

Matthew 5:10-12 (1984 NIV)***Blessed Are Those Who're Persecuted for Righteousness*****Introduction**

In 1965, God called a quiet, intense and prayerful young man from Queensland, Australia to India to serve Him in a 105-year-old leprosy home. Driven by the desire to serve Christ in this mission field, Graham Staines landed in India and started his noble work among the socially outcast lepers, reaching out to them in the love of Christ.

In the meantime, a young nurse hailing from Australia heard the call of God in her life to serve Him in 1981 through Operation Mobilization. She served this organization in Singapore, Malaysia, Europe and India. In India, she met Graham. By divine providence, Graham Staines and Gladys were married back in Australia in 1983. After the marriage, both of them returned to India. The Staines made their home in an old house within the Mission compound and chose a very simple lifestyle. God blessed them with three children—Esther, Philip and Timothy.

In 1997, the Staines took leave to visit Australia. But somehow, it no longer felt like home. They were glad to get back to the only home they knew—the leprosy home in India.

Graham along with his two sons reached a village on 22nd January 1999 to attend the annual jungle camp. On that night, Graham Staines had much to thank God for—a beautiful wife, three loving kids and a mission through whom he could help many live a life of dignity.

Earlier on that fateful night at 11 p.m., a group had set out from Ramada with their leader named Dara Singh. He was a criminal with a record of crimes against minority communities in India. He hated Christianity and the Christian missionaries like Graham Staines. He and his mob approached where Graham and his sons were just after midnight. They came in running from the fields, armed with sticks and tridents. They had just one target—the station wagon.

Dara Singh struck first, wielding an axe at the tyres, deflating them. The others broke windows and prevented the Staines from escaping. Graham was beaten mercilessly and his boys were not spared either. All three were pierced with tridents. Singh then put straw under the vehicle and torched it. In seconds, the vehicle was on fire. Graham held his two boys close to him. The killers stood there and watched the three being roasted alive as the fire consumed the vehicle.

At the funeral service, the inmates of the Leprosy Mission were overwhelmed with grief. Only Gladys (Graham's wife) was able to console them.

Asked whether she would plan to leave India for good, she said: “Never. My husband and our children have sacrificed their lives for this nation. India is my home. I am happy to be here.” She added, “Let us burn hatred ... and spread the flame of Christ’s love.”

This true story may sound very unreal as we sit right here in the comfort of this worship hall. Indeed, persecution and suffering sound so alien and strange to us. We find comfort in the safety of this sanctuary.

(http://www.sermonillustrator.org/illustrator/sermon4/graham_staines.htm)

Today, Jesus is calling us to seek comfort in God even in the persecution of our lives—“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.”

As we come to this last and 8th Beatitude, let’s be reminded that the beatitudes together describe the qualities and characteristics that the Lord wants to see in our lives, making us to be like Him. The beatitudes are PARADOXICAL STATEMENTS OF BLESSEDNESS.

The last of which must indeed be the most paradoxical of all. How can the persecuted be blessed? Imagine someone saying, “I’m so blessed because I have been badly beaten up.”

Two things to note about this last beatitude:

- It is the only beatitude with a command—“Rejoice and be glad.”
- It is the only beatitude repeated by Jesus.

Jesus must have known his followers would have a hard time with this statement. Out of all the beatitudes this is the only one Jesus repeated for emphasis. Jesus doesn’t just say the persecuted are blessed once; JESUS SAYS IT TWICE! We are even told to “rejoice and be glad!”

We find it hard to “rejoice and be glad” if we have a bad day let alone if we should ever face persecution.

I. How the persecuted can be blessed.

Firstly, the persecuted can be blessed when they stand for God’s righteousness. Put in another way, God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God. Persecution is blessed by God when it comes as a result of wanting to be or being righteous in God.

What is righteousness?

- Righteousness is first the DECLARATION OF GOD. Righteousness is not based upon anything we do. The Bible says our righteousness is as filthy rags to God. God says we are righteous through faith in Christ Jesus. As we “come clean” before God confessing our sin, with the full knowledge that Jesus paid the death penalty in our place, God declares us righteous.
- Righteousness is also the DYNAMIC POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. The Spirit of God within you empowers you to live a holy life. Righteousness is not living according to a legalistic set of “dos and don’ts”. Righteousness is a life lived under the control and influence of God’s Spirit living in you. Righteousness is not forced upon you from the outside, but flows from within you by the dynamic power of God for the world to see. The Christian should live differently from those who are not. The values, priorities, goals and desires of the Christian should produce a different lifestyle.

The beatitudes are the building blocks to be like Jesus. When we live our life consistent with the attitudes, characteristics, qualities and values of Jesus, our life will be different. But when Christians lose their uniqueness to the point no one can tell who the Christians are and aren’t; when Christians choose to be invisible or anonymous in a crowd, people will stop taking us seriously.

God needs more risk takers for Him today. This is because the most important decisions we make as God’s people in our lives are not so much about positions and possessions. The most important decisions we make as God’s people are very much about not remaining invisible but becoming visible for God in this world. By this I am not suggesting that we seek the limelight, take centre stage and demand the leading role. Rather, I am saying that we step up from where God has placed us, make our life count and make a difference for Jesus Christ.

Be a risk taker for God today. What I mean is that you trust God enough to obey what He has said—that’s your push factor. And then you carry on with the confidence that God will surely do everything He has promised—that’s your pull factor. So, it is really within each one of us to begin even today to live as a visible instrument of God’s righteousness.

Secondly, the persecuted can be blessed when persecution is the world’s reaction to Christ. Jesus said you are blessed when you endure all kinds of persecution “because of me”.

The Christian faith is not primarily about good works or living a moral life. The Christian faith is about Christ. Our Christian faith is centred on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

When you encounter persecution, remember what Jesus said in John 15:18, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.” People today continue to resist and reject Jesus Christ. The Lord wants us to remember when we encounter persecution that it’s not about us. It’s very much about Him.

An unbelieving friend of mine from Canada said this to me repeatedly when we once met at a gathering, “I think many Christians have no integrity, especially people in your profession. They preach one thing and do something else.” Can you guess how I felt? All the moral fibres in me got stirred up to protect my own respectability.

I have also friends who repeatedly express their view of Christ this way, “I am sure Jesus Christ is a very holy man. But I am not sure if He is the Son of God.” This is a refutation of the claim and uniqueness of Jesus Christ Himself. Can you guess how I have felt? I have not felt as emotionally charged as the first instance when I felt I had to protect my own respectability, never mind if the reverence of Christ is being questioned.

So, don’t be surprised when people despise you, or treat you unfairly. As long as they hate Jesus, they will do such things to you. The important thing is to make a stand to defend the reverence of Jesus, not to protect our own respectability.

A newspaper editor worked hard for many years to make the paper one of the most widely circulated and read in the country. The board decided to reward him by granting him two months’ leave, fully paid. When he received the news, he said, “I am sorry I cannot accept the kind offer.”

When asked why, he answered, “There are two reasons. First, my leave may affect the circulation of the paper.”

The board was impressed with his concern for the paper, and assured him, “You need not worry. Your leave will not affect the circulation of the paper.”

The editor replied grimly, “That’s my second reason.”

What are we most concerned about when we are reviled or persecuted for our faith—our own respectability or the reverence of the Lord? Often, our so-called righteous outbursts are efforts to protect our own respectability, not to defend the reverence of Christ. But the Lord reminds us that the reason people revile us is because they resist and reject Him. It’s very much about Him, not about us. And we can only feel blessed when we carry this right perspective in such times—i.e. to make a stand for the reverence of Jesus is more important than to protect our own respectability.

Thirdly, the persecuted can be blessed when they remember they are not alone in their experience. Jesus said in Matthew 5:12 that we are in good company when we are persecuted—God’s faithful prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

Jesus wants us to remember we are not the only one who has ever experienced persecution for our faith in God. The godless people of the world have always hated Christ and in turn His followers. Why do people of the world do bad things to God’s people? It is because God’s people make a stand for God and live out godliness.

I guess one way to remember you’re not the only one experiencing persecution is to remember you’re not the only one to complain to God about it either. Elijah was a great prophet of God. He had been used mightily by the Lord to call the nation of Israel out of a lifestyle of compromise and pagan worship. On Mt. Carmel, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to see who served the living God. It was no contest. God answered Elijah with fire from heaven. Yet when Queen Jezebel threatened to have Elijah killed after his great victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah ran for his life! He complained to God, “I’m the only one left.” God gave Elijah a reminder in 1 Kings 19:18, “Not so Elijah, I still have 7,000 others who have not bowed their knees to Baal. You are not alone!”

Isolation is an enemy of the soul. When we think we are all alone, we begin to give up hope; we even begin to doubt God. Jesus says, “Remember they have treated my other followers just like you.” The writer of Hebrews reminds us the grandstands of heaven are filled with those who have gone before us. They are watching and cheering us on to the finish line (Hebrews 12:1).

But we do not only have this number of departed saints to cheer us on in this life. In fact, the Lord has given another sizable number of people to help cheer us on in our Christian living. Who are they? You and I. God has given us one another to come together to encourage and cheer one another in our faith life here on earth. He has given us one another so that we can learn to be accountable to one another out of mutual love and trust. The Lord wants us to be the right crowd doing the right things together. Only then will there not only be safety in numbers, but also safety in exodus—we lead one another other away from the temptation of sin.

As a group, we help one another to deal with temptation at the very beginning. We encourage and challenge one another not to be curious about the wrong things, but apply ourselves to the right things. In so doing, we limit the opportunities we have to be tempted. The place to win over temptation is when it is in the distance when there are still plenty of opportunities to retreat from it. And we push and pull one another back to where God wants us to be.

Fourthly, the persecuted can be blessed because a reward is promised to them. The Lord says in Matthew 5:12, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.”

God will bless the persecuted with the kingdom of God. However, we need to remember God does not make this blessing a blanket promise for just anyone. Your persecution won't be blessed if you are persecuted for your own misdoing.

Only those who are persecuted for righteousness and because of Jesus have something to look forward to. To persevere in the face of persecution is to keep the end in view—the better thing that God has promised us.

A life devoted to righteousness or godliness will be persecuted or reviled or spoken against.

- If you cherish sexual purity, your life will be an attack on people's love for free sex.
- If you embrace temperance, your life will be a statement against the love of addiction.
- If you pursue self-control, your life will indict indulgence.
- If you live simply and happily, your life will show the folly of greed and discontentment.
- If you walk humbly with your God, you will expose the evil of pride.
- If you are honest and thorough in your dealings, you will expose the sin of deceit and negligence..

Florence Chadwick was the first American woman to swim the 26-mile strait between Catalina Island and the Californian mainland on 4 July 1952. She already had become the first American woman to swim across the English Channel. So, she felt well prepared and confident that she would make it across the Pacific to the California coast.

As noon passed, she was still going strong. But after 15 hours, she began to talk about giving up. Her mother and trainer encouraged her to stay in the water. They were sure the coastline would not be too far away though nothing could be seen through the thick fog.

Florence continued for a while but eventually got out of the water after 15 hours and 55 minutes. What defeated her was neither a muscle cramp nor a shark, but the discouragement of not being able to see her objective.

As she reflected on her failure, she said, "I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen the land I might have made it." It turned out that she was only a half mile away from the coastline when she gave up.

Two months later, Florence succeeded in a second attempt in equally foggy conditions. But this time, she kept a mental picture of the shoreline in view as she swam along. She not only succeeded in swimming across, but also in breaking the men's record by two hours in the process.

Christians will face troubles, suffering and persecution in this world because they belong to a different kingdom—the Kingdom of Heaven. We need this mental picture of where we are going constantly before us—i.e. entering into the Kingdom of Heaven and be with the Lord forever. This is our destination and eternal destiny.

(Doug McIntosh, *Life's Greatest Journey* [Chicago: Moody], p. 193-94)

So, we need to stand faithful in our Christian witness even when we are reviled or ridiculed by others by always keeping this blessed picture of our Kingdom destination and eternal destiny in view. Yes, there is a heavenly reward awaiting the faithful. But we stand faithful because we love the Lord rather than love the reward. And for those who remain faithful in the face of revile and ridicule, the Lord has promised intimacy with Him in the Kingdom to come (we stick close to Him here on earth, He lets us sit near to Him in His Kingdom). Indeed, the Lord's commendation of us at the judgement seat will override all revile and ridicule we endure in His name here on earth.

Indeed, suffering that comes from persecution can be a doorway to blessedness.

II. How we should respond to those who persecute us.

We can respond in at least three ways.

- First, we can respond by simply leaving. We are not promised a blessing if we go looking for trouble. None of us need to develop a martyr complex.

Jesus knew when it was time to get out of a hot spot. On one occasion a mob wanted to stone Jesus to death, but He left (John 8:59). Another time Jesus knew the Pharisees were plotting to have Him killed so He left and withdrew to another area (Matthew 12:14-15).

- Second, we can respond by guarding against compromise. One way to end persecution is to become like those who would oppose you. We need to remember we are called to please and obey God and not men. Peter and John were ordered to stop preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus, but their response was, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God" (Acts 4:19).

I received the Lord as a young man. At that time, I was socializing regularly with a group of friends. We enjoyed parties. After I gave my life to Christ, He convicted me that I could still have them as friends, but some things must go. I tried hard to make a stand before my buddies but they also tried hard not to take me seriously. The Lord tested, my friends taunted, and the devil tempted.

After my repeated refusals to join in some of their “fun”, these friends gradually distanced themselves from me. They didn’t find me an interesting and fun person to have around anymore. But we were still friends and we still got together from time to time. And whenever we were together, they would not impose their indulgences on me. They began to take my stand for Jesus seriously. I might not have been popular with them anymore, but I certainly had won their respect for standing firm and not compromising.

By the grace of God, He later led me to a church where I began to make new friends who encouraged and helped me grow in my walk with the Lord.

- Third, we can respond by praying for those who persecute us. The truth is this—HURTING PEOPLE HURT OTHER PEOPLE. The person who injures you is often the victim of personal pain. They attack others in the same way they have been hurt.

It’s hard to love people who are not lovable. Prayer helps us to love the unlovable people in our lives. We are powerless to change people. However, prayer can change people, including ourselves, as God responds in His way and will to what we pray.

God wants us to pray and love those who persecute us so as to break the cycle of retaliation. Romans 12:17-21 reads: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Conclusion

Two reminders as I end my series on the beatitudes:

- One, the beatitudes are building blocks to be like Jesus. These are the attitudes, qualities and characteristics which produce in us a Christ-like lifestyle.
- Two, the beatitudes are paradoxical statements of blessedness. They remind us that we are only strong in the Lord when we admit that we are weak in ourselves. And when we so admit, the Lord offers us a blessedness that neither this world nor circumstances can take away from us.

“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.”

Indeed, blessed is the one who hears the beatitudes and seeks the Lord's help to live by them.

Pray that the Lord helps us to always live under His Lordship so that we can always live above our circumstances.

Amen!