

# Persecuted But Not Abandoned

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] and although this is the final beatitude I will hope to give another message one more message just to bring it all together and to offer a kind of summary of of the beatitudes as a whole but our beatitude tonight is found at Matthew chapter 5 verses 10 to 12 and in this beatitude this is what Jesus says 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 now what I want to do this evening I want to explore this beatitude under four headings there won't be an introduction I'm just going to go straight into the headings I've got a bit to get through but the headings are as follows firstly persecution is the norm for Christianity secondly persecution as the badge of biblical Christianity thirdly persecution and its cause and fourthly persecution and rejoicing firstly then persecution is the norm for Christianity and I have phrased this first point in the form of a proposition and I'm sure most of you know what a proposition is it's simply something you're proposing and something you're stating in philosophy propositions are either true or false and I've deliberately stated this in this propositional forum because I want to endeavor to prove the truth of the proposition namely persecution is the norm for Christianity and I'm going to offer five proofs of that statement of that proposition first one is this this beatitude although it is counter-cultural counterintuitive paradoxical and strange is nonetheless one of the eight beatitudes and just as we know that all of those beatitudes are a multifaceted portrait of the characteristics and description of kingdom people of disciples of Jesus this beatitude which concludes the beatitudes and indeed is part of the brackets within the beatitudes I when I say brackets I refer in the first beatitude blessed of the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven this beatitude states blessed are those that are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of the kingdom of heaven so not only is the kingdom of heaven so not only is this beatitude one of the eight but it forms part of the entire number of beatitudes and it forms the other part of the brackets so that's the first proof the second is the stress and emphasis given to it I wonder if you'll note that each of the other beatitudes only have one single verse this beatitude has three verses and Jesus enlarges on this beatitude and talks about a particular blessing that he connects with this beatitude so the very fact that it's stressed more is I think somewhat significant in terms of its importance in terms of perhaps that in Jesus's mind those first seven beatitudes

this is their destination this is their destination this is their destination and this is their destination and this is in a sense where they were moving towards and I also want you to notice in the stress that Jesus gives us it changes from the third person plural to the second person plural I try to emphasize that in my reading blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you so there's a difference here so there's a difference here it's as if he's been speaking in kind of general terms but he now specifically looks at the disciples and makes this statement about persecution persecution thirdly I want you to notice the grammar in verse 10 blessed are those who are persecuted now I don't often talk about grammar but I think it's important here I'll tell you why because the word of the verb that is used in this verse verse 10 persecuted is in what is called the perfect tense and what that tense means in Greek is it's an action that has taken place but continues but continues and to my mind what Jesus is saying is something like this blessed are those having been persecuted and will continue to be persecuted it's almost as if it captures the whole history of those that have been persecuted for the truth and then fourthly he talks about the identification with the prophets in verse 11 he talks about for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you the prophets were the people in particular who took their stand for God who proclaimed the word of God fearlessly and he is a Jesus is a Jesus is identifying that the people of God the church of God the followers of Jesus with the role of the prophets there and fifthly notice the word when in verse 11 verse 11 blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and so on in other words he's not saying if or should it happen or maybe he's not saying when in other words it will happen I used to be working insurance and I worked for legal in general and the manual life a Canadian insurance company and then I worked for myself for about eight years selling insurance policies savings personal pensions and mortgages now I remember being at a conference and a debate between an accountant and the accountant said something like you guys you're you're always a playing on people's fear what if this happens what if that happens and the insurance consultant stood up and says it's not a question of if or should it happen it's when it will happen of course he was talking about death and but this is what Jesus is saying Jesus is saying it might happen he's saying when it happens and now that doesn't mean of course that it'll happen all the time or that everybody's experience will be the same but it does mean it's a normal part and parcel of Christianity the rest of the sermon presupposes the truth of this proposition and I hope that you agree with me that these five reasons I've given show that persecution is the norm for Christianity secondly persecution is the badge or mark of biblical Christianity

you know we live today in what some have called a consumer society the media machine of the world relentlessly tries to mesmerize us with its promises of happiness couched in the gab of glamour and sexuality but part of our insatiable appetite also is to consume different forms of Christianity there is available to us today a kind of supermarket of Christianity that people can choose from and are even drawn into by slick marketing strategies for example feel good Christianity this is a Christianity where everything is designed to make the people feel good the music the type of hymnology the thrust and ethos and atmosphere and everything about it then there's peace at any cost Christianity this is a Christianity that promotes peace without truth then there's what I call theatre or theatrical Christianity it's a Christianity where people are shaking and fainting and swooning and goodness knows what else and they're getting this and that done for them there's also prosperity Christianity and then there is what I call private sorry pious stroke private Christianity

I'm thinking here of rationalistic Christianity Orthodox Christianity and yet Christianity that is to an unhealthy degree privatised what all those Christianities have in common is they're targeting what we like and what we want and not what God wants but here in this beatitude Jesus is emphasising something that none of us would naturally want unless we were masochists namely persecution it's a shocking and unbelievable beatitude I'm sure you'll agree with me it's given the portrait of the previous beatitudes you know the poor in spirit the gentle the humble the merciful the peacemaker who would have thought that such a portrait would evoke or provoke persecution actually it's very interesting that the the attitude blessed of the peacemakers is immediately before this final the attitude it's the penultimate attitude that's maybe a warning to us and as the Apostle Paul puts it if it be possible be at peace with all people we are certainly not to engineer or promote or provoke persecution we know don't we that Jesus is telling the truth we can see that from the Bible from history even church history and from our contemporary world indeed it's a chilling truth all who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution how many of us are willing to take this beatitude as seriously as the others the Apostle Paul was told by the Holy Spirit that he must also bear witness to Jesus in Rome now that word witness is the word marturial marturio from which we get the word martyr and yet we're all meant to be witnesses we're all meant to be his marturia when not if as Jesus said here the time comes for us to be persecuted as as a church or as individuals will be we willing to be his witnesses

I've already indicated that we're not of course to seek out or provoke persecution as did some early church martyrs who were queuing up for martyrdom carried along by martyr fever neither are we to bring about persecution by being obnoxious or unwise or troublemakers that's not the persecution that Jesus says is blessed but it remains a permanent truth and a badge of biblical Christianity that we have been called to suffer for Christ listen to what Paul says in Philippians chapter 1 verse 29 Paul says this for it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him but also to suffer for him and of course he's one of the great Christian sufferers himself and and Paul is speaking there with the language of privilege and and and we're we're ready

[ 13 : 49 ] I'm sure to embrace that we've believed in him but he said it's also been granted unto us to suffer for for him but why is it the case that this persecution comes about and this brings me to my third point two reasons are mentioned by Jesus in this the attitude the first one is righteousness and the second one is because of me now righteousness in the Beatitudes is the the concept I believe that from which everything that Jesus had had says on the in the sermon on the mount flows it's the hub it's used in five times in the sermon on the mount the word righteousness it's used four times in the in this two or three sorry twice in this chapter and and a couple of times in chapter six and Jesus says it is baptism that he's here to fulfill all righteousness now in the old testament this great word righteousness has at least four dimensions to it relational right living right standing redemption or salvation now I believe that Jesus is here talking about its relational and right living dimensions and if I am correct it follows that here it does not refer to justification and most certainly not to human righteousness if anything it would be more akin to sanctification we must remember that the message is addressed to those who are already disciples and those who would be disciples through hearing the sermon another way of saying this is Jesus is unpacking the inner and spiritual righteousness of the law its spiritual core the Torah the Torah that had degenerated into a non-relational set of external rules

Jesus is reminding us that the righteousness of the Torah reflects the righteousness of God it is this righteousness that I believe Jesus is teaching in the sermon on the mount and embodying in his own ministry and for which he is persecuted listen to what he says in verse in chapter 5 in verse 20 Matthew 5 verse 20 do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them truly I tell you until heaven and earth disappear not the smallest letter not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law and then he adds in verse 20 of chapter 5 for I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven but this is only part of the picture

Jesus offers a second reason I'd like to put that word second in inverted commas and the reason is that the two reasons are inseparable for each other they're two sides of the same coin Jesus is linking this righteousness of God as something inseparable from himself righteousness is no longer unfolded through living by the letter but comes through following Christ as Paul puts it Christ is the end of the law for righteousness not its termination and its annihilation but its goal and fulfillment so that at last Christian ethics and righteous living follow from following Christ and from our relationship with him now that means that the Beatitudes are Christological that is they find their perfect fulfillment fulfillment in Christ and can only be realized in the kingdom community to the extent we are following

Christ and also if we think about it Jesus' comments about persecution there and especially after the Beatitudes as he talks about salt and light point very powerfully do they not to Jesus' understanding as Christianity being a public affair but these words because of me these are remarkable words and they are challenging and searching words are they not we could ask ourselves is our faith only a private affair is there only the sound of silence in our public square and if we've never experienced and I preach this to myself firstly if we've never experienced a might of persecution why might that be the case would we be willing to follow him to the point of possibly being persecuted for his sake the supreme cause of

Christian persecution is fidelity to Jesus Christ and this brings me to my final point persecution and rejoicing you know the picture of the church as persecuted that Jesus gives us is the church at its best it's the church encountering critical and crucial moments in the drama of its witness the persecuted church is the church taking up its cross and denying itself for the sake of Christ it is the church sharing in the sufferings of Christ remember what we read from Acts there what Jesus said to Saul the persecutor of the church he did not say Saul Saul why do you persecute the church he said Saul why are you persecuting me and this is why

[ 20 : 47 ] Paul always talks in his letters about sharing in the sufferings of Christ this is something that he knew as a Christian that he was called to on behalf of Christ how much is it in our thinking and our outlook and attitude to our Christianity and you know something those that are persecuted are never persecuted alone Jesus Christ the persecuted one is always with them I remember reading somewhere and I don't remember where someone said to a fellow prisoner at Auschwitz where is God now and the prisoner replied back he's right here he's right here the persecuted church is the church that leaves a legacy to our children and our children's children now if we're shocked or surprised at this mark of the church graphically portrayed by Jesus there is an even greater shock to come from the lips of

Jesus for here he declares how we should respond when we experience persecution there is there in verse 12 rejoice and be glad now my first sort of instinctive response to that would be be you must be joking I do not understand this at all it seems outlandish over the top ridiculous and it does but this is what Jesus said what reasons does Jesus offer for this outrageous command well he offers reward great is your reward in heaven now of course they have the reward that is mentioned in verse 10 yours is the kingdom of heaven but this may well be something other that Jesus wants to salute those if you like that wear the medals of persecution and the wounds of suffering for Christ and then the second thing that he says he wants to give them reassurance that they're in great company sterling company for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you yes this is indeed the norm this is indeed what will happen for those that are willing to take a stand for me in the public square and then there is another reason because of me

I think these words are powerful that Jesus apart from the fact that they're astounding apart from the fact that coming from the lips of Jesus they point to his absolute authority and uniqueness but they're an amazing word there's a call almost coming from them because of me the one who is our great lover the son of God loved me and gave himself for me what can I give for him because he is the one who is the great lord in the Roman empire people had to go once a year to say that Caesar is lord and this was one of the reasons that the Christians at that time were persecuted because they refused even that one single time they could say and get their certificate and go away and get on with their

Christianity and everything would be fine if you like but they refused and they were persecuted and also he is the living saviour that is with us even in our most difficult times there it is then blessed are they that are persecuted because of me for theirs is the kingdom of heaven theirs is a great reward they are in the company of the prophets and they can find at some point a cause for rejoicing for the inestimable privilege and honour of being given the opportunity to share in the sufferings of Jesus Christ are we part of the blessed and persecuted community of faith that Jesus teaches us about in this final beatitude amen and may the Lord bless these thoughts to each and every one of us for one of us