



THE BEATITUDES

BEAUTIFUL CHARACTER
FORMED BY CHRIST

PT. 8:
PERSECUTED BECAUSE OF
RIGHTEOUSNESS

PERSECUTED BECAUSE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.

Since Jesus spoke these words, a lot of blood has been spilled. For many people who call themselves Christians, their blood was spilled for righteousness. For others who called themselves Christians, that was not entirely the case. So, let's explore what it means to really be persecuted for righteousness, and what Jesus calls us to. It's very possible that in the future, our culture will persecute Christians. But we do need to think through what Jesus says here - because, this is part of what it means to be an imitator of Jesus Christ and to live out the character that He calls us to.

"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."

Here's what that Beatitude does not say: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are objectionable, or because they rave like wild-eyed fanatics, or because they pursue some religio-political cause." (D.A. Carson). Right now, there is a tendency to see persecution in that light. To see anything and everything that might be connected with our faith as "persecution." I remember one time I had a friend who was acting very snobbish and rude to people who disagreed with him when claiming to be "sharing the gospel." When he got shunned, he cited persecution. The reason he was shunned was not because of the message he was sharing but the way he was sharing it. He was a jerk. That is not persecution for righteousness. Don't be a jerk.

Jesus says that it is those who are persecuted because of their righteousness who are blessed. That means, those whose righteous character - who actually embody and live out the fruit of the Spirit and the beatitudes, and who still are mistreated because of their faith in God - are blessed. That's what Jesus is talking about here - those who were determined to live like Jesus and who suffer for it. So. Let's get that straight off the start. All along, we have been talking about the Beatitudes - the character that we are to have as we are formed into the likeness of Christ.

PERSECUTION, REJOICING, AND BLESSINGS

So, first of all. What is persecution? Persecution can take a lot of different forms. Some people are ostracized from their family, or peers. I experienced a low-level persecution like this. Low-level because I was able to live, but there were days where living as a Christian was really, really hard, because it brought physical bullying, verbal abuse, and social rejection. Some other forms of persecution can come from being seen as a weirdo by those who you work with or play sports with, just for your faith and the kind of "righteousness" that brings. I've even had a few incidents where someone was trying to do something they saw as nice for me, but it was against the law, and so I wouldn't do it. It was awkward to refuse something that would benefit me but was illegal, and was awkward for the others too. This can lead to persecution sometimes, no matter how nice we try to be.

Now, this is kind of more western-world persecution. The truth is, though, we need to be careful. We can't be "claiming persecution" loudly in our broader society when these things happen, it should be expected. We have many brothers and sisters who have lost their lives and livelihoods and families because they follow Christ - things that are not to be expected as a norm of life. The cost is very high in many places around the world. Instead, we ought to pray, and then, be reminded of what Jesus says is true of those who are persecuted.

"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."

"Blessed are you." Okay, even if you have faced mild persecution, if someone told you you were blessed, you'd probably like to bless them with a few choice words. It really doesn't feel like a blessing. It feels like crap. It feels like you are alone and you are hurting and that your faith ruins the fun of life. I used to face minor persecution, and I actually cried out to God in lament every single night. I poured over the Psalms - they were my prayers for what I was going through. I couldn't wait to get out of High School and maybe find some friends (which did happen by the way!). When Jesus says "Rejoice," I'll tell you, it was more like "Lament." But even in the Psalms, Laments always end in Praise - in some kind of rejoicing. So, let me explain what I learned through low-level persecution and why someone could honestly "rejoice" over it:

REJOICING

Rejoice:

1. You need to know what is worth rejoicing about: You are God's, and you are shining. You've heard the saying the "squeaky wheel gets the grease"? Or what about "the nail which sticks up gets hammered down." Okay, these are negative connotations. But, when you think about it, to some degree, you are a brightly shining light, which shines in the darkness, and if people want things to stay dark, they will try to cover and push down the light. Our enemy - not the flesh and blood people but the powers and principalities in our world - the true enemies of God, are trying to push down the light. So, if we are "lighting it up" we can expect to have some darkness thrown our way. It will come to all who live righteously. Unless, of course, we are hiding it (which Jesus says can't really happen if its truly our character and the gospel really makes a difference (Matt. 5:14-16)! So don't bother hiding. Rejoice in persecution instead!

2. Great is your reward: Okay, this offers a comfort - there is an eternal reward in heaven for you. The kingdom of heaven, and all of the other things that the Beatitudes mention. So, slight encouragement in the moment but a huge encouragement for the rest of eternity. But, another thing I think about when I read this: "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The prophets were some of the only people in Israel who had close communion with God, and were led by the power of the Holy Spirit. They had a mission, direction, and purposeful calling by God. All who are followers of Christ and face persecution because of righteousness are following in a "great cloud of witnesses" - great men and women of the faith who were faithful and did what was right and honoured God. So, in that sense, it is something really worth rejoicing over - you aren't alone, and you growing close to God!

3. Rejoicing keeps you kicking: If you've ever been in a sports game and the game is tight, the attitude of the players makes a big difference between winning and losing. I've been on a team and when the players begin to whine and complain, they start playing more defensively than offensively and so, they lose. They start a whole lot of in-fighting, and it sucks be on that team. Now, I've also been on a team where things are tough but people are, instead of being grumpy, pumping each other up to keep going and keep fighting. Jesus says that the gates of hell will not overcome the Church - so we are to keep on the offensive, keep kicking in the gates of hell and rejoicing and encouraging one another, even when things are tough! Now that's a whole different outlook than being a grumpy curmudgeon when facing persecution. Grumpy curmudgeons tend to cling to whatever they can control, and so they start playing defensively rather than offensively. They stop seeking God and His righteousness and instead their own safety, collective will, and they create a "holy huddle" that is actually more like an "unholy huddle" because they aren't able to rejoice in the midst of persecution. That's often when people start being jerks and then they get persecuted for unrighteousness rather than righteousness. It's possible to become like this, but don't. Remind yourself whose you are and rejoice - keep going forward as followers of Jesus Christ in a crooked and depraved world.

//THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN//

Even in the midst of persecution, we can live out our calls to be witnesses to the risen Jesus. We can often still minister to those in prison, and we can continue to care for the poor and downtrodden, like Jesus. When Paul was in prison, shackled, the end of Acts tells us that the message of the gospel was proclaimed by him "unhindered." (Acts 28:31). If there is anything true, it is that the Acts 29 life that we now live (there is no Acts 29, that's us!) is to be lived proclaiming the message of God despite persecution and suffering! It does not dictate our response, calling, or purpose. Like the Prophets before, we operate and live out the character of Christ, who is with us and is calling us forward, with purpose and a calling to be His witnesses at home, in our province, country, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) So, we can rejoice, because even in persecution, the message of the gospel can and will go forth - and all the more as we exhibit Christlike character and the character that is blessed.

REFLECT. PRAY. ACT

Reflect:

- Think of a time when you faced insults because of Christ. How did you respond?
- What are our typical reactions to persecutions?
- "Identify some differences between persecuted for the sake of Christ and simply drawing fire for being obnoxious." (John Stott)
- Stott asks: "Looking back through the whole passage, in what ways do the disciples embody the character qualities in the Beatitudes" Take some time to explore the Bible (specifically Acts) and see how the disciples embody this teaching:

Pray: Pray for the Persecuted Church in our world today:

- Pray that they might continue to bear fruit for Jesus
- Pray many would come to know Christ through their persecution.
- Pray also for their deliverance
- For them to be comforted by the Presence of God.
- For brothers and sisters facing persecution to encourage each other.
-

Act: Consider downloading the App: *Pray for the Persecuted by Open Doors* and commit to praying for those who are going through intense persecution.

CHARACTER QUALITY	DISCIPLES' ACTIONS
Poor in spirit	
Mourn (their sin)	
Meek	
Hunger for righteous	
Merciful	
Pure in heart	
Peacemakers	
Persecuted for righteousness	