

Persecuted for Christ

Matthew 5:10

SUFFERING IS AN UNAVOIDABLE THEME IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' *If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.* If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. John 15:20

And we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; *when persecuted, we endure.* 1 Corinthians 4:12

Persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 2 Corinthians 4:9

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will be persecuted,* 2 Timothy 3:12

Peter who was present for the Sermon on the Mount quotes Jesus twice (1 Peter 3 and 4):

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? *But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.* Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

1 Peter 3:13–17

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. *If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed,* because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 1 Peter 4:12–14

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him *but also suffer for his sake.* Philippians 1:27–29

HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND JESUS' TEACHING

Being righteous or practicing righteousness really means being like Christ. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for being like me." We see this clearly as we look at verse 11. He said, "Blessed are you when you are persecuted...on my account." The world doesn't persecute good people. The world persecutes Christ-like people. Why? Because just like Christ, when His followers live righteously they live in direct contradiction to what the world affirms, esteems, loves, longs for, and worships. Jesus in John 3:18-20 said, "And this is the verdict: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed."

The world hates light. Interestingly enough, what does Jesus call Christians in Matthew 5:14? He says, "You are the light of the world." Martyn Lloyd Jones said that this is quite possibly the most searching of all the Beatitudes. It forces us to consider how much resemblance we bear to Christ.

Kent Hughes says, "By far the greatest reason there is so little persecution is that the Church has become [so much] like the world. If you want to get along the formula is simple. Approve of the world's morals and ethics – at least outwardly. Live like the world lived. Laugh at its humor. Immerse yourself in its entertainment. Smile benignly when God is mocked. Act as if all religions converge on the same road. Don't mention hell. Draw no moral judgments and stand for no moral issues. Above all, don't share your faith. Follow this formula and it will be smooth sailing."

Jesus said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 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" John 15:18–19. We must be careful that our ideas about Christ and Christianity are not such that the natural man can easily admire or applaud them. The Christian is like his Lord. If they didn't praise Christ, they should praise your life or my life.

PERSECUTION COMES IN VARIOUS FORMS

Blessed are you when others *revile* you and *persecute* you and *utter all kinds of evil* against you falsely on my account. Matthew 5:11

Blessed are you when people *hate* you and when they *exclude* you and *revile* you and *spurn your name* as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Luke 6:22

The word "persecuted" in Matthew 5:10 has the idea of "pursuing" or "chasing". The reviling that we see in verse 11 literally means to "cast in one's teeth," or hurl insults at another. Persecution can most certainly go to physical extremes as a survey of church history would reveal; but most often it comes in the form verbal assaults, sometimes audible, sometimes whispered, sometimes direct,

sometimes by way of innuendo. It may come in the form of the faithful employee of 20 years being passed over for a position because of his uncompromising, God-honoring ethics. It may come to the student who is ostracized because she won't let her friends cheat off of her homework. It may come in the form of the stay at home mom who is considered dull by her neighbors because she doesn't delight in their gossip. It often times is seen in hurtful, slanderous remarks that are made behind a Christians back.

BLESSING ONLY COMES TO THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE

We need to be clear about the fact that this Beatitude doesn't say, "Blessed are the persecuted." Those who would interpret it this way, and there are many, delude themselves into thinking that anytime they experience conflict or hostility they are bearing the reproach of Christ. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake."

1. Blessing isn't promised to those who are persecuted for being objectionable.

Martyn Lloyd Jones said, "We can bring endless suffering upon ourselves, we can create difficulties for ourselves which are quite unnecessary, because we have some foolish notion of witnessing and testifying, or because, in a spirit of self-righteousness, we really do call it down on our own heads."

Joseph Bayley, a Christian author and publisher who passed away in the mid-80's, once wrote a satirical short story called *The Gospel Blimp*. The storyline follows George and Ethel are concerned about the salvation of their next-door neighbors, but don't know how to reach them with the good news of Jesus Christ. During an evening get-together of George and Ethel's Christian friends, the group is captivated as they see a blimp flying overhead. Why not use a blimp to proclaim the gospel to the unchurched citizens of Middletown they thought? The group incorporates, buys a used blimp, hires a pilot, and commences to evangelize their hometown by towing banners behind the blimp with Bible verses on them. As a means of being more direct with their message, they also dropped tracts, called "gospel bombs" into the backyards of their neighbors. At first, the town's people put up with the intrusion, but their toleration turned to hostility when the blimp's owners installed loudspeakers on their Bible balloon and began inundating the people with gospel broadcasts. The locals were frustrated and the local paper ran this editorial:

For some weeks now our metropolis has been treated to the spectacle of a blimp with an advertising sign attached at the rear. This sign does not plug cigarettes or a bottled beverage, but the religious beliefs of a particular group in our midst. The people of our city are notably broad-minded, and have good-naturedly submitted to this attempt to proselytize. But last night a new refinement (some would say debasement) was introduced. We refer, of course, to the airborne sound truck, the invader of our privacy, that raucous destroyer of communal peace.

That night the gospel blimp was sabotaged by some of the people in the city and the Christians saw this as “persecution”.

I am reminded of the gentleman that usually once a year comes out to USI and engages students in spiritual arguments. He antagonizes them, calls them names, makes them look foolish. He stirs up anger and when he is treated according to his actions he calls it persecution for the sake of Christ. Not only is this not persecution for the sake of righteousness, but it is also a terrible witness as those who engage with him often times leave thinking, “If that is what Christianity is all about, I don’t want anything to do with it.”

2. Blessing isn’t promised to those who are persecuted for being fanatical.
3. Blessing isn’t promised to those who are persecuted for cause. Martyr spirit...
4. Blessing isn’t promised to those who are persecuted for being good, noble, or self-sacrificing.

HOW DOES GOD USE PERSECUTION IN THE LIFE OF A BELIEVER

1. To conform us into the image of Christ.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Romans 8:29

2. Suffering develops our character.

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Romans 5:3-4

3. To keep us from getting too comfortable in this sin riddled world.

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. You are good and do good; teach me your statutes. Psalms 119:67–68

4. To advance the gospel.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Philippians 1:12–14

5. Suffering brings us into closer fellowship with Christ.
6. Suffering in a small measure helps us to appreciate the sufferings of Christ.
7. Suffering well can be used of God to draw others to Christ.

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. Acts 5:41–42

DO WE KNOW THIS PERSECUTION

While we are never called to seek out drum up persecution, we are called to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. If this is the case, there will be ongoing various degrees of persecution in our lives. On the other hand, if we are never faced with persecution it very well may mean that we with resemble little of him, or that we don't know him at all. The brighter our light is the more we set ourselves up to suffer for righteousness sake. Those who suffer for righteousness have the blessed promised, "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

A HELPFUL TRANSLATION

Approved by God are those who are treated like Christ for living like Christ, for theirs, and theirs only is the kingdom of heaven.