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Persecution in the Capitol (The Sermon on the Mount) Matthew 5:1-12

There were more Christians killed in the 20th century than in the previous 19 centuries combined. In some countries governments actively pursue and persecute Christians. In others, little or nothing is done to prevent violence against believers. In America and in West Virginia we do not face such overt persecution, yet there are signs that followers of Christ are encountering increasing mistreatment and harassment. Paul warned that "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..." In Jesus' final beatitude He gives great encouragement to believers who will undergo persecution for their faith. His words are relevant today for His followers living in America and serving in the West Virginia state capitol. Let us consider and find assurance in His amazing words, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness..."

Jesus concludes the introduction to His Sermon on the Mount with these encouraging words:

¹⁰Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
Matthew 5:10-12

This is perhaps the most striking of all the beatitudes. How can one who is persecuted be blessed? How can one rejoice in the face of insults, lies, and evil treatment? It may be for this reason Jesus gives greater description and commentary for this beatitude than the others. The first beatitude and the eighth both include the promise, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". For this reason, we count eight beatitudes with verses 11 - 12 being a description and application. Notice also the change in person between verses ten and eleven. The Beatitudes are all "blessed are those", while verses 11-12 are "blessed are you". Jesus seemingly takes a moment from his message to the crowd to speak specifically to His closest followers who were soon to face tremendous persecution. Peter certainly took these words to heart as he quotes them twice when he wrote to believers facing great trials. He wrote "...**Even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed**" (1 Peter 3:14) and "...**If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed...**" (1 Peter 4:14). Jesus' words are meant to be an encouragement for those who will face trials, difficulties, and persecutions for His sake.

The Cause of Persecution

It is vital to understand the cause of the persecution of which Jesus is speaking. He makes it clear that real persecution is "**for the sake of righteousness**" (vs. 10) and "**because of me**" (vs. 11). Real persecution comes because we are living out the righteousness which has been delineated in the previous beatitudes. He is not talking about persecution because of political, social, or moral stands. He is not talking about trials due to being obnoxious, proud or self-righteous.

In John 15:18-20 Jesus gives a fuller explanation as to why believers will face persecution: "**If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.**"

There are three specific areas of a believer's life that will bring about persecution. (We might consider how these might apply here in the capitol community.)

Sharing the Gospel - We will most certainly face persecution if we are faithful in boldly proclaiming the gospel. For us to proclaim that faith in Christ is the only way of salvation is considered by many to be the height of arrogance and presumption. The world will hate us when we proclaim Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one comes to the Father but by Him. (John 14:6, Acts 4:12)

Standing for Truth – We live in a postmodern age when “tolerance” and “diversity” are the watchwords of our culture. The world will hate us when we stand for absolute truth, especially the truth of the Word of God! Jude challenged believers to **“contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints”**. (Jude 3) He was writing of the necessity of dealing with those who teach falsehood and distort the gospel.

Standing for Righteousness – When we proclaim that there are absolute standards of right and wrong, we will quickly be labeled hate mongers and bigots. When we live righteously, our very lives and testimonies quickly become a convicting influence on those doing wrong. The world will hate those who stand for righteous living, but Jesus’ words of encouragement are specifically for those righteous in their own living and are like Him.

Our Response to Persecution

Scripture encourages us regarding how we are to respond when we face persecution. This includes persecution in our own lives, as well as that which our brothers and sisters in Christ experience.

Persecution in Our Own Lives

Rejoice Jesus tells us we are blessed when we face persecution for His sake. Remarkably, He goes on to exclaim we are to **“rejoice and be glad”**. He describes it as evidence that we are truly part of His kingdom. In Acts 5 the disciples were severely persecuted for sharing the gospel of Christ. Verse 40 tells us **“When they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”** Their response is truly amazing! Verse 41 continues: **“They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.”** How can we actually rejoice that God would consider us worthy to suffer for Christ’s sake? We can do so by remembering Christ’s promises.

Remember How can we rejoice in persecution? Here in this last beatitude and in other scriptures, we learn we can endure and even rejoice in persecution by remembering some important truths. Jesus is teaching us that persecution is evidence that we are truly part of His kingdom. He encourages us to remember that the reward is great for those who faithfully endure persecution. (**“Your reward in heaven is great”**) He encourages us to remember the great example of those who have gone before us enduring great persecution for their faith. (**“In the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”**)¹

Persecution in The Lives of Fellow Believers

Hebrews 13:3 informs us what our response to fellow believers who are facing persecution should be:

“Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also.”

We are encouraged to remember our brothers and sisters in Christ who are undergoing persecution, just as if we are suffering together with them! One of my desires for this study today is simply to remind us to remember those who are suffering for their faith. **“Since you yourselves are in the body also”** may refer to the fact that we too are in a fleshly body and may be subject to persecution in this life. More likely, however, the writer is referring to the fact that we are all members of the body of Christ and that we all suffer when other members of the body suffer.

Is This Relevant Today?

Jesus seems to indicate that persecution will almost certainly be a result of living a righteous life and being like Him. Paul warns Timothy that **“All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”** (2 Timothy 3:12) If we never face any persecution, perhaps we need to ask ourselves why. Are we so much like the world there is no real difference? Are we unwilling to boldly proclaim the gospel message of salvation in Christ alone by faith alone through grace alone? We must realize persecution for us may come in different forms. In the Capitol it might mean taking heat in the press, failing to gain positions of leadership, or perhaps even losing an election. Whatever form persecution takes, Jesus says we can rejoice because in it we are truly blessed as it is evidence we are part of His kingdom.

We need to be ready and willing to suffer persecution for the gospel, the truth, and for living a righteous life.

We need to remember our brothers and sisters in Christ who suffer greatly for their faith in various areas around the world. This includes praying for them as well as supporting them in other ways as God gives us opportunity.

CAPITOL BIBLE STUDIES

Thursdays

8:00 AM Government Org. Conference Room (East Wing)

12:00 PM Senate President’s Conference Room