

1. The blessing of persecution

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is Matthew chapter 5, verses 1 to 12. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down.

His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. 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.

[1 : 14] Now we're going to sing, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, On which the Prince of Glory died, My richest gain, I count but lost, Have all contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, Save in the death of Christ my God, O Lord, that I should boast, I sacrifice them to his blood.

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See from his head, his hands, his feet, Sorrow and love, Formingled down, The air sobs love, And sorrow meet, For thoughts compose, So rich a crown.

[3 : 45] The love, O realm of nature, And sorrow meet, And sorrow meet, And sorrow meet, And sorrow meet, going to come and speak to us. Good morning everybody. Very happy new year to you. I'd like to welcome you particularly if it's your first time with us or if you're visiting.

My name's Andrew and I'm pastor here at Union Baptist Church. It's great to have you with us this morning. So for the start of the new year we're launching a new sermon series. And in this series we're going to be studying passages of the Gospels, the accounts of Jesus' life where Jesus talks about the cost of being a Christian. Now you might be thinking shouldn't we be launching the year with something really positive and like yeah it's all going to be great and let's do this and it's all going to be wonderful. But instead we're actually talking about bad stuff that could happen to us for being a Christian and bad things that might happen to us if we follow Jesus. Well we're in a building project at the moment. We've actually got two building projects going on at the moment. One is a physical building project down at that end of our building. It looks like that at the moment which is very exciting. It's got a new floor and various exciting things happening down there. But we're actually we're in the midst of two building projects and the second one is what Jackie was talking about earlier related to our motto text that that's a building project which a company of builders are doing but there's a building project which God is doing to the church here, Union Baptist Church, and that's us. And God is building us,

God is shaping us into the church that he wants us to be. Now in any building project you have to count the cost. Now we did this with the Living Stones project, the project to renovate our worship space.

It took an awfully long time to actually come up with a cost for the project but it's really important that we did that because if we'd started out without knowing the cost it would just there'd just be panic you know when builders arrive and start sending in bills and we'll be running around how are we going to pay this. And in the same way if builders turned up at your house and just started building stuff and you hadn't really kind of spent time thinking about having a conversation about

what's this going to cost you would rightly be quite panicked about that. You'd be thinking about how are you going to pay for this. Now as part of our vision and strategy for this year we have a focus on helping people to take the next steps towards Jesus and building on relationships we already have with people who may be far from God. We're going to be sharing a lot more about that at our meal and meeting on the 21st so do commend that to you. It's helpful for us to be honest with ourselves and ask ourselves why has this not been happening to the extent it could have been? Why have we not seen more people coming to faith? Why have we not been able to welcome more people? Why have we not been able to share our faith with more people? And I think if we're honest we find that outreach is hard. I know

I do. We find it hard because sometimes when we talk about Jesus to others we get a negative reaction or we might get a totally ambivalent reaction which can be hard or sometimes we actually feel a bit shy and we feel too timid or lacking confidence to actually start to share our faith with other people.

[7 : 34] Because the world says to us that things should be easy and we should be easy on ourself and if things are hard then we need to change our lifestyle to make things easy. Well we're in a cost of living crisis in this country and many of us over the last year or so have had to to take stock of what we spend money on to do some sums to count the cost of things to take a view on what's actually really important. And the Christian life has a cost. It's the cost of living Christ-like and I believe that we need to count that cost so that we're prepared for it because then we can move on confidently having counted the cost and knowing that it's worth it. Because every time Jesus talks about persecution and the cost of following him in the Bible he also talks about how much we receive and how much more we receive. And if we're willing to pay the cost we will receive from him so much more. And I believe that knowing that will help us to move forward confidently in 2024. We've got five or six sermons in this series. We're going to split them up. We're going to do a couple this month and then some others later on in the term. And in between we're going to be studying the book of 2 Peter which is really helpful for us as Christians to to navigate in a world which can be hostile to the truth of the gospel. More about that later. But we're going to look in detail at the passage that Rachel read to us from Matthew chapter 5.

I think it's on page 968 or thereabouts. If you have that open in front of you in the Bibles that'll be really helpful. As you do that let me just pray. Father God we thank you for your word to us and I pray that by your spirit you will speak to us through these words that we're looking at together now. In Jesus name. Amen. So we're going to be focusing on verses 10 to 12 which starts blessed are those who are persecuted. Now this comes within a famous piece of teaching by Jesus known as the Sermon on the Mount.

And within that there's a series of eight statements that begin blessed are dot dot dot. And these are called the Beatitudes. Billy Graham referred to these as beautiful attitudes.

They all begin blessed. That word blessed can be translated happy. Not in the sense that everything is comfortable around us but in terms of a deep inner sense of well-being. That isn't dependent on the circumstances that we find ourselves in. These eight statements describe eight different types of people. Sorry they don't describe eight different types of people but rather they describe a Christian and the progression for every Christian who knows this kind of happiness. It begins in verse 3 with recognizing our poverty of spirit. That means knowing I don't have what it takes myself to be the person that God created me to be. And having recognized that poverty of spirit we mourn that poverty in verse 4.

[10 : 27] That's describing what it means to repent. And then we recognize the truth about ourselves that we're more sinful and flawed than we ever thought possible. And we turn to God and we're then comforted by his Holy Spirit. And then we become meek in verse 5. That is we submit to Christ as Lord. And when we do that we start to truly make sense of the world around us. We inherit the earth. And when we live that way there are indicators in our lives. There are evidences in our lives of what that means. So verse 6 says blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We have a new appetite for things which please God. And verse 7 we become merciful. That means we're compassionate and kind. We're looking to the needs of others not ourselves. And then we become pure in heart in verse 8. That's really talking about single-mindedness in terms of putting God first in our life. And the impact of this in verse 9 is that we become peacemakers knowing that the root of conflict is not out there. It's actually in here in our hearts. And that's where the peace of God begins to work its way out into society and into the world

from in here. And that leads us to verse 10 which comes to be honest as a bit of a letdown after the seven statements we just looked at. Because you might think the person kind of person who's just been described would be welcomed by everyone. But Jesus says blessed are those who are persecuted. And just to make the point he actually says it twice in two different ways. And we're going to think about this under the following headings. The relevance of persecution. The reason for persecution. The reality of persecution. The response to persecution.

And finally a question for us. Are we ready for persecution? Let's just first of all think about the relevance of persecution. Is this actually relevant to us? Is persecution not outdated? We know that there were martyrs back in the early life of the church. But people today don't really get killed for their faith do they? Well actually they do. And an estimated 200 to 300 million Christians worldwide suffer persecution. And of those there's tens of thousands who are martyred every year. They actually die for their faith. The 10 most dangerous countries to be a Christian are currently North Korea, Somalia, Yemen, Eritrea, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and Sudan. So at least from a global perspective these words of Jesus are very relevant for millions of our brothers and sisters who live under direct constant threats every day. But the second reason is the biblical one. As I said Jesus wasn't describing different categories of Christians. He was describing all Christians who truly follow him. Paul says in 2 Timothy 3 verse 12, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ

Jesus will be persecuted. What are the reasons that Christians will face persecution? When verse 10 Jesus talks about being persecuted because of righteousness and then verse 11 he says because of me. So we can put those together. True righteousness always involves a relationship with Jesus. It's not just about doing the right thing for its own sake. It's the mercy and purity and peacemaking which comes from a relationship with Jesus and which we do in honour of Jesus. There is such a difference. There's such a tension between Jesus' message and his way of life and the way of life of the world which means that conflict is inevitable because the world says I want to be in charge. I want to do things my way and the Christian message says Jesus is Lord and I'm to submit to him as Lord and that means surrendering my life to him. And that's not easy. We don't like that. That's why we fight and resist and that's a big reason why Christians face opposition. Well let's see what Jesus says about what this persecution looks like, the reality of persecution. He mentions three different aspects of it in verse 11. He goes from the third person where he said blessed are those. Now he says in the second person blessed are you when people insult you. Having people insult you is having something verbal said directly to your face.

And we all know the old saying, sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Most of us are also aware that it's completely not true because words to our face can be extremely hurtful. Words can and do hurt us and the nature of attack to us may be hurtful things said to us.

The second thing is persecution. Jesus says they may persecute you and this is in terms of acts against us, offensive acts against us. This diagram shows some of the different ways that Christians are persecuted or may be persecuted around the world. Some of them are direct, some of them are indirect. And the third is falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. And this is talking about people who say things about you behind your back. It can be more subtle, maybe more cowardly but it's every bit as devastating. What kind of opposition might we come up against for being a Christian here in the UK in 2024? What might be the cost of living Christ-like for us?

[15 : 38] It may be that the price we pay is popularity. It may be that peers at school or college or colleagues at work don't want to spend time with us because our worldview is different from theirs.

It may be that people laugh at us or make jokes about us when we talk about our faith. It may be that we get shunned from public spaces. This is particularly an issue right now for Christian groups at colleges and universities. There's examples in the life group notes this week about Christian unions being banned from their student unions. A Christian union has recently been banned in one of our local secondary schools. If we hold to our biblical beliefs we are likely to be labelled at some point a bigot or narrow-minded or a something-phobe. And I think we're likely to experience this more and more as our society becomes more secular and as our society forgets the Christian roots of its value system. For families with children there is a price you and your children pay for following Jesus. As a family we've made a decision that we prioritise worship on a Sunday.

It seems that more and more birthday parties are scheduled for Sunday mornings and we've turned those invitations down having made that decision. My children have been invited to join sports clubs

which meet on a Sunday and we've had to make the difficult decision to forego that opportunity. In your workplace if you're in a shop or factory floor type environment as a Christian you're going to work your full hours and not cut corners or slack off. You may well be persecuted by colleagues for doing that because you indirectly show up the way that they don't work their full hours and the way they do cut corners and they won't like that. On the other hand if you work in management or a professional type scenario your employer may well put pressure on you to overwork, to spend all your time working, to give them your soul. You may have to make difficult decisions about living the life that Jesus wants you to live over your career progression or over your prospects for promotion. Opposition doesn't just come from outside sometimes it comes from within the church. Jesus fears his critics were from his own religious community. Well Jesus tells us what our response to persecution should be in verse 12. He says rejoice and be glad. Rejoice and be glad. Really? Somewhat surprising isn't it? Is that really what you meant Jesus? Wouldn't react and get mad be more appropriate? But Jesus gives us reasons why we should rejoice and be glad. He says because great is your reward in heaven. Jesus is saying what is ultimately of value is not what is of the earth and temporary but what is of heaven and eternal. If you're only excited about living in this world and what this world has to offer then you will likely run and hide whenever any opposition comes your way. But what Jesus offers to us is to be with him on an adventure in this world which is only temporary and we will be rewarded in our eternal future. Now just to clarify our eternal future with God beyond death is not a reward for living a righteous life. The Bible is very clear that is a gift to us by grace made available to us because of the price that Jesus has already paid. The sacrifice that he made. But having reached our eternal future there will be a greater reward for those who've paid a greater cost in this world in terms of persecution. We don't know what exactly that is. That's the mystery. But we can trust Jesus in this.

[19:11] That beyond any shadow of a doubt the reward of heaven will way more than make up for any suffering we endure as a result of following him. This is a truth that was well known by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German pastor who opposed the Nazi regime. As he left his prison room on the way to the gallows in 1945 he said to the camp doctor, this is the end. For me the beginning of life. Ten years later the camp doctor wrote, at the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost 50 years that I worked as a doctor I've hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer paid the cost but he knew it was worth it so he was able to rejoice even in death. Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones, a famous minister in England in the early 20th century, gave up being a physician to preach the gospel. He took a 90% cut in salary and he was shunned and ostracized by almost all his peers. One day a reporter came to him and said, was it worth it? And Dr Lloyd-Jones looked at the reporter and said, let me get this straight with you. I gave up nothing and I gained everything.

I gave up nothing and I gained everything. He knew that the cost of following Jesus didn't compare with having Jesus. To him it was like comparing the cost of a 75p postage stamp that you have to put on an envelope in order to withdraw a million pounds from the bank. It just wasn't worth comparing.

That's the reason that he was able to rejoice and be glad. As we come towards the end, I want to ask us this question, are we ready for persecution?

Or to put it another way, are we already being persecuted? The Bible is clear that if we truly follow Jesus, we will face opposition at some point. The Bible doesn't say that everybody who's persecuted is necessarily living godly. You can be persecuted for being obnoxious, for being fanatical or for being unpleasant. Sadly, some Christians act this way and they think they're being persecuted for righteousness sake. But how can you tell? Well, so far we've just been focusing on opposition and persecution, but I want us to consider what the Bible says as a whole about the impact, the results of living out our life in obedience to Jesus. What can we expect? Yes, on the one hand, that will lead to opposition, but that's not the whole story. Because Jesus also said a few verses later, in Matthew 5 verse 16, he said, let others see your good deeds, that they will glorify your father in heaven. In that scenario, they're not persecuting you, they're praising God because of you. And in Acts chapter 2, the early church, it says they enjoyed the favour of all the people. So the true mark of obedience to Christ is that we both attract and repel people. It's a bit like being a magnet. If you've ever played with magnets, you'll know that magnets both attract and repel metal objects. The Bible says that if we live in obedience to Jesus, we will both attract and repel other

people. If you're always being persecuted, but nobody's being attracted to Christ because of your love and mercy and meekness, then it may be because you're being obnoxious. On the other hand, if you're never experiencing any opposition, it may be actually because you're being a coward.

[22 : 52] Are we attracting and repelling or are we just like a lump of iron that has no magnetic charge? We have no impact on those around us. That's a very safe way to live, but ultimately that's not going to be a happy way to live. So if we find that people are neither attracted by us or repelled by us, we need to go back through the list of beatitudes. Let's look back at those. Verse 9, could it be that we're not a peacemaker? That doesn't mean that we avoid confrontation. We never make waves. That's not how Jesus made peace. It's about letting people know that your boss wants to make peace with them, that God wants to make peace with them. It's not thinking, do I like this person?

Do they like me? It's about thinking, what is God doing in this person's life and how can I be a part of that? If you're not a peacemaker in that sense, is it because you're not pure in heart, not single-minded, not focused on serving God? If not, is it because you're not merciful and compassionate? Verse 7. If you're not merciful, is it because you're not hungering and thirsting for righteousness? Verse 6. If you're not hungering and thirsting for righteousness, is it because you're not meek? You're not submitted to Christ as your Lord? If you're not meek, is it because you're not mourning your condition? Is that because you're not aware of your own poverty of spirit, aware that you need Jesus because you can't put yourself right with God without him?

In the next verses, after this section, Jesus talks about being salt of the earth, the light of the world. We're the ones that make a difference, but it's costly. Maybe we've been compromising, not willing to pay that cost, keeping away from God, not submitting to him, not allowing him to be boss in our lives. We need to confess that and ask the Holy Spirit to empty us of ourselves and fill us with the life of Jesus, with a hunger for him, with meekness, with mercy, with purity of hearts, with a desire to see those around us make peace with God and to not be afraid when we face opposition. I'm going to read a prayer in just a moment and then after we've sung a song together, we'll have the opportunity to read this prayer together as a prayer of commitment to Jesus or recommitment to him at the start of this year, of 2024. And then we're going to have an opportunity to each be prayed for, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, for the power of God, to put him first in our lives as we step into 2024. As part of your response to God this year, you might consider joining our Christianity Explored course. It starts on the 9th of January, later this week. It's a great opportunity to explore what the basics of the Christian faith are and to ask any questions you have about that. Do please see me or Mike about that afterwards. Let me lead us in a prayer and just listen to the words for now, but we'll have the opportunity to join in this prayer together after we've sung. I'm just going to ask the musicians to come up and be prepared to lead us in the next song as I pray. Dear God, thank you for what Jesus has done for us. We recognize that we could never put ourselves right with you, but you have done that for us by the sacrifice Jesus made for us.

We are so thankful. We want to live our lives in response to what you've done for us. We recognize that there is a cost to following you. We are sorry that sometimes we've not been willing to pay that cost. We've been timid. We've been fearful. We've been afraid. We've been more in love with what the world offers than what you offer. This year we want to live for you. Please fill us with your spirit that we would be convicted of our sin, that we would know how much we need you, that we would hunger and thirst for you. Please transform us to be more like you, to have your mercy, to have your purity, to have your peace, to be people who can help others to make peace with you. Help us to be ready for opposition, knowing that you will reward us so much more.

May we rejoice when we suffer because of you, knowing that you're being glorified through us. Amen.