

"Blessed are the Persecuted"

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Matthew chapter 5? We're returning to Matthew chapter 5 today as we come to the eighth and last of Jesus's Beatitudes. That's page 759 in the Pew Bible. I'm going to read verses 1 through 12, but our sermon will focus on the last three verses.

So, as you turn there, let me pray as we come to God's Word together. Father in heaven, as we come now to your Word, we ask for your Spirit to be present as you promise, teaching us and guiding us into all wisdom so that we might behold Christ, our King, and all of His beauty, and be shaped more and more into His likeness, that we might be salt and light in the world that you've made, be bearers of your kingdom and your grace. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

All right, Matthew chapter 5, 1 through 12. 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. 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. Well, is Christianity hard or easy? Is Christianity hard or easy? On the one hand, following Christ seems incredibly hard. Take up your cross and follow me, Jesus says, to all who would consider being His disciple, being His follower. In other words, Christ doesn't just demand part of us, He demands all of us to bring everything that we are under His good lordship with nothing remaining. He wants our time, our money, our desires, our relationships, everything. So Christianity seems, in that perspective, hard. But then again, Christianity also seems incredibly easy. Jesus says, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. We are accepted by God in Christ freely, by grace, as a gift, through what Jesus has done, not through any works of our own. So, Charles Spurgeon once wrote, my Lord is more ready to pardon than you are to sin, more able to forgive than you are to transgress.

So the call of Christ is both a call of radical free grace, where the only thing you need is nothing at all. And at the same time, it is a call of radical surrender, a centering of the whole life around Christ, His way, His words, His love, His desires. It's both the dying to self, and it's the gift of becoming our true selves. Now, this same dynamic, Christianity, is both hard and easy as it works in our passage today, this last of Jesus' Beatitudes. We've seen that all of these statements of blessing are a bit upside down, aren't they? They're not what we'd expect. The world values the strong, the rich, the powerful, and if we're honest, we kind of do too, don't we? But Jesus says, blessed are the poor, the merciful, the mourners, the peacemakers. But this last one in verses 10 through 12 is maybe the most upside down of all. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

[4 : 45] Being persecuted for doing right, that sounds like the exact opposite of a blessed life, a flourishing life, doesn't it? But remember, when Jesus speaks these words of blessing, His frame of reference is not our own petty dreams and desires. For Jesus, the only real frame of reference for a genuinely human life, the only right way to frame a life worth living is the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God, the world-healing rule of the triune God that is broken into history in Jesus' ministry, that reached its climax with Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, that continues to advance today through the outpouring of the Spirit and the proclamation of His Word, the kingdom that will one day be consummated when Jesus returns in glory. Only living for that kingdom and no

other will you find a life worthy of your humanity.

And in this kingdom, Jesus says, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Why?

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. They belong to God's kingdom. So you see, being a follower of Jesus is both hard and easy. It's hard because following Jesus carries a great cost. But at the same time, we might say it's easy because the cost does not compare to what you gain. So that's how we'll consider Jesus' last beatitude today. If you're going to follow Jesus, there's a very real cost. But second, if you're going to follow Jesus, the cost doesn't compare to what you gain. So let's consider first there's a very real cost if you're going to follow Jesus. Jesus says there's a very real possibility of being persecuted for righteousness' sake. And then He goes on to explain a bit of what that persecution may look like in verse 11. He says, others may revile you. That is, they'll criticize you and insult you. They'll utter all kinds of evil against you falsely.

You'll be mocked and ridiculed. You'll be falsely accused. In other words, there's going to be great loss. You may lose your reputation. You may lose friends or family. You may lose influence or wealth.

[7 : 20] You may lose work or well-being. In some cases, you may lose health or even your life. As we just prayed, there are many places today where professing the name of Christ is a dangerous act, an act that might put you in prison or risk your very life. Now, it's important to clarify as we consider the blessing for those who are persecuted. Jesus says, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. That is, blessed are those who are persecuted for living according to Jesus' words and ways. You know, experiencing ridicule or exclusion just because you're being a jerk or because you're advancing your own agenda isn't what Jesus is talking about here, right?

John Christosom in the fourth century made the same observation in his sermon on this passage. He wrote, do not expect to be blessed if you are reviled for something evil and what is said is true. Rather, Jesus is talking about being persecuted for his name's sake, as verse 11 says, for taking the name of Jesus upon oneself and all that that means. And if you do, if you identify with Christ, if you make him your life, if you shape your life around his ways and his words, his righteousness, not just in private, but in public, then you can expect that there will be a cost. It will be hard.

But you might wonder, well, how can that be? I mean, if Jesus is who he says he is, if he is the Lord, if he is God incarnate, if he is the way, the truth, and the life, shouldn't his words and his ways always bring prosperity and healing? If he created the world, doesn't he know how it works best? Shouldn't following his ways always lead to our good? And yet here it seems like Jesus is saying that they'll lead to our death, to reviling, to false accusation, to pain. How do we make sense of this? Well, think of it a bit this way. It's a bit like an organ transplant, you know, an organ transplant. You know, when a body is sick and needs a new organ, the best thing for that body is to get the right new organ as soon as possible. If your heart is failing, you need a heart transplant, right? But what can sometimes happen is that when a body receives a new organ, that body can turn against it. It can start to reject the new organ that's just been transplanted. In other words, the body begins to attack the very thing that is meant to give it life. The gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ is just like that. You see, humanity as a whole, we're like a sick body, and all of us together suffer under the illness that the Bible calls sin, this willful rejection and separation from God, which leads to spiritual death. But the gospel comes like an organ transplant.

[10 : 27] It's the very thing that can make spiritually sick people whole again. Why? Because it's the only thing that deals with our sin problem. Under sin, we all deserve death and wrath, but Jesus Christ became a human being, died on the cross in the place of our sin so that we can receive forgiveness.

He was afflicted so that we can be made whole. And those who come to Christ in faith, taking hold of what He's done for us, are made alive spiritually. We're brought from death to life. They become a new organism, as it were, in the midst of the old body. And flowing through the followers of Jesus is the message of grace and the way of righteousness. They embody in their life together a new way of being human. The church is like a new organ in the midst of the old body. But just like a sick body can often reject a new organ, so too the fallen world will often reject the people of Christ. Tragically, the fallen world will turn against the very thing that is meant to give it life.

Some of you here maybe experienced that in your own life before you became a Christian. You thought of Christianity as something silly or outlandish or ridiculous or just plain out bad.

But why is it that the fallen world can turn against the very thing that's meant to give it life? Why is that? Well, there are lots of reasons why the gospel might be rejected, but one big reason is that the gospel says that we can't save ourselves.

Our problem spiritually as humans is so radically dire that we need a rescue from outside of ourselves. You know, we spend our entire lives practicing and being formed to be our own lords and our own saviors, right? To build our own way, to make our own righteousness, to solve our own problems. And if you're really good at that, you get a lot of reward and success and fame, right?

[12:47] But the gospel comes and says, you can't rescue yourself. You need a salvation so radical that only God can provide it. You need a salvation so radical that God had to lay on His life to purchase it for you.

So you must humble yourself and not earn it, but receive it. You have to stop trying to run your life your own way and surrender to Christ.

But of course, the problem is we cling so tightly to our own righteousness and our own autonomy that our fallen human heart simply cannot accept it, right? But the good news is, is that by God's grace, He can break through our pride.

The message of Christ crucified does have the power to soften our hearts. When the Holy Spirit works on the human heart, He can bring us to see our sin, our need for a Savior.

He can cause us to see the beauty of Christ. He can grant us repentance and faith and new life. But apart from the grace of God, the fallen human heart rejects the radical nature of the gospel and the person of work of Christ, and it also rejects His ways and His righteousness.

[14:11] Because the righteousness of Christ, again, is according to the kingdom of God, not according to the kingdoms of this world. So a group of people living according to that kingdom are always going to seem out of step and out of place.

So we mustn't be surprised then when hardships come, when co-workers don't understand us, when family members ridicule us, when friends at times seem a little less friendly. You know, that doesn't mean we should go looking for a fight, right?

We ought to pray that God will open their eyes by His grace, just like He did for us, right? We haven't deserved this. We haven't earned anything. It doesn't mean we go looking for a fight, but it does mean that the path of following Jesus has a very real cost.

So two questions then before we move on to the second part of our passage. First question, have you experienced any of this cost or tension that Jesus describes?

Have you experienced this cost? Has being a Christian ever put you in an awkward social situation? Have you ever been the brunt of a cynical remark? If not, then perhaps your identification with the name of Jesus isn't quite what it should be.

[15:36] Again, I'm not saying that Christians should go looking for conflict, but we must also not hide the fact that we're followers of Jesus for fear of facing social ridicule.

If we've never felt this cross current that being a follower of Jesus produces, then perhaps our lives and our aims and our desires and our goals are shaped far more by the world around us than by God's kingdom.

Now look, I'm not saying you need to grab a megaphone and go hit the New Haven Green, right? That would be one way to get a lot of funny looks, you know? But what I am saying is that, you know, when your co-worker asks you what you did this weekend, you might say, you know, I went to church on Sunday and it was really encouraging.

The pastor kind of blabbed on and on and on and on, but everything else was great, you know, I loved it. No, seriously though, in other words, what I'm saying is let your identity in Christ be a natural part of your identity everywhere.

Don't hide it. As Jesus will say in the next section of the Sermon on the Mount, let your light shine before others. You know, we often think that to be a faithful witness, we need to kind of hit someone up with the four spiritual laws every time we have a conversation.

[17:04] Some of you don't know what the four spiritual laws are. You can come talk to me or Pastor Matt afterwards. We'll tell you what the four spiritual laws are. You know, and there may be some times when having a conversation really gets into the nitty-gritty of the gospel and what Jesus did to die for our sins and offer us new life.

But, you know, perhaps the first step is simply identifying with the name of Christ where you are and then prayerfully asking God how you might make your identity in Christ a natural part of your

identity and then seeing what God will do in those contexts.

And, yeah, being ready to have some good conversations when they come. Second question.

Second question. If you are experiencing this cost or tension, if you are experiencing some of what Jesus is talking about right now, do you have a group of fellow Christians to support you?

You know, many of us face challenges that are unique to our particular workplaces or to our particular schools or to our particular cultures. And we need to have fellow Christians that we can share these challenges with to pray with us, to help us discern what's the right way forward.

Sometimes navigating these things, there isn't a playbook that we just implement. We need wisdom. We need discernment. We need encouragement. And we've got to find that together with one another.

[18 : 33] You know, even if you don't find someone who has the exact same challenges as you, maybe they're not in the exact same line of work from the exact same family background, right? We still need fellow believers to follow Jesus well.

So if you aren't connected to a small group or a campus fellowship or a Christian professional group, by all means, join one. Use the start of a new season. The fall is here.

Remember, maybe one of your, you know, resolutions for the start of a new school year, for the start of a new season, is to get plugged in to a fellowship group if you haven't had one yet.

We aren't meant to face the cost of following Jesus alone. So that's our first point. There's a cost of following Jesus. He makes that very clear here.

But that leads to our second point. The cost of following Jesus doesn't compare to what you gain.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[19 : 37] Jesus goes on to reiterate all this in verse 12. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. If you're persecuted for my sake, Jesus says, you're in good company.

Think of the prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, and on and on. Nearly every one of them faced opposition, faced ridicule.

Some of them were imprisoned. Some of them were literally thrown to the lions, right? So when you face opposition, remember, you're in good company.

There's a whole host of saints who've run this race before you. And through persecution, you are counted among them. In the moment of being reviled or falsely accused, you know, we can often feel that exclusion, that ridicule, that shame so poignantly, so deeply.

You might feel like you're losing your community, you're losing your proper place, you're losing your bearings, right? But Jesus says, no, in that moment, you are not losing, you're gaining, you're joining the ranks of the great prophets and saints who've gone before you.

[20 : 57] The world wants to strip you of your dignity, but in that very moment, you're finding Him. For you stand in the long line of courageous men and women who have treasured God more than the fleeting praise of this passing world.

The cost is real. You might lose family, friends, reputation, but look at what you gain. A place among the prophets, a place among the saints, you're in good company.

But it's not just good company, Jesus says. There's also a great reward. We're often too short-sighted as Christians, aren't we?

We tend to live with merely the next 50, 60, 70 years in view, and the older you get, that number gets shorter and shorter and shorter and shorter. But Jesus says, lift up your gaze.

You've been made an inheritor of an eternal kingdom, one that will not fade, one that will not grow old, a city where the rivers flow with life, where the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations, where the living God dwells in the midst, so present, so radiant, that there's not even need for the sun or the moon, because the Lamb is its light for all eternity.

[22 : 28] And there you will reign with Him forever in a completely renewed creation. And best of all, a fellowship with God.

A fellowship with God that's like eating the best meal you've ever had. Fellowship with God.

Paul says in Romans 8, I consider that the sufferings of this present time aren't worth comparing with the glory that's to be revealed to us. They're not worth comparing.

You know, if on your 21st birthday you were set to inherit like this massive fortune, right? Millions of dollars. You just had to like turn the next year old. You know, would you freak out if someone stole \$100 from your purse like two days before your birthday?

It'd be annoying, right? It'd be inconvenient. You know, that was going to be your gas money to get around, so now you've got to bum a ride off your friend. But would it rock your world?

[23 : 36] No. It's not worth comparing to what you're about to gain. In the same way, Jesus is saying here, it's not worth comparing.

Yes, there's real suffering in this life. Yes, it ought to be taken seriously. Yes, we ought to pray regularly for our persecuted brothers and sisters in the worldwide church.

But let us not forget that in Christ, ours is a very great reward. Nothing that is taken from us in this life can really steal the ultimate foundation of our hope, our joy, our life.

These afflictions are simply preparing for us an eternal weight of glory as they draw us closer to Christ and His sufferings, as they draw us closer to eternity with Him in His resurrection.

And for that, Jesus says, rejoice and be glad. You're in good company and your reward is greater than you could ever imagine.

[24 : 51] So brothers and sisters, live for Christ and His righteousness. Don't be afraid of what the world can do to you. If you're misunderstood, if you're slandered, if you're falsely accused for the sake of Christ, don't respond the way the world responds.

Don't be surprised as if something strange is happening to you. No. Jesus says, rejoice and be glad. You're right where you need to be, in the footsteps of your Savior, who also walked a road of righteousness and who was also persecuted and reviled and despised for it, but who through God's power was raised for you.

The way of the cross is the way of the crown. As we suffer for Christ's sake, we can be assured that we will also be glorified with Him.

Blessed indeed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Let's pray. Father, we admit this morning that it's easy to talk about persecution and being reviled and being falsely accused.

It's easy to talk about it in this peaceful space. But God, we know that when we're in the midst of it, we so desperately need your help.

[26 : 20] So help us by your Holy Spirit in the coming days, weeks, months, years. Help us by your Holy Spirit to be reminded again and again of what Jesus has taught us here.

And by your Holy Spirit, help us to know the communion with Christ that you promise us now that can enrich and enliven our hearts even when we face opposition and persecution.

Oh, Christ, would you be our treasure more than anything else in this world. And with the great hope that we have in you, be a great ballast that carries us through the storms.

Father, we do pray again for our brothers and sisters in the global church who know what these verses mean far more than we ever could know.

Christ, be their comfort, be their good shepherd this morning. As our brothers and sisters gather around the world on this day, your day, the Lord's day, would you protect them, keep them, help them too to see that the sufferings we experience in this life are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed when you return and we share in your resurrection.

[27 : 42] Pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.