

July 26, 2015

## THE PERSECUTED (PART TWO)

Matthew 5:10-12

Being a Christian is no piece of cake. It is not always an easy life. There are bad times for Christians just as there are bad times for non-Christians. But Christians maintain a perspective about things. Peter, in his First Letter (2:20), asked, *“What credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it and you take it patiently, you have God’s approval.”* And James said, in His Letter (1:2-4), *“Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness! And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* And then, of steadfastness, he says (1:5-8), *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let them ask God, who gives to all generously and without reproaching, and it will be given to them. But let them ask in faith, with no doubting, for they who doubt are like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded person, unstable in all their ways, will receive anything from the Lord!”*

Never suppose that a double-minded person will receive anything from the Lord! With what inner struggles do you wrestle? There’s an inward persecution I feel when I experience the guilt of being a backsliding sinner. There’s an inward persecution I feel when I act unlovingly and feel shame; and when I put other things before God and feel anxious, and even when I think of my personal unworthiness and fear God’s judgment of me. But I’m also persecuted by the hurt I feel for the hungry, by the sadness I feel for the neglected and abused, by the loss I feel for those who are perishing for a lack of faith. *“We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed!”* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9) We need to keep perspective! God loves us! Jesus died for us! Keep this reality in mind at all times!

Perspective: In Matthew 5:39-41, 44-45 Jesus says, *“I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles....Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons and daughters of your Father who is in heaven...”*

*“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”* You’re not right just because you are persecuted. There are a lot of people who go around saying, “Look at me! I’m persecuted! I’m being rejected! So I must be right! Just ask them if they’re being rejected on Christ’s account, or, if they feel like they’re being persecuted for righteousness’ sake. We need to help each other keep perspective!

### REJOICE AND BE GLAD

*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven!* In heaven. The reward cannot be measured in human terms. It is ours now: *Your reward is great....”*, but it’s *“In heaven.”* That means all the more that Christ will prepare a place for you. He’s preparing a place already. As soon as you became a believer, He began preparing you a place. But remember, a Christian that seems uncommitted or compromising will never be persecuted on Christ’s account. And in some areas of the world, where

Christianity seems to be a threat to the status quo today, Christians *are* persecuted. They're rejected and afflicted just for being Christians. But in our society today, Christians aren't persecuted. They're ignored.

Christians aren't really that different from the rest of the people in our society. Christians don't cause much of a threat any more. Part of the reason is because our society is based on religious tolerance. Another part of the reason is that Christians today don't stand up for their beliefs the way they ought to. *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*

Persecution comes in many forms. There's the outward violence the slander of words, and then, there's the inward distress brought on by personal self-persecution due to confusion and self-confrontation. But what about a confrontation of a different kind: Peer pressure. Peer pressure can be a powerful persecutor. Young people are often led into the abuse of alcohol and drugs, and immoral conduct under the fear of the persecuting taunts from classmates, the people they want to call their friends. Insults and put-downs are the kind of persecution that tends to attack a person's self-esteem in such a way that it can be devastating. It's no wonder people so often go along with the crowd.

I remember being laughed at by the freak crowd because I was a straight jock in high school. I was called chicken because I refused to smoke dope with people who had at one time been my friends. And then on the other hand, I can remember Peter Vander-Motter being pushed around because he was a brain and he wasn't athletic, he was called a nerd. And it hurt him. About five years ago, a girl in the junior class at the high school in Rockton became so depressed from insults and put-downs about her weight that she came home after school one day and committed suicide.

The pressure gets to us.... But faith can help. We need to be able to say: *"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me, uttering slanders against me, my adversaries and foes... they shall stumble and fall. Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His Temple. For He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble; He will conceal me under the cover of His tent; He will set me high upon a rock..."* (Psalm 27:1-5)

In spite of the pressure of persecuting taunts, you can choose to be happy anyway. Some people are happy or unhappy by choice. If you start with a positive attitude, you can withstand anything. In Zechariah 9:12, we are told, *"Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double!"* We must be like prisoners of hope believing in the sun even when it's not shining. If you love life, life will love you back. Realize that you are free to choose how you will react to what happens to you. When something destructive is happening, we need to choose wisely the meanings we give to those occasions. When I was ridiculed in college because I was a church goer, it was not I who was wrong, it was not church that was wrong, it was the attitude that my supposed friends had that was wrong. By being positive, we can choose our perspective in any situation. We can't just sit and say, "If only..." "If only they had been raised to enjoy the Bible..." "If only they had been taught to see the Bible as a powerful resource for the spirit..." "If only..." Instead, we need to say, "Next time..." "Next time, things are going to be different." Next time!

When you stand up for what you believe in, you run the risk of rejection and ridicule. A positive attitude can tolerate rejection. Positive thinking can affirm self-respect. Along with that positive attitude is a sense of preparation. We all need to have a spiritual support system. And I believe that the greatest

cheering team we can have are being involved in the methods of discipline for building a stronger faith. And this includes prayer and study, worship and service, and fellowship and witness. With these elements in our lives, we'll be able to find the inner strength we need to resist temptations. We'll be able to persevere, to keep going, to keep doing what we know is right. Compromising your faith is like selling your soul. *Realize that we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness... So take the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and, having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having the belt of truth around your waist; wearing the breastplate of righteousness; running with the shoes of the gospel of peace. And take the shield of faith to protect yourself from the foaming darts of evil. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.* (Ephesians 6:12-17)

Faith is the resource for persistence, for perseverance, for carrying on in trust. *Through Jesus Christ we have gained access to the grace in which we stand; and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produced hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, God's special gift to us.* (Romans 5:2-5)

We won't lose heart. We believe in the sun even when it is not shining. And so do we believe in the Son of God even when He might seem absent from our hearts, or, our experiences. *"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven!"* Heaven. Remember, *the Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; they can't say, 'Lo, here it is!' or, 'There it is,' for behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you!* (Luke 17:20-21)