company with their corruptions. They strongly desire to have others infected with their sins so that there is no one to make them feel ashamed for their evil way of life. Their god is their sinful lust and the separated Christian stands as a public witness against their sin. "Profane men cannot abide that the godly

³ Gordon H. Clark, *A Commentary on First and Second Peter* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, [1967] 1993), 138.

should be a credit and reputation beside them, partly because of their natural enmity against them, Gal. 4:29, and partly because their way is a shame and reproof to theirs, as Christ's was to his enemies, John 7:7."⁴ Therefore, they spread lies to damage the reputation of the godly. They try to lift themselves up by falsely putting the Christian down.

Second, the ungodly hate Christians because of their loyalty to Christ and His Word. The Christian life is a battle and believers are Jesus' soldiers. Our lot in life is to live and teach the supremacy of Christ over all things. And what could be more offensive to the natural man than the teaching that his beliefs are all wrong; that his whole life is deceit and vanity; that his greatest love is nothing but idolatry; that he must acknowledge his sin, lay down the weapons of his warfare and flee to Christ as Lord and Savior? The ungodly are led by the worldview of Satan and their loyalty is to darkness rather than light. The gospel is despised as foolishness and the messengers of the gospel are hated because they have exposed the great lie of all unbelief. "The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (Jn. 3:19-20).

When men are faced with the light (without a work of God upon their heart), they always choose the darkness. "They shut themselves up to the darkness. They cut themselves off from the light. Why do they do this? Because 'their works were evil.' Immersed in wrongdoing they have no wish to be disturbed. They refuse to be shaken out of their comfortable sinfulness. So they reject the light that comes to them."⁵ Thus, the unbelieving scientist who accepts evolution does not just disagree with the Christian creationist. No, he hates him. He mocks him. He wants to verbally destroy him. Similarly, the homosexual finds it necessary to hate and attack every form of Bible-believing Christianity. This is where the slander, lies and persecution come in. The sodomite rights movement must first lie about Christians (e.g., Christians who are faithful are full of hate speech). Then they do everything within their power to get the civil magistrate to shut off the light of the gospel. This involves direct persecution by the state. Because unbelievers hate the light and want to shut it off, they are always looking for ways to mock and attack believers. They look for hypocrisy, inconsistency, sin and then seize upon them and blow them all out of proportion. They attack the message by attacking the messenger. The unbeliever hates and opposes Christians because their message and their lives expose him to the light.

Before we end our discussion as to why believers are persecuted, we would do well to briefly consider God's sovereign purpose in allowing His church to suffer. It is quite ironic that severe persecution has often indirectly been a great blessing to the church. This is true because God uses the affliction of persecution to purify His people. Persecution not only drives unsound, carnal professors of religion out of the church (cf. Mt. 13:20-21), but also causes the righteous to cling more tightly to Christ and His Word. "It purges our pride, impatience, love of the world. God washes his people in bloody waters to get out their spots and make them look white (Daniel 12:10)."⁶ Under persecution the genuine character of a man's faith is revealed. In suffering for Christ we demonstrate our loyalty to Him. "A true saint carries Christ in his heart and the cross on his shoulders."⁷

⁴ Alexander Nisbet, *1 and 2 Peter* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth [1658] 1982), 161.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 233.

⁶ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 262.

⁷ *Ibid*, 269.

What Does Persecution Involve?

When our Lord amplifies this beatitude in verses 11 and 12, He switches to the second person plural, looks directly at His disciples and tells them what will happen to them. Thus, although these verses apply to believers throughout history they especially apply to the apostles and the first Christians. Jesus tells the disciples what their persecution will involve.

The word persecute has the sense of “to make to run or flee, put to flight, drive away”⁸ and thus the churches in Jerusalem “were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Ac. 8:1); and can have the sense of “to harass, trouble, molest.”⁹ Saul pursued Jewish believers with the intent of “dragging off men and women, committing them to prison” (Ac. 8:3). Obviously there are degrees of persecution and the kind of persecution that Christians presently experience in America is nothing like the persecutions of Nero, Stalin, the papacy and certain Islamic nations where believers are pursued until they are tortured and killed. If we include the parallel statement in Luke’s account, the Savior uses the following terms to describe what persecution will involve.

Persecution first begins with hatred. Luke writes, “Blessed are you when men hate you” (6:22). In non-Christian nations and cultures when a person publicly confesses Jesus and commits himself to the biblical world and life view, unbelievers are often filled with hostility and hatred. Persecution always begins in the unbeliever’s heart. Hatred is the attitude that lies behind evil words and acts toward God’s people. It is the foul spring from which persecution flows. The wicked hate God and Christ and must suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Thus, they despise those who profess it, live it and especially preach it. They disdain God’s holy law and hate all those who stand up for its obligation and authority; who attempt to follow it out of gratitude for salvation, a means of sanctification and a rule for civil order. They hate Christians because the holy gospel convicts and condemns them both in their beliefs and in their lives.

The Jews hated Christ because of His doctrine and life: His teaching on His divinity and equality with the Father (Jas. 5:17-26; 8:57-59; 10:28-39); the abiding nature of the moral law as opposed to their additions and human traditions (cf. Mt. 5:17ff.); His doctrine that men are justified by faith in Him apart from the works of the law (Jn. 8:24); His refusal to accept or participate in corrupt man-made ordinances (Mt. 15:3-9); His impeccable character; and the performance of signs and wonders that proved His authority. The Jews did not hesitate to heap insults on the Redeemer, addressing Him as follows: “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (Jn. 8:48). Hatred of believers always begins with a hatred of Christ. “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you” (Jn. 15:18).

Second, persecution involves exclusion. “Blessed are you when men hate you and when they exclude you” (Lk. 6:22). The term “exclude” refers to social, religious and economic exclusion. The first generation of Christians often suffered excommunication or complete expulsion from the synagogue for their belief in Jesus (cf. Jn. 9:34). Our Lord’s statement is likely an allusion to Isaiah 66:5: “Your brethren who hated you, who cast you out for My name’s sake.” Persecution usually begins with apostates because they cannot tolerate the righteous and want nothing to do with them. The first Protestants suffered severe persecution at the hands of the wicked and corrupt Roman Catholic Church. Today, in America, strict Bible-believing Christians are ridiculed and mocked by the civil government, the news media, universities and Hollywood. They are the object of derision by an evil, adulterous and perverse generation.

⁸ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker [1901] 1977), 1378.

⁹ Ibid.

Believers also often suffer persecution by types of economic exclusion. We read about such exclusion in Revelation 13:17, which says those who do not receive the mark of the beast on the hand or forehead will not be able to buy or sell products in the market place. Given the time indicators and context this likely means that those who do not hold an allegiance to Caesar as divine with the mind and hand would have their livelihoods removed and their businesses closed. Also, in the Roman Empire, people who made and sold various goods usually belonged to guilds. These guilds usually required participation in some form of cultic ritual, which included eating the meat of an animal sacrificed to the guild's god. This would render membership in such guilds as antithetical to the Christian faith. Thus, when rank paganism is an integral aspect of culture, Christians are forced to exist on the fringe of society.

Third, those who persecute believers "revile" them. The word translated "revile" in the KJV is *oneidizo*, meaning to reproach or upbraid. The word reproach means to accuse, blame or censure someone for a fault, for something committed that is bad. In cases of persecution the accusations are always false. The Jews accused Jesus of being demon-possessed, a bastard, a Samaritan, a false prophet, a liar, a glutton and a drunkard. All of these accusations were, of course, completely false. This is persecution by the tongue. Those who are not willing to murder Christians seek to murder a believer's reputation. The wicked love to reproach the righteous. "In Acts xxviii.22, *the sect* is represented as *everywhere spoken against*. Slander is a part of the Christian's portion. He must endure the persecution of the *tongue*. He must expect to be misrepresented, both as to his principles and his practice."¹⁰ The ungodly do this to seek to justify their wicked behavior.

Receiving reproach and slander was a common experience for believers for almost three centuries in the Roman Empire. Roman pagans made all sorts of disgusting accusations against believers. Because early Christians often rescued abandoned babies and because of the symbolism of the Lord's body and blood in the holy supper, believers were accused of sacrificing infants and of eating their flesh. The Christian love feasts or fellowship meals were twisted by the heathen into sex orgies. The Christian view of the second coming and the kingship of Christ was said to be revolutionary incendiarism. Because Christians did not bow down to any statue or idol they were even accused of being atheists. Thus, the most gentle, law-abiding people in the Empire were viewed as dangerous, rebellious and unethical.

Fourth, closely related to reproach is slander. In Matthew's account we read, "Blessed are you...when they say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake" (5:11). Luke writes, "They...cast out your name as evil" (6:22). Thus, unbelievers engage in malicious gossip and slanderous public accusations against believers. Early in Jesus' ministry the Pharisees said of our Lord's followers, "But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed" (Jn. 7:49). Later, the Jews would slander Paul's doctrine accusing him of teaching: "Let us do evil that good may come?" (Rom. 3:8); and, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1). The papists also accused the Reformers of teaching antinomianism which was completely false. Whether through everyday gossip or through various witnesses, judges, corrupt church officials or civil magistrates, the Christian must expect slander. "Note, There is no evil so black and horrid, which, at one time or other has not been said falsely of Christ's disciples and followers."¹¹ Apostates and unbelievers will treat godly Christians as evil, as someone whom they do not associate with. They attack the believer's good name in order to strike at the very person and in doing so they are really lashing out at Christ Himself.

¹⁰ Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 195.

¹¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:52.

Thus, we see that being hated, ridiculed, mocked, slandered, excluded, abused and persecuted is the normal lot of every sincere Christian. Suffering for Christ's sake is a badge of true discipleship. It indeed is a privilege and honor. "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Ac. 14:22). "For to you has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. 1:29). Thomas Watson writes, "Though Christ died to take the curse from us, yet not to take the cross from us. Those stones which are cut for a building are first under the saw and hammer to be hewed and squared. The godly are called 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:5). And they must be hewn and polished by the persecutor's hand that they may be fit for the heavenly building. The saints have no charter of exemption from trials. Though they be ever so meek, merciful, pure in heart, their piety will not shield them from sufferings. They must hang their harp on the willows and take the cross. The way to heaven is by way of thorns and blood."¹²

The persecution that Christians receive in our day in the United States, Canada, Western Europe and places like Australia is obviously not as severe as what Christians experienced under the Jews and pagan Romans, yet it is real nevertheless. The almost universal abandonment of the Christian Sabbath has shut believers off from many economic opportunities (e.g., retail, restaurants, sports, real estate, many sales jobs, etc.). Today, the hatred and ridicule of Bible-believing Christians is acceptable, popular and widespread in our culture. Pagan relatives are often highly offended by a Christian's strict biblical family life. People at work often see Christians as prudish, out-dated idiots. Further, as Western nations' law systems become more consistent with their humanistic, secular, positivistic and evolutionary concepts of law, countries will (some already have) pass laws that force believers to break the law and place themselves in jeopardy of prison and large fines (e.g., hate speech laws or laws that forbid Christians from calling homosexuality a sin and laws that would force Christian churches and organizations to hire sex perverts [e.g., homosexuals, cross-dressers, "trans-gendered,"] etc.). Also, we must not forget that far more Christians were murdered for their faith under communist regimes in the twentieth century than all the believers who died during the three hundred years of pagan Roman rule and the thousands of Christians murdered by the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and Reformation period.

The Blessing that Attends Persecution

Jesus says that those who are persecuted for righteousness sake are blessed, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:10). When our Lord expands and applies this beatitude He adds, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt. 5:12). There are a number of things to note about this blessing.

First, Jesus comes full circle and returns to the blessing of the first beatitude: those who are persecuted for Christ's sake already possess the kingdom of heaven. Salvation is theirs. They are justified, sanctified and adopted into God's own family. Those who have lost all because of their loyalty to Jesus have gained much more. "All the grace and the glory that results when God in Christ is recognized and obeyed is theirs even now."¹³ "Let persecutors do their utmost to rob the godly of all that they have, yet they cannot rob them of heaven, for it is said, the kingdom of

¹² Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 259.

¹³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 280.

heaven is theirs.”¹⁴ Their homes may be destroyed. They may be banished, imprisoned or even tortured and slain. Yet, heaven and paradise is theirs. They are in possession of a place where they will never again shed tears, or suffer pain, or experience hardship or persecution. We must remember the words of Paul when we suffer for Christ: “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). We see that one of the ways that believers are to cope with trials and tribulations is to have a future orientation. The unbeliever lives by sight and cares about present pleasures and this world’s glories. But the Christian looks beyond this present world and sees heaven. He makes sacrifices now and suffers now with the faith that the kingdom of God is his and can never be taken away.

Second, those who suffer persecution shall receive a great reward in heaven. Believers who suffer persecution not only possess heaven, but shall also receive great rewards from the Savior for their suffering. These are rewards of grace, for it is the power of the Holy Spirit which enables us to endure suffering and the rewards we shall receive far transcend our service. As we are persecuted we must focus on our love for Christ and the fact that in the future, out of present sight, we have eternal heavenly rewards. These rewards are not like earthly treasures which moths, rust and thieves can destroy, but instead are completely secure. Jesus promises us that when we suffer and have our liberties and even life itself removed from us that He will abundantly recompense us for all the difficulties we have experienced for Him.

Third, persecution for righteousness sake is an indication of the genuine character of our faith and of our true brotherhood with the holy prophets who suffered before us: “For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt. 5:12). This point is especially addressed to the apostles and ministers of the gospel who follow the prophets in being persecuted for preaching against sin in the nation and apostasy among God’s people. When ministers are faithful in applying the Word of God to all areas of life, they are fiercely attacked by the heathen, by wicked and heretical professors of religion and by false teachers. “Moses was reviled again and again (Exodus v.11; xiv.11; xvi.2; xvii.2; etc.). Samuel was rejected (1 Samuel viii.5). Elijah was despised (1 Kings xviii.17) and persecuted (1 Kings xix.2).”¹⁵ According to the church fathers, Isaiah was sawn in half with a saw (see Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*; and Heb. 11:37). The prophet Jeremiah was repeatedly persecuted and abused (cf. Jer. 12; 20; 26; 36; 37; 39; 43). According to Jewish tradition he was forced by the Jews to go to Egypt and then stoned to death by them. Micaiah was evil spoken of, beaten and cast into prison (2 Chron. 18:17-26). Both Ezekiel and Daniel were persecuted (Ezek. 2:6; 20:49; 33:31, 32; Dan. 3:24ff.). Amos was falsely accused of conspiracy and forced to flee (Amos 7:10-13). “Nehemiah was oppressed and defamed (Neh. iv.). The Savior Himself, the faithful witness of God, was put to death by the people to whom He ministered. Stephen was stoned, Peter and John cast into prison, James beheaded, while the entire course of Paul was one long series of bitter and relentless persecutions.”¹⁶

Fourth, those who are persecuted for Christ’s sake are not to fret, grieve or be depressed about it, but are commanded by our Lord to “rejoice and be exceedingly glad” (Mt. 5:12). Luke says “rejoice in that day and leap for joy!” (6:23). Matthew uses the present tense, emphasizing that this great joy must never leave the Christian during his time of suffering, while Luke uses the aorist tense to note the urgency of the command—“immediately rejoice.” The fact that Jesus commands His disciples to rejoice to the extent that they leap for joy in the midst of persecution

¹⁴ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 48.

¹⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

can only be truly understood by a Christian. This attitude of great joy for persecution is often seen in the book of Acts: “So they departed from the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (5:41; cf. 4:23-31; 16:25; 21:13-14).

Why are Christians to greatly rejoice when they are persecuted for righteousness sake? The Savior gives two reasons (enumerated above): your reward in heaven will be great and they persecuted the prophets before you. In order to rejoice we must have a completely different perspective on life than unbelievers. We must gladly sacrifice comfort, ease, peace and pleasures now for Christ, to secure the eternal rewards of grace later. If the heathen are willing to buffet their bodies and expose themselves to great danger in the present for a temporal earthly glory, what should we be willing to do for heavenly reward? As Christians we must not be overly concerned, sad or depressed about present sufferings because we know that they cannot be compared to the glories that await us. “If he that gives ‘a cup of cold water’ shall not lose his reward, then much less he that gives a draught of warm blood. The rewards of glory may sweeten all the waters of Marah.”¹⁷

Every Christian who suffers for the faith stands with the holy prophets of old. They take their place along all the great martyrs of the past. If we are to join this holy company in heaven, we must endure suffering by faith as they did. The martyred saints have had their faith tested and were victorious. Let us rejoice when we are given this great privilege. “Not in spite of our persecutions are we to rejoice, but because of our persecutions. The wounds and hurts are medals of honor. They attest that we belong to Christ not to the world. In war promotion is rapid, and the war for Christ never ceases.”¹⁸

Fifth, other portions of Scripture speak of persecution as a blessing because it helps sanctify us and makes us more mature as Christians. James says, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience” (1:2-3). Paul writes, “We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character hope” (Rom. 5:3). Peter exhorts persecuted believers saying, “You have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:6-7). “Persecution is called the ‘fiery trial’ (1 Peter 4:12). God has two fires, one where he puts his gold, and another where he puts his dross. The fire where he puts his dross is hell-fire. The fire where he puts his gold is the fire of persecution. God honours his gold when he puts it in the fire.”¹⁹

Other Applications

As we consider these verses on the blessing of persecution for righteousness sake, there are a number of things that we should focus on and apply to our lives.

First, the Christian who is truly following Jesus and leading a godly life should expect some kind of persecution or opposition from unbelievers in his life. Belief in the gospel results in a sharp distinction between believers and unbelievers. This division often causes unbelievers to lash out at the message and life of those whose worldview condemns them. If we think about this truth and the blessing that attends persecution, we will maintain a godly composure in such circumstances and will respond to insults and slander in a biblical manner. If we are full of joy

¹⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 295.

¹⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 197.

¹⁹ Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 290.

instead of anger and/or depression, we will not be tempted to lose our temper, lash out or try to force a situation. We will be able to respond to hatred with kindness and leave the matter in God's hands.

Second, if our lifestyle is worldly and our doctrine is heterodox and syncretistic, we should not expect persecution, but rather praise from unbelievers and apostates. In other words, the application of this beatitude is both positive and negative. This point is brought out by one of the words in Luke's account. "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets" (6:26). A professing Christian who tells dirty jokes at work or hangs out with unbelievers in the bar after work is praised rather than ridiculed because his words and life do not reflect Jesus Christ. If a believer is acting the way he should, unbelievers will not want to spend time associating with him and they certainly will not praise him.

Likewise, when ministers teach secular humanism or antinomianism and are unwilling to talk about the moral law, sin or the judgment to come, they are praised by pagan society. The world speaks well of them because their doctrine does not have the sharp antithesis between God and fallen man, light and darkness. They are false prophets who speak the world's philosophy, but dress it up with Christian terminology. In our day of widespread idolatry, hedonism and apostasy, popularity and numbers in a congregation or denomination must not be confused with God's blessing. It can be, but more often than not it is a sign of heterodoxy and corruption.

Third, this section of Scripture stands as a sharp rebuke to all professing Christians who engage in malicious gossip, slander and reviling of other believers. It is one thing for the unregenerate to speak evil of Christians. This is to be expected. But very often good men of God are attacked by other church members. This ought not to be so. A person who habitually slanders and reviles other Christians needs to examine his own heart as to whether or not he is even regenerate.

Fourth, we must have a biblical mindset when suffering on account of Christ. We must look beyond this present evil age to heaven and the rewards of grace that come with obedience and perseverance in trials. We must imitate Jesus, "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross" (Heb. 12:2) and those heroes of the faith who viewed themselves as strangers and pilgrims on this earth who desired a heavenly country (see Heb. 11:13-16), "of whom the world was not worthy" (Heb. 11:38). We must live our lives like Paul who did good works knowing that on the day of judgment "each one's work will become clear" for "it will be revealed by fire" (1 Cor. 3:13); that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). When we suffer, we must focus on Scripture's glorious promises of paradise and great reward. The reason that Scripture repeatedly mentions the reward is precisely to help us endure the trials and sufferings that come with serving Jesus. A day of perfect justice is coming and Christ Himself is the judge.

Fifth, given the previous points, do we experience joy when we suffer for righteousness sake or do we worry, complain and get angry? Our Savior commands us to rejoice, leap for joy and be exceedingly glad under such circumstances. The next time we are abused by unbelievers or ungodly professing Christians do we stop and examine our attitude to make sure we are obeying Christ or do we feel sorry for ourselves? These types of commands are often difficult because they run counter to our emotions. Therefore, such commands require meditation upon the Word, faith and practice. Let us more and more put this beatitude into practice in our lives.

