

“Blessed Are They Which Are Persecuted”

Introduction. Our last beatitude does not introduce another characteristic of the Christian; it points out the reception that the world will give to those who live righteously. This last beatitude is the only one with a note of peril. Unlike the others, this beatitude is expanded into two more verses of explanation.

After describing the characteristics of a Christian, the Lord tells us the treatment to expect when displaying these characteristics. This is the first time that Jesus warned of persecution, but His life was filled with warnings and prophecies of hardship (Mark 13:9; Luke 21:16-17; John 15:18-21). Paul taught that it was God’s will for the Christian to be persecuted (1 Thessalonians 2:1-2; 3:3; 2 Timothy 3:12), and Jesus tells us how to respond to our enemies.

This beatitude shows the disciple of Christ at his highest, triumphing by the spiritual power of the new kingdom over forces of opposition. Here is the test of truly possessing the kingdom -- the one who can bear persecution and maintain integrity. We will look at our Lord faithfully warning His servants about what they may expect to encounter, and then defining how they are to respond and how they are to conduct themselves under the fire of their enemies.

I. “Blessed Are They Which Are Persecuted”

- A. The word “persecute” means to “put to flight, to drive away, to pursue.” It also has the connotation to “harass, trouble, and to molest.” It is suffering on account of something. In our context, it refers to suffering for the sake of Christ.
- B. There are various forms of persecution: the reviling tongue (1 Peter 4:4), the persecuting hand (Acts 8:1-4), and the loss of property (Hebrews 10:34). Our persecution may not be physical; it may take the form of slander, reproach, ostracism, taunts, nicknames, and cold looks. Through the blessings of God, our country has spared Christians from physical persecution for a long time, but the devil finds other ways to destroy the usefulness of God’s servants.
- C. It is ironic that the means a faithful child of God has of influencing sinners to come to Christ can also be the means of arousing their animosity.
 1. The main reason for this is that “men loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19-20; 15:19-20).
 2. Our righteous lives are a constant rebuke to sin (Hebrews 11:7; 2 Peter 2:8). People who are godly and virtuous always provoke resentment from the wicked (Matthew 14:1-12; Acts 7:51-52; 14:22; 1 John 3:11-12).

3. Furthermore, the Christian interferes with the progress of sin (Ephesians 6:10-20). Jesus (John 2:13-18) and Paul (Acts 16:16-24; 19:22-29) are good examples.

II. ***"For Theirs Is The Kingdom Of Heaven"***

- A. Jesus said to "rejoice and be exceedingly glad." The world cannot understand how a slandered, reviled person can rejoice. But this can be done for several reasons.
 1. Because they enjoy the blessings of the kingdom.
 - a) Jesus begins with the kingdom and ends with the kingdom. All the beatitudes have special blessings. But the Lord started and ended with this particular promise in order to impress upon His listeners that the most important aspect of life was membership in the kingdom of heaven.
 - b) If Christ suffered so much to give us the opportunity of being members of the kingdom, should we not rejoice to suffer a little for Him (Acts 5:41)?
 2. Because they realize it is for the sake of righteousness.
 - a) This is not for just any cause, but the greatest cause one can give themselves to. It gives us the opportunity to glorify God by our fidelity to truth.
 - b) We are a peculiar people who manifest holiness (Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9). This beatitude only offers consolation to Christians who have suffered for "righteousness' sake." No blessing is promised to someone who suffers for wrongdoing.
 - (1) Christians can create unnecessary problems for themselves by suffering on account of their own misconduct or sinful behavior.
 - (2) Being offensive in a natural way is very different than being offensive because of righteousness (Luke 23:39-40; 1 Peter 4:14-16).
 - (3) We are not to seek persecution. We are not to provoke it by strange ideas or conduct, by violating civil laws, or by speech that is unnecessarily offensive to others.
 3. Because they are in the company of all those who have been persecuted in the past (Luke 6:22; Hebrews 11:32-40).
 - a) Persecution has always been the experience of the Lord's servants.
 - (1) Moses was reviled (Exodus 5:21; 14:11; 16:2; 17:2).
 - (2) Samuel was rejected (1 Samuel 8:5).
 - (3) Elijah was despised (1 Kings 18:17).
 - (4) Micaiah was hated (2 Chronicles 18:17).
 - (5) Nehemiah was oppressed and defamed (Nehemiah 4:7-8).

- (6) Jesus was put to death (Matthew 27:31).
 - (7) Stephen was stoned (Acts 7:58).
 - (8) James was beheaded (Acts 12:2).
 - (9) Peter was cast into prison (Acts 12:3).
 - (10) Paul's life was a series of persecutions (2 Corinthians 4:11; 11:23-28).
- b) There is cause to rejoice, no matter how fierce your trial may be. We not only have fellowship with some of the most faithful people the world has ever known, but we also have fellowship in the sufferings of our Lord (Philippians 3:10).
4. Because they have a living hope of heaven.
- a) The persecuted Christian will be fully rewarded in the judgment. This is the richest of all comforts (Matthew 10:22; 1 Peter 5:10).
 - b) The persecutions of this life pale in comparison to heaven (Romans 8:16-18). If we are ashamed of the Lord, He will be ashamed of us when He comes again. It is far better to suffer persecution and enter the kingdom of heaven than to avoid persecution and be punished throughout eternity.
 - c) When Eusebius was threatened with the confiscation of his possessions, torture, banishment, or even death, he replied, "He needs not fear confiscation, who has nothing to lose; nor banishment, to whom heaven is his country; nor torments, when his body can be destroyed at one blow; nor death, which is the only way to set him at liberty from sin and sorrow."
- B. In reacting to persecution, some Christians whine, complain, pity themselves, or seek vengeance (Romans 12:17-19). Others become discouraged and give up the battle (Mark 4:16-17). Finally, some pray for their persecutors and gently correct who oppose them (Matthew 5:43-45; 2 Timothy 2:24-25). How will you react?

Conclusion. The congratulated life described in the beatitudes is a life of faith in Jesus Christ, pointing the Christian to the perfect happiness that is only found in Him. But this beatitude tests our ideas as to the definition of a Christian. Most of us think that the Christian is almost always a nice, popular person who never offends anybody and is easy to get along with. But if this beatitude is true, a Christian is not a person who is praised by everybody. They did not praise Christ, and they will not praise one who is like Him (Philippians 1:29). William Hendriksen said, "Scars are the price which every believer pays for his loyalty to Christ."

In ancient Rome, crowds by the thousands would gather in the Coliseum to watch as Christians were torn apart by wild animals. Paul Rader, commenting on his visit to this famous landmark, said, "I stood uncovered to the heavens above, where He sits for whom they gladly died, and asked

myself, 'Would I, could I, die for Him tonight to get this gospel to the ends of the earth?'" Rader continued, "I prayed most fervently in that Roman arena for the spirit of a martyr, for the spirit of Paul when he was brought handcuffed to Rome." Those early Christians "lived on the threshold of heaven, within a heartbeat of home, no possessions to hold them back."

If you are here today and want a new life, be warned! The new life of a Christian is not one of instant popularity. Jesus did not base His appeal on promises of exemption from battle. He will allow no man to follow Him without helping him to understand the difficulties involved. It is not an easy task, but it is the most worthwhile calling any of us sitting in this room can answer.