

Persecuted Blessed

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[0 : 00] Our text today is the gospel according to Matthew chapter 5 verses 10 through 12, wherein we hear Jesus speak the eighth of his famous beatitudes.

Since all eight are interrelated, let us once again read Matthew chapter 5 verses 1 through 12.

Matthew 5 beginning at verse 1.

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up onto a mountain and sat down. His disciples came to him and he began to teach them saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

[1 : 14] Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of me.

Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. The word of the Lord.

You may have noticed that in each of the other studies in the Beatitudes, I have read the text and then I have prayed something like this.

Lord Jesus, thank you for enabling Matthew the tax collector to remember your words and to write them down accurately for our sake. Will you now help us understand your word?

And more importantly, will you help us actually live into the reality your words are describing? I am not so sure.

[2 : 21] I want to pray that way around the eighth beatitude. Who wants to live into the reality of being persecuted?

I gladly want Jesus to help me live into the reality of hunger and thirst for righteousness. Into the reality of being merciful.

Into the reality of being pure in heart. And into the reality of being a peacemaker. But persecuted? Helmut Tillich.

A great theologian preacher of the 20th century. Writes of the eighth beatitude. What a ghastly prospect. It makes one ask in all seriousness how Jesus could have ever gained disciples with an appeal like that.

And then does it not sound like sheer mockery? For him to go on and say in the face of the tortures of body and soul to which they were actually exposed.

[3 : 27] Rejoice and be glad. If it is not mockery and surely it cannot be. Then there must be some great mystery here.

Which we do not see. Let us pray. Lord Jesus. Thank you for enabling Matthew the text collector.

To remember your words. And to write them down accurately for us. Will you help us now understand your words? And more than understand.

Will you help us actually live into the mystery your words are describing? This we pray in your name.

And for the greater fame of your name. Amen. Before we wrestle with this eighth beatitude.

[4 : 25] I'd like to make a number of preliminary observations. First. It is a double beatitude. It's the only double in the beatitudes.

For some reason. Jesus repeats and restates this one. Is it because he knows that this is the one we would rather not hear? Or is it because this is the one he himself experienced?

Second. In repeating the beatitude. Jesus makes a shift in pronouns. He moves from the third person. They.

To the second person. You. No longer is the subject. Some vague. They. It is now you. You. You. Men and women. Who are sitting before me on the mountaintop. Third. Jesus brings himself into the picture for the first time. On account of me.

[5 : 29] He's been there in all the other beatitudes. As we have seen. But in the eighth beatitude. He makes it explicit. On account of me. It is as though Jesus is saying to us.

I. Am the problem. You are going to find yourself in trouble. Because of me. Therefore. Fourth. Note carefully the reason for the persecution. Jesus is not blessing those who get persecuted for being obnoxious in their peacemaking. Jesus is not blessing those who get persecuted for being tactless or insensitive in bearing witness in the world.

Jesus is not congratulating those who get persecuted for being dogmatically dogmatic or narrow-mindedly narrow-minded. Jesus is not congratulating the thrill-seeking confrontationalist or those with a victim complex.

He is blessing those who find themselves in trouble. He is blessing those who find themselves in trouble because of righteousness and because of me.

[6 : 40] For the sake of right-relatedness and on account of me. Right-relatedness and Jesus. Right-relatedness.

They belong together. They cannot be separated. Right-relatedness and Jesus. For right-relatedness is most clearly manifested in Jesus.

He is righteousness in the flesh. Which is why hunger and thirst for righteousness, which he blesses in the fourth beatitude, turns out to be a hunger and thirst for him.

And which is why a hunger and thirst for him issues in a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus is blessing those who experience opposition and scorn because of their craving after right relationship and because of their relationship with him.

Rejoice. Be exceedingly glad. According to Luke, Jesus adds, and leap for joy. Right, Jesus.

[7 : 49] Now, I want to ask the question we've been asking of all the other beatitudes. It's the why question. Why is being persecuted something Jesus congratulates?

I've been arguing that the qualities Jesus blesses in his beatitudes are not natural human qualities. That is, we do not produce these qualities. They are the product of his gospel.

Jesus comes into our lives with his evangel, with his good news. The good news of the nearness and in breaking of the kingdom of God. And when he and his news get a hold of us, we become poor in spirit.

We began to mourn. We become gentle. We hunger and thirst in a new way. We become merciful. We begin to become pure in heart. We begin to make peace.

And we get persecuted. Oh, yes. We are also used by him to win many others to him. But sometimes we get persecuted. So I want to ask why.

[8 : 51] Why is being persecuted a mark of those whom Jesus evangelizes? It is no mere theoretical question. For even as we sit and stand in this sanctuary today, believers all over the world are experiencing persecution and many of them in painful ways.

Missiologists tell us that over 25 percent of the Christian family today is forcibly underground. David Barrett, who is the editor of the World Christian Encyclopedia, says that if you total up all the people who were persecuted for their faith in the 20th century, it would work out to 300,000 people a year killed in the past century for their allegiance to Jesus.

It's estimated right now that 200,000,000 disciples of Jesus in 60 different countries are denied basic human rights because they named the name of Jesus.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus adds the line, Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for in the same way they used to treat the false prophets. Yikes.

It's what made a number of you in your small groups throughout this past week ask, if a person or community claims to belong to Jesus and his kingdom but is not persecuted, does it mean that that person or community is not actually faithfully living out the call?

[10 : 27] So why is being persecuted a mark of those who have turned around and embraced Jesus and his good news?

For one basic reason. It's the reason Jesus gave the night he handed himself over to death when he had gathered his disciples together in an upper room somewhere downtown Jerusalem.

If the world, says Jesus, now by the word world, he means human society organizing itself without God. If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

John chapter 15, verse 18. If the world, if human society organizing itself without God hates you, remember that it hated me first.

Jesus goes on. Remember the words I spoke to you? No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you. Simple as that.

[11 : 37] If the old order of things, if human society organizing itself without God cannot handle the master, what is it going to do with the master's servants?

If the old order of things cannot tolerate the righteous one, what will it do with those who seek to follow and reflect the righteous one's character in the world?

Thus, the rest of the New Testament tells us that persecution of one sort or another is inevitable for the followers of the persecuted one. The apostle Paul has to encourage his colleague, Timothy, who tended to be a bit timid.

Indeed, all who live godly lives in Christ will be persecuted. Anyone want out of the gospel? How about just water all this down to Christianity light?

The question, therefore, becomes, why was Jesus persecuted? That's the key question.

[12 : 51] Why was Jesus persecuted? How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him, says the prophet Isaiah, are the feet of him who brings good news, who brings shalom.

Why, oh, why would anyone want to insult or hurt this man who brings good news, who brings the shalom of God?

Why would anyone want to get rid of a man who heals people, who frees them from the power of the demonic, who forgives people their sins and welcomes them into his family?

Clearly, clearly, Jesus was not persecuted for being obnoxious. He was not tactless or insensitive as he lived and spoke his gospel.

Clearly, Jesus is not a pushy evangelist going around shoving his gospel down people's throats. He did, at one time, issue a series of woes.

[13 : 53] Woe to you hypocrites, to the entrenched religious establishment. But that was long after the establishment had decided to get rid of him. Long after the establishment had hardened its heart against Jesus.

Why was Jesus, the most beautiful human being who ever lived, persecuted? As I see it, it is for three reasons.

For simply being, doing, and speaking. Jesus experienced insult and harm by simply being righteous, by simply doing righteousness, and by simply speaking righteously.

First, Jesus got in trouble by simply being, by simply being righteous. Righteousness, especially perfect righteousness, is experienced by us unrighteous people, either as a blessing or a threat. And it all depends upon whether we unrighteous are willing to acknowledge our unrighteousness and want help to be righteous. Because we do not, on our own, like to face our unrighteousness, righteousness, especially perfect righteousness, is usually experienced as a threat.

[15 : 26] Oh, at first, it's welcomed. Even celebrated. For the presence, the mere presence of righteousness, justice, goodness, especially absolute goodness, calls for change.

Righteousness need not say a word. It need only enter the room and be there. Without speaking, the presence of righteousness exposes the rottenness.

And either we open up to goodness, or we will feel a need to move goodness out of the way. Jesus of Nazareth is goodness incarnate.

He is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. Bless his name. His mere being there exposes attitudes and actions of darkness.

And either we open up to the light, turn around and embrace the light, or we'll feel a need to get rid of the light.

[16 : 43] Am I making sense? If the world, human society organizing itself without God, hated goodness himself, what is it going to do with those who begin to reflect his goodness?

When he imparts his righteousness to us, we begin to change. We don't become perfect, but we do begin to change. And slowly but surely, we find ourselves as nonconformist in the world.

Flannery O'Connor used to say, you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you odd. Haggios is the biblical word.

Holy. Saints. Not in the sense of perfect, but in the sense of set apart, other than, different, marching to the beat of a different drummer. Jesus is different.

Wonderfully different. But different nonetheless. He is not of the world. He is in it, all the way in it, but not of it in any sense.

[17 : 57] His mere presence, his radiant presence, can therefore be experienced as a threat. That's the first reason he got persecuted. Simply being righteous.

Second, Jesus got in trouble by simply doing. By simply doing righteousness. He not only spoke, he acted, and he acted in ways that rocked the boat.

Rock the boat is putting it mildly, isn't it? He disturbed the status quo. More to the point, he subverted the status quo. Not that Jesus went around as a rabble rouser.

Indeed, Jesus shied away from public gatherings and public attention. He simply went around living his gospel, doing righteousness. And doing righteousness in an unrighteous world always rocks the boat.

Jesus' announcement of the nearness of the kingdom, and Jesus' full embodiment of the different values of the kingdom automatically exposed everything that was out of sync with the kingdom.

[19 : 13] His doing righteousness set up this clashing of kingdoms, or kingdoms in conflict, as Charles Coulson put it. Mortimer Arias of Bolivia says it this way, The coming of the kingdom means a permanent confrontation of worlds.

The kingdom is a question mark in the midst of the established ideas and answers developed by people and societies. Jesus began to disturb things by always bringing the wrong people to the party.

This man welcomes tax collectors and sinners and eats with them, they said. It's said in disgust. Jesus' way with people upset the religious establishment's whole concept of righteousness.

They taught that people had to shape up first before they came home to the Father. Jesus taught people just come home to the Father, the shaping up will come later. The religious establishment could not handle Jesus' revelation of the righteousness of God.

That is, they could not handle grace. Jacques Ellou has once said, grace is odious. Because grace says you're not making it on your own.

[20 : 32] Grace says you're not going to make it on your own. Grace says you need help. Grace says you need me. Grace subverts our human pride of wanting to be able to sing I did it my way.

Jesus disturbed things in another way. He violated many of the rules. The human rules. Rules that were made supposedly to bring about righteousness.

For example, Jesus regularly violated the rules around the Sabbath. He didn't violate the Sabbath. He didn't violate God's good command. He simply questioned and subverted many of the human made rules and regulations developed around God's good command.

Why? Because the human rules and regulations were unrighteous. They had nothing to do with right relatedness, especially right relatedness with God. The rules were oppressing people's spirits. The rules were keeping people from the Father's heart. It's a fact of history that Jesus of Nazareth got crucified because of the way he acted on the Sabbath.

[21 : 45] Jesus rocked the boat in yet another way. He actually caused the kingdom to be manifest. He went around doing kingdom stuff. For example, Jesus encounters a man near the Sea of Galilee.

This man is demon-possessed. He's held captive by a legion of evil spirits. Jesus orders the spirits to leave the man. The spirits ask permission to go into a herd of pigs.

Jesus grants the request and the herd of pigs rushes down the steep bank into the sea. Two thousand of them, says Mark, and they are drowned. And the people of town rejoiced.

Right? A human being, a human being had been set free and the town rejoiced. Not.

They were angry because simply by doing righteousness Jesus was upsetting their whole value system.

[22 : 50] If the world system, secular or religious, could not handle Jesus doing his gospel, what's going to happen to those who go around doing gospel?

Ask the Apostle Paul. He did not set out to disturb the status quo. All he did was set out to announce Jesus' good news.

I'm going to say that again. The Apostle Paul does not set out to subvert anything. All he does is set out to announce Jesus' gospel. So, for example, in the city of Ephesus, which at that time had about 225,000 people, Paul found himself in the middle of a riot and had to leave the city.

Why? Because he tried to start a riot? No. All he did was announce the gospel and things began to happen.

people turned around and embraced Jesus as Savior and began to follow him as Master. Why then the riot? Well, many of the Ephesians practiced magical arts and as an expression of their new life in Jesus, they came together and they burned all their occult books.

[24 : 11] many of the Ephesians were also ardent devotees of the goddess Artemis or Diana. Before coming to Jesus, they used to buy these statues of Diana.

After coming to Jesus, they stopped buying these statues and here's the reason for the riot. The Ephesian economy was built upon these statues to Diana.

The silversmiths were making huge amounts of money. Now they were losing money. So a man named Demetrius incited the other merchants to start a riot against Paul.

All Paul did was righteousness. All he did was announce the good news which brought people into right relationship with God.

He did not intend to disturb the status quo. It just happened as it always does. The gospel always messes with idols.

[25 : 11] And therefore, the gospel always messes with a way of life built on idols. As many of you know, I had the privilege of serving as the pastor of Union Church of Manila from 1985 to 1989.

When we arrived in the Philippines in the fall of 1985, things were very tense. People who spoke out against the dictatorial way of Ferdinand Marcos were disappearing.

Many of their bodies then floating in the river that goes through the city days later. You could feel the tension everywhere. So a group of pastors and priests invited me, the new guy on the block, out for a welcome lunch.

They wanted to encourage me. They reminded me that I would never know who was gathered in the sanctuary on a morning when I was preaching, so they said, be careful what you say. I try to be careful.

They said, be careful what you say. And their advice to me that day was, just stick to preaching the gospel. I said, I had no other intention.

[26 : 17] What else is a preacher to preach but the gospel? Just stick to preaching the gospel, they said. The implication being, you will then be safe in Manila.

and I asked, what gospel are you referring to? Not the gospel according to Jesus.

The gospel according to Jesus is the kingdom of God is invading the city. How do you think you're going to preach that gospel and remain safe?

You see, as long as we keep all this kingdom stuff in the private, personal realm, we can avoid conflict. We can silently acquiesce to the idols of our time.

We can avoid getting caught in this crunch where kingdoms collide. But once we let this kingdom stuff out of the bag, so to speak, Jesus was persecuted simply because by doing his gospel of the kingdom, he was turning everything upside down and therefore right side up again.

[27 : 38] Third, I can't read you very well right now. Jesus got in trouble simply by speaking, simply by speaking righteously, simply by speaking righteously about himself.

for example, he would walk up to people like fishermen and tax collectors and say, follow me, follow me. It is not an invitation.

Jesus isn't saying to these people, say, how about considering the possibility of following me? it is a command. Follow me. It is like receiving a note from a perfect stranger that you just met saying, be at the party tonight.

What? Who is this guy who thinks he can walk into people's life and order a change of agenda? And then there are those claims.

all those claims he makes about himself, especially his I am claims. I'm the light of the world. Follow me and you will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.

[28 : 49] I'm the door. Enter by me. I'm the true vine. Apart from me, you can do nothing. I'm the resurrection and the life. If you live in me, even if you die, you will live. He just spoke those loaded words matter-of-factly.

No fanfare, no hype. He just said them. I am the bread of life. Vancouver, you need me more than you need your next meal.

Whoa, dude. I am the way, the truth, and the life. Not a way, a truth, a life. The way, the truth, the life. Jesus, if you would just use that little word a, you wouldn't get yourself in trouble.

To which he says, and I'm supposed to deny who I am? Who are you, Jesus? The religious authorities ask in white-hot anger, before Abraham was, I am.

And they took up stones to throw at him. The way Jesus speaks about himself subverts our fundamental presuppositions about God, about ourselves, and about life itself.

[29 : 54] And sometimes it's too much to handle. God's love. If some people cannot handle Jesus speaking about himself so outrageously, what are they going to do with those who continue to speak his outrageous claims and those who then seek to live out the implications?

Ask Peter and John. Peter and John go to the temple one day. On the steps there's a man laying there. Peter, he's begging. He stretches out his hand hoping for money.

And Peter says, silver and gold we do not have, but what we do have we give to you in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene. Walk! And the man does.

And the city rejoices. Some do. But not the religious authorities. They haul Peter and John in for interrogation and they ask, by what name or power did you, did this thing happen?

And Peter responds, by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene. Now, if Peter had just left it at that, he might have gotten off, but he didn't leave it at that because he couldn't leave it at that.

[31 : 04] He goes on to say, and there is salvation and no one else. Acts 4.12. For there is no other name under heaven that has been given by which we must be saved.

No other name. That is what got him in trouble. What the theologians call the scandal of particularity. The claim that life is found in Jesus and only in Jesus.

Many of you have personally and painfully experienced what Peter and John experienced. Just say Jesus is one of many healers in this age of tolerance.

Just say Jesus is one of many lords and we will be welcomed at the feast of pluralism. of many of many people. But say what Peter said.

That is muster up the courage and say what Jesus himself says. There is no other healer but Jesus. There is no other Lord but Jesus.

[32 : 16] And we will be asked to leave the feast. Or worse. we will be charged with being intolerant. But it has nothing to do with intolerance.

It has everything to do with righteousness. Being faithful to a relationship with Jesus. He made the claims. Not we. What are we supposed to do?

Water them down? Give in to the spirit of the age? And deny who he is? We cannot. We can be kind and thoughtful.

Meek and gentle. But we cannot be unfaithful to who he claims to be. Blessed.

Right on are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Blessed in sync are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil falsely on account of me.

[33 : 27] Rejoice and be glad. Rejoice and be glad, Lord. I know how I feel when I'm only mildly criticized.

I know how I feel when people snicker behind my back after I've said something about Jesus. I'm supposed to rejoice and be glad? Why, Lord? Because great is your reward in heaven.

Okay. That sort of helps. And because you're not alone, you stand in the line with a lot of other people for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Okay. That helps. yours is the kingdom. What? Yours is the kingdom.

Not yours will be the kingdom. Yours is the kingdom. Is. Now, Jesus is putting everything into perspective. It is because God's glorious kingdom is already breaking into one's life that he or she is treated the way Jesus was treated.

[34 : 39] it's because Jesus gospel is already taking hold that we find ourselves in the crunch. With that perspective, I just might be able to keep my cool.

And I just might be able to bless the persecutor. I've tried to gather up all that we've learned in this series in the Beatitudes by writing a little hymn.

It has nine verses, one for each of the Beatitudes and then a concluding verse. And what we're going to do now is I will sing the content of each of the eight verses that start how blessed those and then you will be invited to sing the little refrain Alleluia, Alleluia.

The words are not in front. They'll be up here behind me. So I will sing the words you will sing Alleluia, Alleluia, and then you'll be invited to sing with me the ninth verse.

How blessed those who know their who make no claim to open heaven's door.

[36 : 19] For theirs is the kingdom now and ever more. alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Alleluia. How blessed those who mourn the status quo, who their own sin sadly woefully know.

For they shall receive the comfort of their God. Alleluia, alleluia.

who are who are who are so gentle and so meek, who find great strength in choosing to be weak.

For they alone shall call the earth their home. Alleluia, alleluia.

[37 : 52] how blessed those who hunger and who thirst, who pray for God's full Lord, righteousness as first.

For they shall taste the satisfying feast alleluia, alleluia.

How blessed those who mercy freely give, who God's full pardon, tender kindness live, for they shall more of mercy ever know.

Alleluia, alleluia. How blessed those whose hearts are clear and pure, who fix their vision on their Savior sure, for they shall soon the face of God behold.

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. How blessed those who seek to make God's peace, who work in hope.

[39 : 59] Every war shall cease, for they the name, God's dearest children bear.

Alleluia, alleluia. blessed those who suffer for the right, who often feel the darkness, hate of light, for theirs is the kingdom now and ever more.

alleluia, alleluia. You are the king, the healer, and the boy, who brings to life my strength to take from your word.

Your name, O Jesus, be forever blessed. Alleluia, alleluia.

Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.