

Suffering the Consequences

September 26, 2021

Matthew 5:10-12

This morning, we come to the end of our list of beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount. And just looking at it, we can easily tell that this one is a bit different. Instead of spelling out another step in becoming a believer or citizen of the Kingdom, another attribute to live out as a believer, this one tells us what to expect when we live out a Kingdom lifestyle. This one tells us what to expect as a follower of Jesus: persecution. That is a shift, indeed it is an unexpected shift. It is a shift so strong that it seems as if Jesus has switched topics. But He has not. We see here the same pattern, indeed the exact same promise attached to the first beatitude. Clearly, this one follows the others. But it is different. It describes not an attitude, nor an action, but a perspective that is designed to follow from the reaction of others to who we are and what we do...and the reaction is not positive. It is quite negative. In short, they are going to hate those who follow after Jesus.

And, the placement of this beatitude into this context is quite telling and striking. It reads almost like a disclaimer for the one who enters the Kingdom: this is what you need to expect. You've been warned. You were warned from the first paragraph on the first page of the script about life in the kingdom: expect to be treated poorly simply because of your connection to Jesus. But, when that happens consider it a blessing from God. Clearly this is going to need some unpacking. Clearly, this is tough stuff. Clearly, Jesus didn't know anything about how to give a sales pitch intended to convince people to buy into what He was selling!

So, follow along as we read THREE whole verses this morning! Begin to grasp what Jesus here says and how He intends us to take it. READ Matthew 5:10-12.

Main point: Being treated poorly for the cause of Christ is designed by God to be a blessing.

Once more, on the surface level, this beatitude makes no sense: happy is the one who is poorly treated for the sake of Christ. That makes no sense at all. As all the others, this beatitude is meant to be unpacked and digested. (2 parts)

I. God's hand of blessing is on those who suffer for Him. v. 10

I know this sounds nonsensical. These two things don't fit together! It is a sign of God's blessing on you when you are treated poorly because you live out your faith in Jesus? Are you kidding? How can such joy and ill treatment be viewed as compatible? Is Jesus really serious here? Yes, He's serious.

v.10- "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

For the last time, we see the pattern: the pronouncement of blessing, the identification of the attribute, and then the promise attached to the attribute. Once more, we must see this as not that God chooses to bless those who display such an attribute but that the attribute must be seen as a blessing from God.

That will be especially difficult for this one. And then we see the promise attached to the attribute, this time “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” We immediately notice that this promise is identical to the first one, poor in spirit. It is clear to me that this was intentional, meaning the two identical promises are bookends to the whole section. This statement in v.10 is designed to be connected directly with the others in the list. Jesus has NOT changed topics.

Both promises describe in simple form acceptance into God’s kingdom with all the perks and privileges thereof. It is this same promise throughout. But as always, there is an appropriate connection to the specific attribute. When you are treated poorly, harmed for the sake of the Kingdom, just remember that the end result is that you will inherit everything. God has a blessing for you that is beyond comparison. It far surpasses anything you will be asked to endure. Truly, there could be nothing greater than to be promised the whole kingdom of heaven.

Then we notice the attribute itself, although it doesn’t seem like an attribute: persecuted for righteousness’ sake. Blessed by God is the one who suffers persecution. Now, as we have seen before, this is specific in nature. This is not a blessing simply on those who suffer. Suffering is not a sign of God’s blessing. That would be a bit perverse. It is not just a specific kind of suffering: persecution. There are many people who are persecuted for many reasons: skin color, status in life, where you live, football team you root for. There are endless number of reasons for persecution. But this is more specific than that.

This is persecution for righteousness’ sake. Immediately, we are brought back to this core issue of righteousness. What is righteousness? The STUFF you need to be right before God. It is that which qualifies you to be right before God. You have to have it. And since such a person has made peace with God, they now have righteousness. Yes, it is Jesus’ righteousness, but He has given it

to you. In the fourth beatitude, hungering and thirsting for it was highlighted. Here it is the reaction from others to the fact that you have it, or stand up for it, or preach to others their need for it. Such persecution might be because you preach that the people before you need more righteousness than the most devout religious people of your day (5:20). I could see how such a message would bring persecution. It is perhaps because your commitment to the Kingdom changes your perspective on certain things, and that puts you at odds with those around you. You can no longer support what they support. I can see how that might bring persecution. There could be many reasons why others might persecute followers of Jesus.

But to complete this thought, let's consider what such persecution described here is not. Clearly, it is not persecution for wrongs we do. We can't claim persecution when we are in the wrong. It also is not just the most dedicated, heroes of the faith who endure such persecution. In this list, it is the expected path for ALL believers. In other words, being a part of the Kingdom of God WILL bring persecution. It WILL. Simply living out life in the kingdom will bring persecution.

Notice the text does not give the source of the persecution. Elsewhere, the world is identified as those who will treat poorly followers of Jesus: John 15:18-19,

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

But it might just be from people who would be supportive of you. The main source of Jesus' persecution was from the religious elite of His day. They hated Him. I affirm that the attacks that hurt the most are the ones that come from people and groups you thought were on your side. I remember being chewed out many years ago by a pastor in that town because an evangelist we invited came to town and effectively preached the gospel. That was persecution for righteousness' sake.

But for me, the most striking aspect of this beatitude is its placement so close to the description of entering the Kingdom. It is as if Jesus said, "Here's how you get in the kingdom. Oh, and expect to be persecuted for it." That's a sales pitch! It is to be expected that entrance to the kingdom will be met by others with ill will, harsh unfair treatment. It comes with life in the kingdom. Indeed, it is no coincidence to me that this section is followed directly with the salt and light analogy. As we will see next week, they are all connected together. This IS life in the kingdom.

But because this is included in the list of beatitudes, we must not only expect such treatment, but we are to view it as evidence of God's hand of blessing. Once more, this blows our minds. How can we view being treated poorly because of our association with Jesus as a blessing from God? And yet it is true. Such persecution means the purposes of the Kingdom are being accomplished in and around us. As the early disciples put it in Acts 5:41, "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." That is precisely what Jesus has in mind here.

Jesus was quite aware that He was not a uniter but a divider. Later in Matthew (10:34), Jesus puts it this way, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." He goes on to tell how becoming a believer will bring strife into all kinds of

relationships. By definition, the kingdom of God will divide people, and those on the other side of the divide WILL strike out at the people of the Kingdom. It WILL happen.

So, here, the purpose seems to be prepared for it when it comes, and to view it not as some sort of punishment, but as a blessing. God is blessing you when it happens. Again, this takes a big picture perspective. When you suffer persecution for the Kingdom of Christ, it means God has blessed you to be on the front lines of His work. Don't view it as, "What have I gotten myself into!!!" Instead, view it as, "God has blessed me to be on the front lines of His work. He sees me, notices what is happening, and will make things right in the end. But for now, I will endure with joy whatever comes my way."

II. Enduring suffering from persecution will itself be rewarded. vv. 11-12

Not only is the principle true in a universal sense in v.10, but here in vv.11-12 it is put in personal terms. There will be benefits that come from God to YOU if you stand up for Him. He is not cold to our plight.

11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Because of the form, you could view this verse as another beatitude, but it is not. It seems to me that it is a personalizing of the last beatitude, making sure you understand that Jesus gets it. He sees what you are going through and is committed to making things right with you. Notice the "you" here. This doesn't say, "the one who" or "those who" as do the others in the list. Here it is in

second person. Jesus is speaking directly to you. This is personal. It means that He has noticed. He has not just laid down the principle and promised that everything will work out in the end. It is that He has noticed what you individually went through yesterday, or last year, or when you were a child. It is a big deal to Him when His people suffer because of Him. It's not, "That's life! What did you expect?" Instead, it is, "Yes, Curt, I saw that. I'm proud of you and had a purpose for that, otherwise I would not have allowed it. Know that I will make it right. Your sacrifice for My sake WILL BE rewarded."

Then we see here that there is an expanded list of potential types of persecution. You might be tempted to think of persecution as being tortured, imprisoned, or put to death. You know, the stuff that the martyrs have endured, the heroes of the faith. But to those clear examples that only a relatively few are asked to endure are things like being reviled or saying false things about you. These too count, He notices those things as well. How many of us have had hurtful and mean things said about us because we are identified with Jesus? ALL of us! How many of us have had bad things, evil things falsely said about us because of our faith? ALL of us. In fact, it may happen to some of us so often that we don't even notice it or keep track of it. And the truth of this verse is that even if we don't notice it, God does.

He hears when they treat you poorly. He notices when they falsely accuse you. He keeps track of such things. In fact, notice that He takes it personally, "on my account." Jesus Himself knows that when you are treated this way, they are really treating Him this way. You understand this way of thinking. When you do something, and the other person complains to your wife or husband, you have a sense of responsibility for causing the outburst. That is what Jesus is saying here. As we saw in John 15, He knows that such violence, or oppression, or mistreatment that comes to us is really directed at Him, but they can't get to Him so they take it out on you. Jesus gets that and wants us to know that He gets that. He notices each and every instance of such treatment, no matter how

big or small and He takes it personally, both against those who do it and for those who endure it. We might say it as, “I got your back!” You are blessed by God to be put in this situation and He will make it all right with you and them.

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

But then we come to this short, duplicated call to rejoice and be glad. Notice these are directive in force. We are called to rejoice. We are called to be glad. Again, this doesn't make sense on a human level. Are we to get all excited that we have been treated poorly? Not really. Pain is pain, hurt is hurt. Even Jesus, when He was being put to death was not crying out with joy. He was singing a psalm alright, Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” So, the call here to rejoice and be glad doesn't mean ignoring reality and stuffing our true emotions. Instead, it means focusing on the bigger picture. We see this here in several ways. The first is that such endurance of persecution for Jesus' sake comes with a promise of reward in heaven. What that reward is and how and when it will come to us is not spelled out. It could mean the simple fact that we are in heaven is the reward. That would be reward enough. But it also could mean there IS some sort of reward corresponding to each and all of the persecution we have endured. We'll just have to wait and see. All we know right now is that God has noticed, and has promised to make things right in the end. This is indeed, very good news. Our Savior gets it and promises to make things right. But it does mean a delay in receiving the reward. It is not immediate.

To this, he adds a statement of perspective. He ties the persecution that we suffer directly to the suffering that the prophets of old suffered. Why would Jesus make such a connection? Probably for many reasons, but what comes to mind for me is to help us see the pattern, the big picture. In other words, this has always been the case. The people who speak out for God are not treated well. . .and He knows it. We are in a long line of such people who have been treated this way. But the second reason that comes to my mind is to build us up. How do the Scriptures treat the prophets of old? They are the heroes. Moses, Isaiah, Daniel, Elijah, Nathan, there are many. They are lifted up by God. They are honored. They will be given a special place in the Kingdom of God for what they have done and endured for the sake of God's plan. True prophets of God are highly esteemed in Scripture. And so, this is how God views you when you endure hardship for Him. He highly esteems you as well.

We might be tempted to downplay what we have endured, and rightly so. I have never been thrown into the lion's den. I am not viewing myself as being hunted down by the powerful in our society for my stand for God. But Jesus wants us to know that enduring such treatment puts us in the same position as all of our heroes. You might think of it as wearing the jersey. When we endure such things, we get to wear the jersey. We've shown we are on the same team.

Again, I see this as a big deal. Putting our persecution on the same level as the great prophets of old is no small thing. This is a pretty important statement. I have no sense that it is hyperbole or overstatement, or puffing us up to satisfy our ego. Jesus really means it. Whatever His plan calls us to endure, personally, specifically, in part and in whole, He notices, and takes upon Himself. When it happens to us, it happens to Him, and He is just, protective.

But underneath all of this, can you see the principle that the advancement of the Kingdom will necessarily bring hardship to His servants? There will be

costs, a price to be paid. He could have made it work differently, that the Kingdom would grow through shared happiness and puppy dogs and laughter. But for His purposes, God has not chosen to make the kingdom like that. It is going to grow and spread through hardship. And Jesus wants us to know this right up front, from the very beginning, in the first paragraphs of His great sermon. Advancement will bring suffering for the sake of righteousness, for Jesus' sake, for the purposes of the advancement of His kingdom. It will cost those who are in it. We who are in the Kingdom are on the front lines of the spiritual battles between God and the forces of evil. We will suffer wounds and injuries. It comes with being in the Kingdom.

But the good news is that God notices and promises to make things right. What a promise this is! There are real reasons for rejoicing during suffering for the Kingdom. There is not only the confidence that such suffering has purpose and will result in good. There is also the knowledge that God does not ignore or pooh pooh the suffering of His people for His name's sake. He will make it right. We just have to wait to see how this will all unfold.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1. We will not go out seeking to suffer, but we will recognize that simply living the Christian life will bring persecution.
2. We will remind ourselves that God sees our plight and promises to make it right.
3. When facing such persecution, we will not shrink back in fear, but rejoice that we have been found worthy to be a part of the plan.
4. We will remind ourselves that what we are going through is normal and to be expected.
5. We will focus on the big picture rather than our pain of the moment.