

God's Happy Subversives

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- [0 : 0 0] Our text this morning comes from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 5, verses 10 through 12. Here we find the eighth beatitude which Jesus announces in His Sermon on the Mount.
- Because each of the beatitudes is related to the others, we need to read again Matthew 5, verse 3 through 12. If you are able, would you please stand for the reading of the Gospel?
- And we will read this in unison all together. Hear the word of Jesus, the Good Newsizer. 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 receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.
- [1 : 1 3] Blessed are the people who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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. You may be seated.
- Blessed are the persecuted. How fortunate are those who are insulted. As you may have noticed, after I read the text of Scripture that is to be preached, and before I preach it, I usually pray something like this.
- Spirit of the living God, long ago you inspired Matthew the tax collector to write down these words for us. I pray now that in your mercy and grace, you will take these words off the page and make them come alive in us as never before.
- I'm not so sure I want to pray this way with regard to the eighth beatitude. Who wants being persecuted to come alive in us as never before?
- [2 : 5 4] Most of us come to worship service beaten up enough, trying to make ends meet. I gladly wanted the Holy Spirit to cause poverty of spirit and hunger and thirst for righteousness and purity of heart to come alive in us as never before.
- But being persecuted? Let us pray. Spirit of the living God, you have been so faithful in taking the other beatitudes off the page and making them come alive in our lives.
- It therefore does not seem right not to pray that way about this beatitude. So, Spirit of the living God, will you now take the words of the eighth beatitude off the page and cause them to come alive in us as never before?
- For we pray this in Jesus' name and for his greater glory. Amen. Should I go on?
- Before grappling with the eighth beatitude, I want to make four preliminary observations about it. First, it is a double beatitude.

[4 : 33] It's the only double in the set. For some reason, Jesus repeats and restates this beatitude. Was it because he knows this is the one we do not want to hear?

Or was it because this is the one he knows the best? Second, in repeating this beatitude, Jesus makes a shift.

He moves from the third person pronoun they to the second person pronoun you. No longer is the subject a theoretical they. It's now you.

You people sitting in front of me on this mountain. Third, Jesus brings himself into the picture for the first time. On account of me.

He has been there in all the other beatitudes, as I've tried to show you. But here he makes his present explicit. Fourth, take note of the reason for the persecution.

[5 : 40] Jesus does not bless those who are persecuted for being obnoxious. Jesus does not bless those who are persecuted for being pushy, shovy, insensitive, tactless in their witness.

Jesus does not bless those who are dogmatically dogmatic or narrow-mindedly narrow-minded. Jesus is not here congratulating thrill-seeking confrontationalists.

He's not here congratulating those with a victim complex. Jesus is blessing those who find themselves in trouble because of righteousness and because of me.

For the sake of right-relatedness and on account of me. Right relationship and me. They can never be separated. Right-relatedness and Jesus.

For righteousness is most clearly illustrated in Jesus. He is the personal embodiment of all right-relatedness. Which is why the hunger and thirst for righteousness, which he blesses in the fourth beatitude, turns out to be a hunger and thirst for him.

[6 : 52] And which is why a hunger and thirst for him always issues in a hunger and thirst for right relationship. Jesus is blessing those who experience opposition and reproach because of their craving to see relationships be right and because of their relationship with him.

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad. In Luke's version of this beatitude, Jesus adds the phrase, and leap for joy. I want to now ask the question that I've asked of each of the other beatitudes.

The why question. Why is being persecuted something Jesus would congratulate? I've been arguing that the qualities Jesus blesses in the beatitudes are not natural human qualities.

We do not produce them. Rather, they are the product of the power of his gospel. They are the result of Jesus and his gospel grabbing hold of us. He comes into our lives.

He causes the good news of the nearness of his kingdom, the good news of the inbreaking of his kingdom, to take a hold of us, and we become poor in spirit. We begin to mourn.

[8 : 02] We become meek. We hunger and thirst for righteousness. We become merciful and pure in heart. We seek to make peace, and we get persecuted. I want to ask why.

Why is being persecuted a mark of the gospelized? Now, this is no theoretical question. Missiologists tell us that in this century, 25% of the global Christian body is forcibly underground.

25% of the brothers and sisters in Christ today are going to be worshiping underground somewhere. According to David Barrett, who is editor of the World Christian Encyclopedia, if we were to add up all of those Christian persons martyred for their faith thus far in this century, add up all the people who have been martyred for their faith thus far in the 20th century, it would work out to 300,000 per year.

300,000. It's a staggering number. At first, it seemed to me too high. But consider this. From 1917 to 1953, 30 million Russian Christians were killed.

33 million Russian Christians were put into prison. Consider this. From 1971 to 1976, under the reign of Idi Amin, 400,000 Ugandans died or disappeared.

[9 : 42] Persecution of one sort or another is not an early Christian phenomena only. In Luke's version of this beatitude, Jesus adds the line, Woe to you when all people speak well of you.

For so they spoke of the false prophets who were before you. Which makes me ask, if a person or community claims to be gospelized and it is not persecuted, does it mean this person or community is not, after all, gospelized?

Why is being persecuted a mark of those who have turned around and embraced Jesus and His gospel? For one reason. It's the reason Jesus gave to His first disciples that night they gathered in the upper room for the Lord's Supper.

John 15, verses 18 to 20. Listen. If the world, and by this term world, Jesus means human society organizing itself without God.

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. Remember the words I spoke to you, no servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.

[10 : 58] If the old order of things, if human society under the reign of sin, if human society organizing itself without God could not handle the master, it will not be able to handle the master's servants.

If the old order of things could not tolerate the righteous one, it will not be able to tolerate those who seek and reflect His righteousness, which is why the New Testament then makes that claim that we don't want to hear, namely that persecution of one sort or another is inevitable for the followers of the persecuted one.

The Apostle Paul has to tell Timothy, who tended to be pretty timid in his discipleship, indeed all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus in this world will be persecuted.

If they persecuted the gospelizer, what are they going to do with the gospelized? Anybody want out of the gospel now?

The question therefore becomes, why was Jesus persecuted? How lovely on the mountains are the feet of Him who brings good news.

[12 : 14] Why? Why in heaven's name would people insult and hurt a man who brought good news?

Clearly, Jesus was not persecuted for being obnoxious. Clearly, Jesus was not persecuted for being tactless in His announcing the gospel of the kingdom.

He was not a pushy evangelist going around shoving His message down people's throats. He did, at one point, issue a series of woe to you hypocrites against the religious establishment, but that was long after the establishment had hardened its heart against Him, long after it had resolved to eliminate Jesus.

Why was Jesus persecuted? For three reasons. First, righteousness, especially perfect righteousness, righteousness is experienced by us unrighteousness by us unrighteous, either as a blessing or as a threat.

It depends upon whether the unrighteous want to acknowledge their unrighteousness and seek help. Because we do not like to acknowledge our unrighteousness, righteousness, especially perfect righteousness, is usually experienced as a threat.

[13 : 39] Oh, at first, goodness is welcomed. At first, goodness is even praised, but it doesn't last long, right? That's because the presence of righteousness, the presence of goodness, the presence, especially, of absolute goodness, calls us to change.

It need not say a word. It need only enter the room and be there. It automatically, without a word, begins to expose the rottenness.

And either we open up to that goodness or we're going to have to find a way to get rid of the goodness. Jesus of Nazareth is goodness incarnate. He is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

And His mere presence begins to expose the darkness. And either we open up to the light and receive the healing of the light, or we have to get rid of the light. If the world hated goodness Himself, what is it going to do with those who reflect His goodness in the world?

When He imparts His righteousness to us, we change. We are not made perfect, but we change. Flannery O'Connor put it this way, You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you odd.

[14 : 54] Hagios is the biblical word. Hagios, holy ones, other than, different, marching to the beat of a different drummer.

William Barclay puts it so well. Let me read a couple of paragraphs from his book, The Beatitudes for Every Man. The Christian is a person who is fundamentally different. Now, if that difference had been expressed by withdrawal from life, there might well have been dislike, but it is improbable that the dislike would have issued in persecution.

But the Christian difference was a difference which was expressed in the world. Paul does not write to the saints in the desert or the saints in the monastery. He writes to the saints in Philippi and in Rome.

It was therefore inevitable that the Christian daily confronted the heathen with this difference in their lives. Further, the difference which was expressed in the life of the Christian was a difference which was a constant unspoken criticism, unspoken condemnation of the pagan way of life.

It was not that the Christian went about criticizing and condemning and disapproving, nor was it that the Christian was consciously self-righteous and superior. It was simply that the Christian ethic in itself was a criticism and condemnation of the pagan life and standards.

[16 : 22] People will always seek to eliminate that which silently condemns them. Barclay goes on, It is not a matter of spoken criticism and constant fault-finding.

It is not a matter of conscious superiority. It is simply that the existence of the Christian life is a reminder of what life ought to be and a condemnation of the way the world is now.

It is no thing for a city to seek to silence its conscience. The Christian, as the conscience of the community, will be exposed to the dislike, the hatred, and the attack of that part of the world which wants to live without God.

Jesus was different, wonderfully different, but different nonetheless. He was not of the world system in it, all the way, but not of it.

His presence, His radiant goodness, was therefore experienced by the world system as a threat. That's the first reason Jesus was persecuted.

[17 : 30] The second follows from the first. Jesus disturbed the status quo. Jesus disturbed the status quo. He was not merely present.

He acted and He spoke in ways that rocked the boat. Rocked the boat is too mild the way to put it. Jesus subverted the status quo.

Subverted. I know it's a dangerous word to use. I know it's a volatile word to use, but I use it intentionally to help us realize that Jesus and His gospel are radically transforming.

It's not that Jesus went about as a rabble rouser. Hardly. In fact, as we read the gospels, He's always shying away from public attention and public events. It's just that Jesus went around living out His gospel.

Living out right relatedness. Doing righteousness in an unrighteous world will always rock the boat. Jesus' announcement of the nearness of the kingdom and Jesus' embodiment of the values of the kingdom automatically challenged everything that was not consistent with the kingdom.

- [18 : 46] Which is to say that Jesus' deeds and Jesus' words set up a conflict of kingdoms. Or as Charles Colson puts it, kingdoms in conflict. Jesus began to disturb the status quo by always bringing the wrong people to the party.

He was always bringing the wrong folks. This man welcomes sinners and tax collectors and eats with them was the charge leveled against him again and again.

It was said with great disgust. The way Jesus related to people upset the whole value system. The whole concept of righteousness that people had in that day.

They taught that people had to first shape up before they could come home to the Father. Jesus said just come home to the Father. We'll deal with the shaping up later. And the system couldn't handle Jesus' understanding of the right relatedness of God.

That is, the system couldn't handle grace. Imagine that. Jacques Ellou says that grace is fundamentally odious to most people.

- [20 : 03] Because grace says you haven't been able to make it on your own yet, have you? Grace says you're never going to make it on your own.

Grace says you need me. Grace says I'm going to have to help you. And grace subverts human pride. Because humanity wants to get into the presence of God and sing Frank Sinatra's song, I did it my way.

Grace subverts all that. Jesus upset the religious and cultural status quo in another way. He violated many of the rules and regulations, many of the human rules and regulations which supposedly were to protect righteousness.

In particular, Jesus knowingly violated the rules and regulations of the Sabbath. He did not violate the Sabbath. He did not violate God's good law.

But he did question and challenge the many human-made rules and regulations that supposedly protected God's good law. Why? Because the human rules and regulations were unrighteous.

- [21 : 17] They had nothing to do with right relatedness, especially right relatedness with the living God. The rules oppressed human spirits and drove people further from the Father's heart.

And so Jesus violated them. It's a fact of history that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified because of the way he acted on the Sabbath and his theological justification of his actions.

He rocked the boat in yet another way. It was that he was always manifesting the kingdom. One of the most dramatic examples of that was that by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus encountered this man who had been demonized.

He'd been possessed by a whole legion of demons. You remember the story. Jesus ordered the spirits to release the man. The spirits begged Jesus to let them go into a herd of swine. Jesus grants them permission, and the text says, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, about 2,000 of them, and they were drowned in the sea.

The townspeople were terrified, and they were very angry, and they begged Jesus to leave the city. Imagine that. Why would you beg Jesus to leave the city?

- [22 : 33] Because Jesus' acts of right-relatedness, Jesus' acts of redemption, Jesus' kingdom works were upsetting the status quo.

People got used to this fellow being in bondage. If the world system, religious or secular, could not handle the gospelizer, what will it do with the gospelized?

We need only look at the life of the apostle Paul to answer that. He did not set out to disturb the status quo. I don't think Paul had a subversive bone in him.

I don't think he set out to be subversive. All he set out to do was to announce Jesus' gospel. Remember that. All he set out to do was good news eyes to the world.

He came to the city of Philippi. Luke tells us in the book of Acts that as Paul and his companions were going to a certain place to pray, quote, a certain slave girl having a spirit of divination met us who was bringing her masters much profit by her fortune telling.

[23 : 42] She kept on following Paul, yelling things like, these men are the bondservants of the Most High God who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation. Finally, Paul had enough, turned to the girl, said to the spirit, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ come out of her.

And immediately the spirit of divination came out, the girl was free, she was alive as never before, and the city rejoiced. Right? Not.

Luke writes, that when her masters saw that their hope for profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.

Paul ended up being thrown in jail. What did he do wrong? Nothing. That's the point. All Paul did was announce the good news.

In Jesus Christ, human beings can be set free. He never intended to upset the city. It just happened, as it always does, when the gospel is unleashed.

[24 : 46] Consider another example. In Ephesus, Paul found himself in the middle of this huge riot, and he had to leave the city. Why? Because he wanted to start a riot? No. All he had done was preach the gospel, and people responded.

They surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ and decided to follow him as Lord. Now, why the riot? Well, many of the people who came to Christ had formerly practiced magical arts.

And as an expression of their new life in Christ, they gathered together and they burned all their books on occult and magic. I was trying to calculate the economic consequences of getting rid of books on magic and occult in this city.

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 didn't buy them anymore. And that's the reason for the riot.

[25 : 52] For you see, the economy of Ephesus was built around the worship of Diana. Diana, the silversmiths of Ephesus made their money by making these statues of Diana. One Demetrius stirred up the mob to have this riot against Paul.

What did Paul do wrong? Nothing. All he did was righteousness. All he did was announce the good news. And people found right relationship with the living God.

He did not intend to disturb the city. It happened as it always does. Because the gospel is always messing with idols. Which means then that ways of life built upon those idols will be subverted.

When we moved to the Philippines in September of 1985, things in Manila were very tense. Boy, let me tell you. People who spoke out against the dictatorial ways of Ferdinand Marcos were disappearing.

We could feel the uncertainty. We could feel the tension everywhere we went. Soon after I began preaching at Union Church of Manila, some of the elders and a couple of the local pastors took me out for lunch.

[27 : 02] They were concerned that I might be nervous living in Manila, that we might be getting afraid. And their advice to me was this. Just stick to preaching the gospel. Which is, of course, what I intended to do.

Just stick to preaching the gospel. The implication being, you will be safe in Manila if you just stick to preaching the gospel. What?

Just stick to preaching the gospel and you will be safe? What gospel are we talking about? We're certainly not talking about Jesus' gospel. Jesus' gospel says, hey, city, look out.

Here comes the kingdom of God. Safe? Safe? Who said anything about being safe? It's just good news, not safe news.

As long as we keep this kingdom stuff in the private realm where the world wants us to keep it, as long as we keep it in the private realm, we're not going to have any conflict.

[28 : 12] We can avoid being charged as disturbers of the status quo. As long as we will just silently acquiesce to the idols of our time, we won't get in trouble.

We won't find ourselves caught in this crunch of conflicting kingdoms. But when we get serious about Jesus and his kingdom, when we let the kingdom out of the bag, so to speak, things will begin to happen.

Jesus got persecuted simply because he was living out the good news of the kingdom. The third reason he was persecuted is the most important of all.

It was the way he spoke about himself. The way he spoke about himself. For example, he would walk up into a crowd of people, some fishermen or tax collectors, and he would say, follow me.

Follow me. We're so used to the word, we don't remember, that it's not an invitation. It's not Jesus saying, hey, wouldn't you like to follow me? I mean, if it's convenient and, you know, wouldn't you like to be a disciple?

[29 : 34] It's not an invitation. It's a command. It's an imperative. You, here, behind me, now, follow me. It's like receiving an invitation in the mailbox tonight from a perfect stranger saying, be there at the party.

What? Who is this guy who just walks into my life and thinks that he can start ordering a new course of life? And then there are those claims he made about himself, those I am sayings, hugely audacious.

I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you will not walk in darkness, but you will have the light of life. I am the door. Enter by me. I am the good shepherd. I am the true vine. Apart from me, you can do nothing at all.

I am the resurrection and the life. If you believe in me, even though you die, yet shall you live. He said the words rather matter-of-factly. No hype, no fanfare.

Just said them as matters of fact. I am the bread of life. Glendale, you need me more than you need your next meal. I am the way, the truth, and the life.

[30 : 46] Not a way, a truth, a life, but the way, the truth, the life. If Jesus had just used that little article A, he would have stayed out of trouble.

But he used the article the. Who are you, Jesus? Before Abraham was born, I am. And John says they took up stones to throw at him.

The way Jesus spoke about himself subverted people's fundamental presuppositions about God, about themselves, about life itself, and they couldn't handle it.

If they could not handle the audacious claims of the gospelizer, what are they going to do with those who keep repeating the claims and who seek to live out their implications?

Peter and John were going to the temple one day to pray. On the steps lay a man who was lame, crippled, and he was begging. He put out his hand, wanting some money from them.

[31 : 54] Peter said, 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 did. He stood up and walked, and the city rejoiced.

Right? Some did. But not the religious authorities. The religious authorities. They hauled Peter and John in for interrogation.

They said, by what power or what name did this thing happen? Peter answered, by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene. Now, if Peter had just left it at that, it would have gone well for Peter.

But he didn't leave it at that because he could not leave it at that. Peter went on to say, and there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.

No other name. No other name. No other name. No other name. No other name. That's what got them in trouble. It's what the theologians call the scandal of particularity.

[32 : 57] That life is found in Jesus and only in Jesus. Many of you know what Peter and John faced. Many of you face it regularly.

Just say, Jesus is one of many healers. Just say, in this age of tolerance, Jesus is one of many lords, and we will be welcomed at the Feast of Pluralism.

But say what Peter said. Muster up the courage to echo the way Jesus spoke of himself and say, no, there is no other healer but Jesus.

There is no other Lord but Jesus, and we'll be asked to leave the table. No other name is not politically correct.

We will be accused of being intolerant. But the fact is, it has nothing to do with intolerance. It has everything to do with righteousness, with a right relationship with Jesus himself.

[34 : 09] He made the claims, not we. What are we supposed to do? Water them down? Accommodate them to the spirit of the age? Deny his uniqueness? Deny his centrality?

We can't. We can speak with kindness and respect, meekness, if you will, but we cannot be unfaithful to him and his claims.

Jesus' claims about himself challenge the very foundation of every individual's life. They challenge the very foundation of every culture. They challenge the very foundation of every nation.

It's just the way it is. And either the old order bows before Jesus' claim, or it eventually has to find a way to get rid of those who keep repeating it.

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

[35 : 15] Rejoice and be glad. Rejoice and be glad. Leap for joy. Hey, I know what I feel just when I'm mildly criticized. I know what I feel when I'm just sneered at because of my allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth.

Rejoice and be glad. How, Lord? Why? Because you have a great reward in heaven.

Okay. And because you're not alone. You join a long line of people. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Okay.

That sort of helps. And because yours is the kingdom. What? Yours is the kingdom. Note.

Not theirs will be the kingdom, but theirs is the kingdom. Is. Now. Do you see what Jesus is doing? He's putting it all in perspective. It's because God's kingdom has already broken into one's life that he or she is treated the way Jesus was treated.

[36 : 28] It's because the gospel is really happening in our lives that we find ourselves in this clash of kingdoms. It's because it's good.

Nothing's gone wrong. Nothing's off track. Everything's happening the way it should. When kingdoms break against kingdoms, you get caught in the crunch. Yours is the kingdom. Okay.

Okay. I guess with that perspective, Lord, I can keep my cool, rejoice, and maybe even pray for those who persecute me.

Mortimer Arius of Bolivia, I think, summarizes it for me. He says, The arrival of the kingdom produces a crisis. It's like a seed forcing its way upward through the soil, stones, and thistles of this world.

It's like the new wine which ferments inside the old wineskins, increasing the inner pressure, forcing its way out to the bursting point. It's like a new patch in an old cloth which tears away and makes the whole worse than ever.

[37 : 40] It's like a fire that has been kindled over the earth, and who can stop it? It's like a sword that draws a dividing line and cuts through the most intimate and sacred relationships and loyalties and subordinates all former value and commitment to the kingdom.

Then Arius writes this, The kingdom is reversal, and as such, the permanent subverter of all human orders.

The proclaimer of this kingdom could not expect any other treatment than the one reserved for the subversives in human history. O Lord, make us your happy subversives.