

July 19, 2015

THE PERSECUTED (PART ONE)

Zechariah 9:9-12 Ephesians 6:12-17 Matthew 5:10-12

THE BEATITUDES

Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Blessed *are* the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Blessed *are* those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. The Beatitudes are a promise, and the promise is prophetic. Each Beatitude proclaims a present blessing and a future promise. But, in Prophecy, present and future cannot always be clearly distinguished.

On the surface, it might seem as if the Beatitudes are looking for blessedness in all the wrong places. Jesus *did* have a tendency to turn things upside-down. Where the worldliness of the times seemed to claim the blessings of material abundance, Jesus proclaims the truer blessing of spiritual poverty. Where worldly seem to claim the blessings of a carefree lightheartedness, Jesus proclaims the truer blessing of a mournful sorrow for the world's shortcomings. Where worldliness claims the blessings of status and ambition, Jesus proclaims the truer blessing of a gentle meekness. Where worldliness claims the blessings of advancement and satisfaction no matter what the price, Jesus proclaims the truer blessing of a thirsty desire for righteousness.

And worldliness seems to ignore mercy, purity, and peacemaking, while Jesus proclaims them as divine virtues: relating us more closely with God, being freed from sin through our mercifulness, becoming visionary, seeing God, through our purity, and being called sons and daughters of God because of our peacemaking.

And then Jesus brings this lesson full circle. Just as the poor in spirit are given the Kingdom of heaven in the first Beatitude, so, likewise, do the righteous persecuted receive the Kingdom of heaven. Only in these two Beatitudes is the promise in the present tense. In all others the promise is yet to happen. But we must see each Beatitude as a Kingdom Promise, because the Kingdom is not some future dream, but a present reality. The Kingdom begins now, where Jesus is, and it began when Jesus came!

The Beatitudes describe virtues, character traits we should pursue. They are not just a formless ethical ideal, but a prescription for practical faith! They are not just principles to live by, but flashes of righteous lightning piercing the darkness of the age! Yes, on the surface, they seem to be searching for blessings in all the wrong places; but, look deeper, and you can see that the way of the Beatitudes is truly the way to happiness.

Happiness is like a window. Through it you can see heaven. And through the Beatitudes, Jesus is showing the way to heaven; to the place which He has prepared for us. And in a world where so many other ways lead to destruction, Jesus shows the way to joy. And that blessedness begins now, the Kingdom of Heaven begins now, in the same way that the feeling of being home begins with the first steps of the journey back; Theirs *is* the Kingdom of Heaven. And that happiness can be multiplied when it is divided. Share the joy that you're going home with someone else, and just watch them smile. Share the blessings you feel and they will bless others!

PERSECUTED

Stop and think for a moment: What happens when you try to share the blessings of being on the way to heaven? You might run into some rejection, you'll be called a religious fanatic, crazy. You might even be taunted, persecuted. You'll be told that you're so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good. But that will only happen to you if you forego some of the other blessings of the Beatitudes, like meekness or peacemaking. Still, Jesus tells us to expect a little persecution now and then. And if it happens, the Kingdom of Heaven is yours. People just won't understand what they can't imagine. So they reject it.

I can remember a missionary telling a congregation about trying to describe ice-cream to a desert Bedouin. Not only was it impossible to get him to picture ice, but it was even difficult to talk about anything cold! You just can't teach someone the taste of something they've never swallowed. And it's also true that you can no more talk about something you don't know, that you can come back from where you've never been. That's why it's important to learn. And to learn, we need to be students, disciples. The Disciples were students of Jesus, learning about the true meaning of life. And Jesus told His disciples that they might be persecuted for what they knew. And not only persecuted, but reviled and slandered too, *"They will utter all kinds of evil against you falsely... on My account."* But He also told them to rejoice and be glad because it's happened to the best of them. The Prophets shared some pretty amazing insights. But because people either didn't want to be corrected, or, they couldn't conceive of the visions themselves, they rejected the prophetic witness... and Jesus is the prime example. His goodness was not only a threat to the status quo, but He preached about a Kingdom that was to come, and, that was already here...His!

So He was persecuted. How do you expect to be treated for being a disciple of Christ? Jesus said in John 15:19, *"Because you are not of the world, therefore, the world hates you."* We are to be in the world but not of the world. We are to be transforming the world, not conforming to its ways. Jesus even said in John 16:2: *"The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think they are offering service to God!"*

It's difficult to be indifferent to a real, wide-awake son or daughter of God. A whole Body of sons and daughters of God confronts the community with a whole different way of life, a whole different set of values, a higher standard of righteousness. Christians confront the world with the Kingdom of Heaven on earth! The goodness and lovingkindness of Christians are a threat to a worldly lifestyle. And simply by the example of their righteousness, the Christian condemns without words the sins of the world in which they live, but of which they choose to rise above. Shine your light in the eyes of a world in darkness and some will not like it; because truth is the enemy of pride; love is the enemy of selfishness; and faith is the enemy of false systems built on power and ego gratification. The blindness and cruelty of the ages have consistently rejected the truth, even as the Pharisees rejected Jesus.

Christians organize their lives a round Jesus as the central meaning of existence. The worldly put other things in the center. Christians are therefore naturally out of sync with the world. Christians *do not conform to this world, but are transformed by the renewal of their minds proving what is the will of God, proving what is good and acceptable and perfect.* (Romans 12:2) By rejecting worldly standards of living, the early Christians seemed quite different, especially in a world where a multitude of pagan gods were worshiped, in a world where subjects of the Roman empire were required to worship the emperor.

FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SASKE

It is not a blessing to be persecuted for preaching ourselves, for boasting in what God is doing for us, but through us. Paul even said in Second Corinthians 4:5-11: "What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed,; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh." By rejecting worldly standards of living, we have the treasure of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God shining in our hearts; we have this treasure in the earthen vessels of our bodies!

A diamond is a piece of coal that made good under pressure. It comes from deep within the heart of the earth where it has been buried for millennia. But it seems to become a magnificent and precious prism seeming to magnify and reflect outward more light than comes into it. God is within us like a diamond. Faith is a journey of life, mining within to find that diamond of light. Becoming a disciple is like becoming a diamond miner, learning that inward journey and discovering what it is within us that reflects the light.

When Jesus began to preach, His initial message was, "*Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*" Then "*As He walked by the sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.'* Immediately, they left their nets and followed Him. And going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with their father, mending their nets, and He called them. Immediately, they left the boat with their father, and followed Him." What does it mean to follow Jesus *immediately*? In a way, it expresses a sense of urgency. In Luke 14:26, Jesus says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." I don't believe that the Prince of Peace really means that in order to be His disciples, we must alienate ourselves from our families. No, Jesus wants us to be peacemakers. And we should want to be good parents and family members. He is saying this because He cannot impress upon the people enough the importance and urgency of being a disciple. And so He says in Luke 14:27, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be My disciple." He even went so far at one point as to suggest in Luke 18:22 to "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me." Jesus knew that whenever our loyalties of faith intersected with the pressures of the world, there was a cross to bear. And at every such intersection there is a cross for the disciples of Jesus.

Disciples. The disciples were disciples even before Jesus taught them anything. They did not wait until they understood everything He had to tell them before they linked their lives to the life of Christ. But they made a decision. They linked their lives to Christ and *then* He taught them. If you wait until you understand the faith completely before you choose to be faithful, you will never be faithful.

Trust and belief are followed by commitment , and commitment is followed by understanding. It is because of this that we can bear up under the persecution of this world. Not only do we bear it, we rejoice in it.

Enough for now. More next time.