October 18, 2015

“Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted”

Matthew 5:10-12

**FCF**: Struggle with “persecution”

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Christ has shown us the path for our lives – including persecution.

(magnet) We need to hear and pursue this.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

The search for life beyond Earth has been in the news lately. Last month came the news from NASA that water exists on Mars. Last week came the news of evidence that, at one time, Mars had streams and lakes. As if that wasn’t enough, astronomers announced the discovery of a distant star with an odd flickering pattern. That caused a few to say, “*Alien life!*” theorizing this was caused by a swarm of mega-structures built by space creatures passing in front of the star.

Honestly, that’s desperate. And may tell us more about the astronomers and the reporters than the observations they are reporting. But such is the desire to believe we are not alone.

That said, we have received a message so strange, alien, other-worldly that it couldn’t possibly be merely human in origin. It had to come from outside. And we have it right here.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 5:1-12 (vv.10-12)

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Next week being Reformation Sunday, my plan is to speak on the life and lessons from a figure of Church History. This year, I’ve chosen the 19th century British preacher, Charles Spurgeon. Some of you may know he faced great hostility in the London press. It was so bad that his wife, Susanna, framed these words and hung them in their home (READ Matthew 5:10).

Some other such examples. ISIS recently released video footage of three men crouched in the sand wearing orange jumpsuits. Three men wearing desert camouflage and black masks stepped behind them, each raising a handgun to shoot these three Assyrian Christians in the head.

Perhaps you’ve heard of Saeed Abedini. He is an Iranian American pastor detained by the Iranian government for three years now. Why? Allegedly compromising national security.

Or Aaron and Melissa Klein. They are the husband and wife owners of a bakery in Oregon, ordered by the state to pay $135,000 in damages for refusing to bake a cake for a same-sex wedding. Not at all out of any animosity but simply out of their religious convictions.

What’s the thread you can trace through these? The persecution of faith, of allegiance and loyalty to Christ. Each of these folks deemed the trinkets of this life not comparable to the great treasures of the next, the applause of man worthless in view of the sweet approval of God.

This is the final Beatitude, a look at the citizens of the kingdom, at followers of Christ. It is not something for us to massage and decide. It is for Him to maintain and declare. Christ has shown us the path for our lives – including persecution. We need to hear and pursue this.

But what would this mean? What would it involve? As we have with each of the Beatitudes over the last few weeks, we’re going to get at this by asking three questions. First, who is Jesus speaking of? Second, why is He describing them in this way? That is, why are they said to be blessed? And, third, those things being true, how then can they be true of you and me?

1. **WHO ARE THEY?**

So, who are they? Who is Jesus describing here? What is this persecution He speaks of?

1. *Definition of Persecution*

Let’s start with a definition. For we need to be clear as to what we’re talking about here.

1. Positively

This is more than just resistance to the gospel. It is opposition and hostility to the gospel. And there is a spectrum worth noting – not just extreme forms but verbal and relational forms as well.

1. Negatively

But let me add something else. It’s not that it’s to be enjoyed or sought. Nor is it the result of our sin, tactlessness, or foolishness. Persecution is not getting a bad grade because you stayed up late with that sweet young thing or ignored your duties to talk to a coworker about Jesus.

1. *Explanation of Persecution*

Which takes from a definition to an explanation. Why does this come? Jesus tells us.

1. For righteousness’ sake

(READ Matthew 5:10a) It comes in response to living by the promises and commands of God.

1. On my account

That is, kingdom values. And also commitment and loyalty to the King (READ Matthew 5:11). Note, by the way, the implicit claim Jesus makes to divinity. The prophets were persecuted for their loyalty to God. The disciples will be persecuted for their loyalty to whom? To Him.

So, who is Jesus speaking of? Those who are persecuted for the King and the kingdom.

*Illustration:*

And the best example we have is the treatment the King Himself received – the rejection, scorn, torture, and death He suffered. Isaiah predicted this long before (READ Isaiah 53:7-9).

*Application:*

We should note the connection between the treatment the leader and the followers receive (READ John 15:18-20). So the next time we hear of ISIS beheadings or the trampling of religious freedoms or face the insult and rejection of peers for Christ, we should not be surprised.

We should be surprised when we don’t hear of or face these things. Why? Because of the fundamental animosity and opposition between two kingdoms – that of Christ and the world.

Christ has shown us the path for our lives – including persecution. We need to hear this.

1. **WHY ARE THEY BLESSED?**

But that raises a question. Why are such people said to be blessed? To be blessed is to be those Jesus says we should admire, envy, imitate, and emulate. How can that be so here?

1. *Because of the Reward*

(READ Matthew 5:10-12) They are blessed because of their reward.

1. Not earned but granted

Now this reward is not something earned. God owes us nothing. This is something granted.

1. Not beat down but lifted up

This reward is not something earned but granted. And is given to those who, by all appearances, are beaten down but are actually being lifted up. There is a greatness that defies appearances.

1. *Reflected in the Response*

They are blessed because of their reward. And it is reflected in their response.

1. Not as we would otherwise

Did you catch it? It is not as we would do. Jesus speaks not of sulking, retreating, or retaliating.

1. But rejoicing

But rejoicing. Literally, this reads “rejoice and leap exceedingly.” Now let that settle in. “As you look back and see the noble line of succession of which you are a part and the badge of authenticity your faith has received, as you look forward to the glory that awaits and far outweighs the passing pain you suffer, know and hold to what awaits. Rejoice and be glad.”

So, why are they said to be blessed? Because of the reward, reflected in the response.

*Illustration:*

This Beatitude is a part of a composite whole. Let me explain. If you go to where Jesus likely spoke these words, on the NW corner of the Sea of Galilee, you’ll see a church built at the top of the hill, the Church of the Beatitudes. The floor plan is octagonal, each side representing one of the Beatitudes. You cannot remove one of those walls without causing it to collapse. It’s the same here. This is not a list from which to choose. This is what it is follow Christ.

*Application:*

These are the people Jesus says are blessed – to be admired, envied, imitated, and emulated – including this (READ Matthew 5:10). These people are blessed. Wondrous words.

Why? They are the ones who have had their faithfulness confirmed. Their loyalty to Christ has been such that it has, in the best sense, provoked a response from the world.

So their faithfulness has been confirmed. And their faith has been tested as not just words spoken into air. Their commitment to Jesus – proven in the fire and shown to be real.

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1. **HOW CAN THIS BE TRUE OF US?**

But that still leaves us with this last question. These things being true, how can they be true of us? Especially in our context and our need to know how to understand the forms of persecution we see in the news and may face ourselves. I have three thoughts to pass on.

1. *Get Sobered Up*

We tend to be angry, fearful, disheartened with such things. We need to get sobered up.

1. Call out the myth

We need to call out the myth of the good old days for what it is – a myth. To say of our country “All was right. Now it’s all lost” is a fantasy. The reality is that this is a spiritual war zone.

1. Read our history

And it always has been. From the earliest days of Church History, through every stage, wherever the gospel has gone, persecution has come. And God has been great and good.

1. *Check Our Vision*

We need to get sobered and then to check our vision, to allow our values to be reoriented.

1. Hear the good news

That starts with hearing the good news and appropriating it for ourselves. The King has come and is coming again. Things are not as they were meant to be and will not forever be this way.

1. Act out of that

We need to hear that and then act out of that. Just as the early church did when facing beatings and stonings, mocking and insults, slander and ostracism, intimidation and threats, imprisonment and death – counting every one of those lighter than the counterweight of glory to come.

1. *Open Our Hearts*

And one more thing – we need to open our hearts. To love and serve our persecutors.

1. Expect to be noticed

Here’s the thing. We should expect to be noticed. The Christian life offers a wisdom test. That is, when it comes to sex and relationships, if we live this countercultural way with a commitment to serve the community, the wisdom of that lifestyle will bear itself out. It will be noticed.

1. Extend mercy and care

Which will come into play when people find themselves burned and broken by going their own way, needing a place to heal and be loved. Where will that be? Where they were loved before.

How can this be true of us? Getting sobered, checking our vision, opening our hearts.

*Application:*

This is other-worldly, a reversal of the world’s standards. And our hearts’ inclinations. How is it even possible? As we’ve seen in this second half of the Beatitudes, by tracing our way back up the path, beginning with this brokenness before God and then flowing out from there.

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**CONCLUSION:**

We have an instinctive desire to be liked. And there’s nothing wrong with that. But that must never become an end in itself. Why? It can often be a mirage. Or, worse, even betray us.

Suffering for the true Christian is inevitable. Few men in recent decades have understood this better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer seems to have hardly wavered in his resistance to the Nazi regime, knowing full well it could have meant imprisonment, torture, danger to his family, and even his own death. He was executed by the direct order of Heinrich Himmler in April 1945 in the Flossenburg concentration camp, only a few days before it was liberated.

But this was the fulfilment of what Bonhoeffer had believed and taught (READ quote):

Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means *passio passiva*, suffering because we have to suffer. That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true Church, and one of the memoranda drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the Church as the community of those “who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel’s sake”… Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of his grace.

Bonhoeffer’s writings will stretch you. For starters, they were translated from German. And they come from another culture, another context – both geographically and historically.

But there’s a bit more to it than just that. Again, (READ quote) “*Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of his grace*.” Is that not alien to us, other-worldly? Little surprise then it will stretch us, sound foreign in our ears and confront us.

And the reason is because such words are a reflection of these words (READ Matthew 5:10). Ah, my friends. May the Lord give us ears to hear Him. And hearts to heed His call.

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