

A Surprising Contradiction

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[0 : 00] Good morning. The scripture reading for today is taken from Psalm 119 verses 81 through 95 and Matthew 5 verses 1 through 12.

! My soul longs for your salvation. I hope in your word. My eyes long for your promise. I ask, when will you comfort me? For I have become like a wineskin in smoke, yet I have not forgotten your statutes. How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me? The insolent have dug pitfalls for me. They do not live according to your law. All your commandments are sure. They persecute me with falsehood. Help me. They have almost made an end of me on earth, but I have not forsaken your precepts. In your steadfast love, give me life that I may keep the testimonies of your mouth. Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Your faithfulness endures to all generations. You have established the earth, and it stands fast. By your appointment, they stand this day. For all things are your servants. If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life. I am yours. Save me, for I have sought your precepts. The wicked lie in wait to destroy me, but I consider your testimonies. Matthew chapter 5.

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain. And when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught 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 receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

[2 : 55] Blessed are those who persecute. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Amen.

Amen. I'm sure you'd agree with me that life is filled with contradictions. One of the common contradictions that I see is people who claim not to believe in God, and yet they spend a whole lot of time talking about the God who doesn't exist.

Another one is people who say they champion free speech, but when you don't agree with them, they attack you. And I can go on. I'm sure you can identify with these contradictions, but I'll give just one more.

And it is to watch people for whom a lot of sacrifices have been made, and they themselves refuse to sacrifice.

But this morning, we come to the last beatitude. As we work our way through the Sermon on the Mount, and we've come now to this first section, the last beatitude, I think we come face to face with what is the greatest contradiction in human relationships.

[4 : 42] And the contradiction is that righteous people are persecuted for righteousness' sake. That is an astounding contradiction.

That righteous people are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Why would anyone want to persecute a righteous person?

Well, we find the answer to that question in this last beatitude. But before we look at it, let's take a moment to pray. Father, we thank you for bringing us all to this place this morning.

But although we all made decisions, humanly speaking, to be here, you and your divine providence brought us all here. And I pray, Lord, that that awareness will cause us to posture our hearts to hear what you would say to us.

Lord, may we do that in the personal interactions we have with one another. But may we especially do that right now as you speak to us through your word.

[6 : 00] Would you give us all ears to hear and hearts to obey. And I ask once again, Lord, that you would use me as an instrument in your hand for the good of your people and for the glory of your name.

We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Again, the fact that anyone would be persecuted for living and acting righteously is a surprising contradiction.

And yet that is exactly what happens. From the beginning of time, righteous people have been persecuted for righteousness sake.

Now, why does this contradiction exist in our world? I want to answer that question this morning briefly under two points.

And the first one is this. The reality of being persecuted for righteousness sake. When we consider the Beatitudes that we have already covered, the first seven, we come to this eighth one.

[7 : 15] And it is quite surprising. It is quite surprising when we consider the eighth Beatitude in light of the previous seven that we have covered over the past several weeks.

But to see the surprise, we have to remember that the Beatitudes are connected whole. The Beatitudes are about the same people. Jesus is addressing the same people throughout all the Beatitudes.

They are poor in spirit. They mourn over sin. They are meek. They hunger and thirst after righteousness. They're merciful.

They're pure in heart. And they're peacemakers. And such people are God's people. And the only reason that these attributes are true about them is that God has done something in their lives.

He's done something in their hearts. He has done what the Bible says. He has regenerated them. He's given them new birth from above. And these descriptions are what they are like as a result of that divine work that God does in sinful hearts.

[8 : 33] But when we come to this eighth Beatitude, what we see is the eighth Beatitude doesn't describe what God's people are like. Instead, it describes what happens to them.

And that's a surprise. And that's a surprise. And all of a sudden, Jesus shifts from talking about what they're like to what actually happens to them.

And what he says is they are persecuted for righteousness' sake. He says they will be reviled. He says people will utter all kinds of evil against them falsely on his account.

And when we ponder to take all this in, we have to ask ourselves, why would people whose lives are marked by such grace and such kindness suffer this kind of treatment as described in this eighth Beatitude?

Wouldn't we want a world filled like this with people like this, brothers and sisters? Just imagine a world where everyone, these attributes that Jesus talks about in the first seven Beatitudes, marked their lives.

[9 : 54] That would be heaven on earth. We wouldn't have a police force. Wouldn't need a prison. It would just be a wonderful set of circumstances in which to live.

It is interesting that the very last Beatitude that Jesus gives is, blessed are the peacemakers.

Blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

It's quite a contrast to see that immediately after the seventh Beatitude, Jesus comes to this eighth Beatitude, and this is what he says about those persons.

Another thing that's interesting to observe is that Jesus, prior to the eighth Beatitude, he's addressing his disciples, but he's speaking in third persons.

He's saying, blessed are those, for example, who hunger and thirst after righteousness. But when he comes to the eighth, it's as if he turns to them, looks them square in the eyes, and he says, blessed are those.

[11 : 07] And then he says, men will revile you, and they will persecute you, and they will say all manner of evil against you falsely on my account. And he shifts from the third person to the second person directly addressing his disciples.

What Jesus is saying is that those who belong to him and live for him in this world will suffer persecution on his account. And it's a remarkable claim that whoever you are and wherever you live, if you belong to Christ and you live a righteous life, you will be persecuted for righteousness' sake.

For some people, the persecution will be verbal. For some people, they're mocked and they're ridiculed. Or perhaps for some, they're shunned.

They're shunned because they're Christian. Others find it maybe awkward to be around them. And sometimes this mockery and ridicule comes from people near to them, like family members and co-workers who do not know Christ.

But I think we all are aware that sometimes this persecution goes beyond what is verbal and beyond the shunning in relationships. It actually includes physical harm and for some, even death.

[12:50] And this is true for many of our brothers and sisters today in countries that are hostile to the gospel. The Apostle Peter echoes the words of Jesus in this eighth beatitude.

And he makes the same point that we are blessed when we are persecuted in Christ's name. But he makes it clear that the persecution must not be because of our own misdeeds.

Listen to what he says in 1 Peter 4, verses 14 to 16. He says, Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed.

But let him glorify God in that name. This is a universal experience.

And again, we have to ask ourselves the question, why is it that all of God's people everywhere experience this? The best of God's people, those who are seeking to honor him, those who are loving their neighbors, those who are giving of themselves.

[14:19] Why? Why do they experience this mistreatment that Jesus describes in the eighth beatitude? Well, first of all, Jesus tells us in verse 11 that it's on his account.

Jesus says it's on account of me, on account of your connection to me. And what Jesus is pointing to, brothers and sisters, is we're part of a cosmic war.

We're part of a cosmic war between God and the evil one who works through people who do not know the Lord, people who don't belong to the Lord.

And it started with the first righteous person who was killed because of his righteous living. And that righteous person was Abel, who was killed by his brother Cain.

In Psalm 119, the first scripture that was read this morning, we see the psalmist, one who delights in God's law, one who loves the Lord and loves the ways of the Lord.

[15:29] We hear him praying and crying out to God, how long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me? Why would such a man be praying like this?

Why would someone be persecuting this man who loves the commandments of God, seeking to obey the commandments of God, one of which is that you to love your neighbor as you love yourself, and yet he finds himself persecuted, and he's crying out to God and saying, how long must I endure this?

When will you judge those who persecute me? He says, the insolent have dug pitfalls for me. They do not live according to your law.

All your commandments are sure. They persecute me with falsehood. Help me. They've almost made an end of me on the earth, but I have not forsaken your precepts.

He says, Lord, despite the persecution, despite all that has happened, I'm not going to forsake your precepts. I'm not going to fight fire with fire. This is a man who's being persecuted for righteousness' sake.

[16:42] He says, in your steadfast love, give me life that I may keep the testimonies of your mouth. Brothers and sisters, this is the law of all of God's people over all of the ages.

As we live in this world, we will be persecuted, and like the psalmist, we need to cry out to the Lord and ask for his help.

Now, some might say, well, I'm not persecuted. Everyone gets along with me. I'm a Christian. And to that, I'll say two things briefly.

One, perhaps you've not served Christ long enough. Because I think, when we serve Christ for any reasonable period of time, in this fallen world in which we live, the reality of persecution comes our way.

At least verbally. Perhaps physically, but at least verbally, it will come our way. And the second thing I would say is, if you have served Christ for a considerable period of time, and you have not experienced persecution in the slightest way, a snide remark, or maybe being shunned in some social context, I think, if you're not experiencing or have not experienced persecution to some degree, and you have served the Lord for a reasonable period of time, I think, I think, it's perhaps good to pause and ask, why is that?

[18 : 41] Why is that? Why is that? Why is your commitment to follow Christ and live for Christ not resulted in anyone persecuting you, even verbally, or mocking you, because of the things that you do or don't do?

Why is your commitment to follow Christ and live for Him not resulted in anyone persecuting you relationally, perhaps not wanting to socialize with you because you no longer laugh or tell crude jokes, or perhaps get drunk as you did in the past, or engage in sexual immorality, or some kind of conduct that is now in your past?

Friend, if you truly belong to Christ, then you have to ask yourself the question, why am I exempt from what Jesus describes in the eighth beatitude that comes to those who belong to Him on His account?

I think it's a fair question for us to reflect upon. The Apostle Paul puts it very plainly to his spiritual son, Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3, here's what he says very pointedly, indeed, all who live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

All, without exception. Now again, Paul certainly has margins in there for those who recently came to Christ, but broadly and generally speaking, all who live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

[20 : 29] Brothers and sisters, this is our lot. This is what we're called to. We will be persecuted if we live a godly life in this world, in Christ Jesus.

And the reason is, it's on the account of Jesus. Jesus said, the world has hated me, it's going to hate you. The world hates the Lord Jesus.

It does. The world is hostile to God. Behind the platitudes and behind all the appearances of things being otherwise, there is enmity, there is hostility between those who are not of the kingdom of God.

And so, it should not surprise us when this comes our way. But perhaps, if you are a believer in Christ and you have not experienced persecution, could it be that you are intentionally or unintentionally living the Christian life, doing what Jesus tells us not to do, which we will cover next Sunday, the Lord willing, and that is hiding your light under a basket.

Intentionally or unintentionally, hiding your light under a basket. And maybe because you don't want to be shunned and you don't want to be mocked and you don't want to be scorned.

[22 : 00] I could remember when I was a young believer, 13 years old, and I didn't want to associate with the other Christians from my church who were attending the same school because we were ridiculed and we were mocked.

And so, I was intentionally hiding my light, putting it under a basket because I did not want the snide remarks and people saying God's quarter and things like that.

But if you're a student this morning, don't be like me. I encourage you to identify with Christ. The Bible says of Moses that he identified with the people of God.

He was more willing to do that than to identify with Pharaoh and his household and all the riches. he was willing to suffer with the people of God and identify with them in that way.

And so, perhaps you are living as an undercover Christian for Christ. I encourage you. I'm not saying that you're to go out there and broadcast that you're a Christian. I don't think that's appropriate. I don't think Christ calls us to do that.

[23 : 18] Pharisees do that. But also, it's inappropriate to intentionally hide the fact that we are Christians. We have to live our lives in a normal way.

We shouldn't be ashamed if we are eating to give thanks to the one who has provided food for us in a public setting. If we're receiving some award or reward for something that we have done, we shouldn't be ashamed to give thanks to the one who gave us the strength and the ability and the wherewithal to make that achievement.

We should honor the Lord and let the chips fall where they may. That's what Daniel did. When his friends plotted against him and they persecuted him and tried to get him thrown to the lions, he knew what the consequences were, but he continued to do the same thing that he always did, opening his window and praying towards Jerusalem.

He didn't do it to be seen. That's what he always did. And so, brothers and sisters, we must not be ashamed to live for Christ in just an ordinary way and let the chips fall where they may.

Now, let me just be quick to say this, that I would not say the same thing to someone living in North Korea. What I'm saying takes into the reality that we live in a country where there is freedom of

religion and this is appropriate in most Western countries, but there are countries that this would not be the same counsel that I would give in North Korea to do this in the very same ways that we do it here, live for Christ in the very same ways openly could result in a different and even a fatal outcome.

[25 : 12] outcome. So that's the reality of being persecuted for righteousness' sake. Jesus is telling us to expect it and so when it comes our way, we need to embrace it.

And this brings you to my second and final point. The reward for being persecuted for righteousness' sake. So exactly how should we respond to persecution?

Jesus tells us in verse 12. He says you to rejoice and be glad. Now this is a most unusual response. It's an unusual response because I think we all know that it's difficult just to endure persecution without wanting to retaliate.

It's difficult. Sometimes we feel the old man wanting to come up to life again when we are persecuted.

So to rejoice and be glad when we are persecuted is even more difficult than just enduring the persecution.

[26 : 21] But here's one of the truths that we see in Scripture. God never calls us to do what He doesn't help us to do. Whatever God calls us to do, He enables us and helps us to do by His Holy Spirit.

He doesn't bark waters at us and say go and do it on your own but His Spirit is there to help us every step of the way.

But notice that we're not told to rejoice in a vacuum. He doesn't say oh just rejoice because you're persecuted. No, He says rejoice first of all because your reward is great in heaven.

This should encourage us. this should encourage us because it's a reminder that our persecutions don't escape the gaze of the Lord. The Lord sees them.

The Lord is not informed when we pray about them or He is unaware about them. He sees them, He knows them and the reason He is going to reward them appropriately is because He knows them exactly for what they are.

[27 : 38] He sees and knows everything about us. He says I know the number here on your head and not one will fall to the ground except I ordain it. But we should not think about this reward that the Lord promises when we are persecuted for righteousness sake as a reward of works.

It's not a reward of works it's a reward of grace. The Lord rewards us for doing what He enables us to do by His Spirit.

He doesn't leave us to ourselves to do this because we can't naturally do this. None of us left to ourselves can and therefore will rejoice and be glad when we are persecuted.

We'll fight and be mad but not rejoice and be glad. But He gives us the grace to be able to do this and we see beautiful pictures of this both in Scripture and in human history.

We see Stephen who being stoned like an angel looking to the Lord and entrusting himself to God. Only the grace of God enables people to do that.

[28 : 57] We have accounts of believers over the ages being thrown to lions and being burned in the fire and they do it without any kind of retaliation or fear.

How do they do that? God gives grace to do that. He enables them to do that and so the rewards that we get they have rewards of grace they're rewards that we get because God enabled us to do what he's rewarding us for.

The other part of what Jesus says is this that should encourage all of our hearts he says that we should rejoice also when we're persecuted for righteousness sake because it's a further reminder that we belong to him.

he said the prophets of old were treated in the same way that you're being treated and it reminds us that we are a part of the company of God's people we are reminded that the same treatment that those who went before us in the ages gone by was subjected to we are being subjected to when we are persecuted in this way.

I want to draw your attention once again to how the Beatitudes end.

[30 : 27] The Beatitudes end in a very similar way to how they begin. Jesus opened the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 3 telling us that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are poor in spirit.

And he ends the Beatitudes by saying that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. It's like two bookends.

Two bookends. This person who is poor in spirit and this person who is persecuted for righteousness sake who is called to rejoice because he has a reward in heaven and because he is identified with the people of God who have been treated in this way throughout all of human history. Another way you can think of the Beatitudes is to remember that Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who belong to Christ. Brothers and sisters, if we belong to Christ, we recognize our spiritual poverty before God.

We mourn over our sin, we are meek, we hunger and thirst after righteousness, we're pure in heart, we're peacemakers, and we are persecuted for righteousness sake.

[31 : 57] And when we are, we're called to rejoice because our reward is great in heaven and is a reminder that we belong to God.

And that's why we're persecuted. In 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 18 to 20, the Apostle Peter reminds us that Christ does not call us to do anything that he himself did not do in the face of unimaginable persecution.

And I think we would all agree that what Christ endured on this earth is far different from what we endure on this earth. He was perfect and without sin, and yet he was persecuted in unimaginable ways.

That we who are with sin have not been and will not be persecuted. But listen to what Peter writes in 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 18 to 23.

He writes, servants be subject to your own masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the unjust.

[33 : 16] For this is a gracious thing when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?

endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it, you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called.

Because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges righteously.

This is what we've been called to, brothers and sisters. And like the Lord Jesus, when we are persecuted, we can entrust ourselves to the one who judges justly.

[34 : 24] And he judges justly because he sees all and he knows all. His judgment is perfect and just.

And we endure remembering that the world hated Christ and so it is no surprise that the world hates those who belong to Christ. As I close this morning, I want to say to you that there is a greater contradiction than being persecuted for righteousness sake.

And it is being crushed for righteousness sake. And that's what a holy God did to his only son. Not because he was sinful, but because he was righteous.

Because he was perfectly righteous, righteous. And we needed a substitute. And God the Father in mercy and grace offered his sinless son to be that substitute of undeserving sinners to bear their sin so that they could bear his righteousness.

And the way that great exchange of sin for righteousness and righteousness for sin came about is the father crushed his righteous son. apostle Peter described it this way.

[35 : 56] For Christ also suffered for sins. The righteous for the unrighteous. And here's why. That he might bring us to God.

That's why he did it. And so as great a contradiction as it is that the righteous are persecuted for righteousness' sake, the greater contradiction, brothers and sisters, is that the father crushed his son for righteousness.

That through crushing him because he took our sin, we are able to bear his righteousness. We're able to be seen in the sight of a holy God as righteous though we brought nothing to and will bring nothing to the righteousness that God declares in us.

But because God crushed his sinless son, because he crushed him for sin and for sinners, brothers and sisters, we can look forward to a day when there will be no more contradictions.

We can look forward to that day. Here's what Peter says in 2 Peter 3.13. He says, but according to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

[37 : 38] this is possible because God crushed his son, his righteous son, because God did something that was greater than any other contradiction, crushing the one who is righteous, perfectly righteous, and sparing sinners, undeserving sinners like you and me, who put their trust in Jesus, but nonetheless deserved to be punished for their sins.

The Apostle Peter tells us that there is coming a day when God is going to usher in a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, and it only is because of what Jesus Christ did for us, what God did by crushing him for us.

And on that day, there will be no more contradictions. No longer will the righteous be persecuted for righteousness' sake, because all who dwell in the new heavens and in the new earth will be righteous, and persecution will be no more.

And not just persecution. The Bible tells us that all of the former troubles and trials of this life will be no more. And God gave the Apostle John a vision of what this future will be.

he gave him a vision of the new heaven and the new earth that we read about in Revelation 21, verses 1-4. This is what John writes, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

[39 : 20] And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for a husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them. And they will be his people. And God himself will be with them as their God. And listen to this part. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

And this is when God's people, who were persecuted for righteousness sake, will receive their great reward. And brothers and sisters, may we all look to and long for this day when we will be finally home.

And all of the things that pertain to this life will be no more. Let's pray. Father, we are so grateful that you, in mercy and grace, sent Jesus Christ to transform the hearts of sinners, that they would be marked by the attributes and the beatitudes.

[40 : 58] Lord, thank you for crushing your son so that we might be spared and we might be at his righteousness.

Would you help us as we live in this world for you to endure persecution? would you help us to remember your words that we are to rejoice and be glad because we have a great reward in heaven and what is happening to us is not strange.

It has happened to all of God's people over all the ages. Father, would you help us to be faithful to the very end and may we look forward to the day when this contradiction and indeed all contradictions will be removed and we will dwell in the new heaven and in the new earth.

Would you do this in all of our hearts this morning? In Jesus' name, Amen.