

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness

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[0 : 0 0] now we have a few different passages to look at together a couple from John's gospel spent a lot of time in John's gospel recently and then we'll be back in Matthew so here in John chapter 3 and at verse 16 we read we're going to read down to verse 21 we read there for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life for God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only son this is the verdict light has come into the world but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed but whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God and then John chapter 15 and beginning at verse 18 down to verse 25 where Jesus says if the world hates you keep in mind that it hated me first if you belonged to the world it would love you as its own as it is you do not belong to the world but I have chosen you out of the world that is why the world hates you remember what I told you a servant is not greater than his master if they persecuted me they will persecute you also if they obeyed my teaching they will obey yours also they will treat you this way because of my name for they do not know the one who sent me if I had not come and spoken to them they would not be guilty of sin but now they have no excuse for their sin whoever hates me hates my father as well if I had not done among them the works no one else did they would not be guilty of sin as it is they have seen and yet they have hated both me and my father but this is to fulfill what is written in their law they hated me without reason and now our beatitude which is in Matthew chapter 5 and from verse 10 to verse 12 blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven blessed are you when people insult you persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you

I want to begin with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer he said this suffering is the badge of true discipleship now Bonhoeffer as you may know was someone who was imprisoned and tortured and ultimately killed for opposing Hitler and the Nazi regime during the second world war that regime that rejected Jesus and rejected the values of Jesus saw Bonhoeffer and those like him in the confessing church as voices to be silenced they were standing on the side of Jesus so they needed to be got rid of I came across a statistic this week a very sobering one that between the years 2000 and 2010 it is estimated that there were one million Christian martyrs one million people killed because of their faith and today you can read of stories of religious persecution in different parts of the world where even the the covid pandemic is being used as a as a weapon to deny poor suffering Christians from getting aid and relief as they have already been denied work or land or freedom so especially if you're a part of the clue our next missions night in December will focus attention on work for the persecuted church so that'll be a Wednesday night at the beginning of December and we're going to pray for the persecuted church shortly think how challenging the idea of persecution is for our day and for where we are we live in a culture of comfort that's very risk averse we like our comfort and security and we live in a time where any kind of inconvenience is unwelcome even at the most moderate level where you know we lose internet connection and it's oh it's a disaster so you think about persecution and our gut instinct most likely is to think of how to avoid it so this final beatitude continues to challenge us just as the others have so we're going to think about three things together that Jesus teaches us here about persecution first of all the reality of persecution this is very much a when not an if it's interesting to notice maybe you noticed it as we were reading the change of vocabulary so so the main body of the the beatitudes blessed are those blessed are those but in verse 11 blessed are you when people insult you persecute you and falsely say all kinds of things about you so here's an emphasis deliberately from Jesus to the disciples right in front of him you will face persecution they are being told loyalty to Jesus brings rejection not recognition and acclaim to pursue righteousness to aim for integrity mercy to be concerned for justice to live looking to practice mercy and to live out God's standards while we would expect to be applauded perhaps as as model citizens will actually Jesus says put you in the firing line

because we find ourselves in the heat as Christians of spiritual battle and and our lives of righteousness when they are lived before the world challenges the moral indifference that we see around us challenges the conscience of people and that is not something that is popular and that's the consistent teaching of Jesus that's why we read those passages in John's Gospel so we read in John chapter 3 we read that sort of the famous Gospel verse about God's love for the world that those who would believe would have eternal life but Jesus goes on to say that though he is his light and though he has come to give love and to bring life people prefer darkness they actually hate the light they hate Jesus they don't want to feel exposed and Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount will say to the church you are the light of the world and so a similar thing happens with Jesus as with his followers and then in John 15 we read there and that's just after that that wonderful section where Jesus said I'm the vine and you are the branches and that call to abide in him and to bear fruit and then he goes on immediately to talk about well the world hated me so don't be surprised when they hate you he says to his followers you've been chosen out of the world by God's grace saved by grace so you no longer belong to the world so that the world rejects you and so Jesus teaches the disciples and teaches us that if we want to represent the Lord Jesus Christ if we want to represent his righteousness and some will be drawn to the light like if you're out in the dark you switch on a light and you'll see insects being drawn to the light but others will want to extinguish the light so they can continue to to live in the darkness of their sin without having that guilt being exposed the consistent message of the Bible is that spiritual warfare is real and there are no neutral countries there is no middle ground that we can find and we can trace that conflict right through the Bible and indeed through church history there is Adam made in the image of God living in God's perfect world with Eve and the enemy comes

Satan who wants to destroy and divide and lead them into sin we see the conflict between spiritual good and spiritual evil there with with Moses and Pharaoh who wants to resist God and resist God's plan we see it with Israel and the nations Israel is called to be a light to the nations but the nations want to extinguish and eliminate the people of God and the purposes of God and sadly to Israel too often fail to be that light we see it with King David who has to face the opposition of the giant Goliath who would defy God and the armies of God we see it when Jesus arrives in the world and King Herod wants to kill him as an infant and we see the powers of his day colluding together to have Jesus crucified just as God's saving plan had ordained and then we see in the book of Acts and through the rest of the New Testament that the church is attacked and persecuted by the religious authorities and by the powers of Rome and so we see that story continue so it's important that as Christians we recognise that we must on the one hand pursue righteousness and we must expect that to be costly in our workplace to pursue honesty and integrity to avoid the gossip or the backbiting in your classroom to maintain the moral values that the Bible lays out to live in our society wanting to be guided by biblical truth is going to mean people will take pot shots at us and that's a hard thing

Jonathan Dodson in his book *Our Good Crisis* says the only way we're going to do this is when we decide to bank everything on the truth that Jesus loves us and that belonging to him and his kingdom is worth it Let's think now for a few moments about the nature of persecution because it's important for us to recognise in these verses that there is a kind of persecution that is blessed and there are different forms that persecution takes So first of all let's think about this what persecution is and is not blessed Jesus is not saying every time we suffer that we are blessed when we are persecuted because of our unrighteousness

[13 : 16] If we do wrong and we face consequences if we sin and we face consequences is that persecution?

No, that's punishment and that's a different thing So we're not blessed if we're persecuted because of our unrighteousness and we're not blessed if we're persecuted due to our self-righteousness So we know what that looks like when we're judgmental towards others when we are offensive towards others Yes, there is the offense of the gospel but we don't want to be personally offensive and vindictive to others We don't want to be proud in the way that we talk to and about others It's why in the letter of 1 Peter so much is about character and speech as we live as exiles, as we as Christians are foreigners then it's important that we show honour to people It's important that we give people proper respect and that we speak about our truth with gentleness We look to persuade people with our humility and kindness So we're not blessed if we're persecuted because we're self-righteous

What persecution is blessed though? It's when we're persecuted because of righteousness In other words, when we are loyal to Jesus When we are loyal to the values of Jesus and when we look to live those out with the character of Jesus then we are blessed even as we are persecuted Jesus, just a few verses later in chapter 5 and verse 16 will say, in the same way Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven So we are to shine at a light in the darkness To be persecuted means to be mocked or despised to be alienated or snubbed To be humiliated for trying to live that way For trying to live as a follower of Jesus We are familiar with the concept of being guilty by association

I still remember as a naive first year student wearing a certain set of football colours in the wrong part of Glasgow And because of an association with a particular football club receiving the shouts and the insults that go with People reject Jesus People reject his gospel So they will reject and persecute those who are loyal to Jesus and the gospel We are persecuted by our association with the Lord Jesus So when we suffer, we want to suffer because we are doing God's will That's the suffering that's commended when we are doing good for the sake of Jesus What forms can persecution take?

Verse 11 is helpful in this It says, blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me So we have drawn and we will later draw attention to the physical persecution that's mentioned there because we are aware today that we have brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are being attacked and being imprisoned and being denied basic rights and being martyred today Now that's not our experience Most of us will not experience physical persecution But Jesus does refer to emotional persecution And maybe that's something we identify with where we are demeaned because of our faith where we're cut out of conversations, miss out on opportunities where we are shamed because we're Christians

[17 : 44] And there is also verbal persecution perhaps a whispering campaign perhaps it's slander or outright lies because we want to follow Jesus Persecution can be obvious or it can be subtle it can be public or it can be private But as a church as Christians we need our eyes wide open Jesus teaches it's inevitable We follow after all a persecuted cross-carrying saviour So again to go back to Peter he said don't be surprised by the fiery trials And in all that as we are aware that persecution is something that is real for the Christian we also need to recognise again that our response matters In our community discipleship groups we're spending time in in 1 Peter and again we're seeing time and again that call to honour and gentleness and to bear up under suffering for the sake of the gospel

And as we do so we remember that we are following in the footsteps of Jesus Jesus again in the Sermon on the Mount chapter 5 verse 44 said I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you And Jesus of course practised what he preached Do you remember as Jesus was there on the cross being mocked having been savagely beaten and now hung up to die prayed Father forgive them they don't know what they're doing Jesus died on the cross out of love for his enemies If you're a follower of Jesus you are once an enemy and it was out of sheer love and grace that Jesus came to reconcile you to make enemies into friends So Jesus loved us when we were persecuting him when we were resisting him and his will

And it's so important to remember that Jesus has done that to give us strength and to recognise too that he promises to be with us to give his Holy Spirit to help us so that we can love others that we can pray for others that we can honour those who mean ill against us Now the last thing to say the radically challenging thing to say is that Jesus calls us blessed when we are persecuted and he calls us to in verse 12 rejoice in persecution rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you now how counter-cultural is this this isn't this isn't Jesus saying run from persecution but embrace it rejoice when you are persecuted now how in the world can we do that

Jesus gives us two reasons in verse 12 the first reason is the reward of the kingdom of heaven the Beatitudes have got as it were a kingdom of heaven sandwich verse 3 first Beatitude blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven the last Beatitude blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and then the other Beatitudes in a sense are the filling this is what we receive now and we look forward to in the future as those who are part of the kingdom of heaven as we rejoice in suffering out of loyalty to Jesus he's saying to us that you will be comforted and you will inherit the earth when you hunger and thirst for righteousness you will be filled you will be shown mercy you will see God you will be called sons of God the reward of the kingdom of heaven is how we can rejoice in persecution and that requires a very different perspective to recognise that here we may lose but in heaven there is gain ultimately the reward is God himself and so we want our trajectory our perspective to be that we want to live for him and to see him as our great reward so we can rejoice in persecution because of the reward of the kingdom of heaven but then we can also rejoice because when we are persecuted as followers of Christ it's a sign of our genuine faith that's why Jesus says look it was the story for the prophets in the Old Testament anybody who wants to follow after

God's ways follow after Jesus will face this Acts chapter 5 verse 41 the apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they'd been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name suffering disgrace for Jesus at the end of the day in God's eyes the persecuted church is on the right side of history mocked attacked despised even killed but those who are loyal in battle receive that medal of honour which is the crown of life John Stott in his book on the Sermon on the Mount says that the ways of the God of Scripture seem topsy-turvy to people that's nowhere I think more clear than here to go back to Bonhoeffer who we began with he says this discipleship means allegiance to the suffering

[24 : 07] Christ and it is therefore not surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer in fact it is a joy and a token of his grace in closing let me encourage you as I want to encourage myself examine your allegiance and your loyalty is it to Christ or is it to comfort are you ready to stand up for Jesus to embrace persecution as reality for the sake of living as the people of God and as we reflect on that remember the Saviour who went into battle for us the one who suffered and was persecuted and was killed for us the one who stands with us so we're not asked to do this in our own strength these are ideals for the people of God to follow those who are filled with the Spirit those who have the presence of Jesus the Saviour those who have our Father in heaven who watches over us blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and.