

Rejoicing in Tribulation

Matthew 5:11-12

A REMINDER OF WHO YOU ARE

There are two ways to look at a Christian. You can look at him as he is, in and of himself. But you can also look at him in light of his reaction to the various circumstances that unfold in his life and in the world he lives in. There are three principles (general characteristics) with regard to the Christian that we see emerge from Matthew 5:11-12.

1. He is unlike everyone who is not a Christian.

The gospel creates a clear-cut division and distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian. Remember Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" Matthew 10:34. The non-Christian proves this division by his persecution of Christians. Jesus told His disciples, "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 15:19. The Christian is not just like everyone else with the exception of subtle differences. The Christian is essentially different in every way. He has a different nature altogether and is therefore a different man. This is the fundamental reason for our persecution.

2. A Christian's life is controlled and dominated by Jesus Christ, by his loyalty to Christ, and by his concern to do all that he does for Christ's sake.

Why are Christians persecuted? Because they desire to do all they do for the sake (glory) of Christ. The Christian's life should always be controlled and dominated by considerations of what will be well-pleasing in the sight of Christ. You have heard me say this before, but, "If you please God, it matters not whom else you displease. On the other hand, if you displease God, it matters not whom else you please." Be certain of this: A desire to whole-heartedly please Christ at any cost will certainly displease those who don't share your desire. This is what it means to be persecuted "on my account". Jesus said, "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. Likewise, in John 15:20-21 He said, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name..."

3. A Christian's life should be controlled by thoughts of heaven and the world to come.

Jesus said, "Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven..." In Hebrews 11:10 we are reminded that, "[Abraham] was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God." Likewise, the writer of Hebrews tells us that, "[Moses] considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking forward to the reward" Hebrews 11:26. This is an essential part of the differentiation of the Christian. The non-Christian does all he can not to think of the world to come – he tries to pleasure himself to elude its reality. The non-Christian hates thinking about death and eternity, but the Christian thinks a great deal about them; in fact he, with great anticipation, dwells upon them.

HOW IS THE CHRISTIAN TO FACE PERSECUTION

1. As believers we should not retaliate.

To retaliate is to act just like the natural man. The natural or lost man cannot "stay the angry word". By nature he has the instinct of self-preservation and the desire to get back or settle the score. But as Christians we are to imitate the leading of Christ who did not take vengeance into his own hands. Peter tells us, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" 1 Peter 2:23.

2. As believers we should not feel resentment.

This is much more difficult than not retaliating. God isn't content with us only controlling our external actions; He wants us to bring our feelings and emotions under His lordship as well.

3. As believers we should not be discouraged by persecution.

If you are not tempted by retaliation and resentment in persecution, you may be tempted to sulk in discouragement. If our eyes are on ourselves it is easy to begin to ask the "why me" question. Jesus said, "Rejoice and be glad!" When are we to rejoice? Paul said, "Rejoice always" 1 Thessalonians 5:16. We are called to become like Christ even on the way we handle persecution. Do you remember what the writer of Hebrews said about the way Jesus endured the cross? He said, "[Jesus] for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" Hebrews 12:2.

WHY IS THE CHRISTIAN TO REJOICE IN PERSECUTION

We do not rejoice in the mere fact of persecution. If you remember back several weeks ago in our study we said that mourning is a mark of a true believer. We mourn (broken) over our own sin before God, but the Christian, indwelt by the Spirit of God cannot help but also mourn over the sin of the

world he lives in. So there is then at the same time both a rejoicing and brokenness. We rejoice insofar as our persecution is for righteousness sake and that it demonstrates the power of God to transform us in Christlikeness, but we are simultaneously broken because persecution is sin and is the result of a person who is controlled by the prince of the power of the air. What specifically are we to rejoice in?

1. We rejoice in that persecution provides proof of who we are and whose we are.

If you are persecuted for righteousness sake, you are being treated just like the prophets – God’s chosen servants – who are now rejoicing in glory! In a real sense God uses the workings of Satan who is the instigator of all hatred towards the things and people of God to actually confirm our identity as children of God. If we are being maligned falsely and persecuted for Christ’s sake, it must mean that our lives are becoming more like His. We rejoice in that our suffering confirms that we do indeed belong to Christ!

2. We rejoice in that persecution provides proof of where we are going.

Jesus says, “Rejoice and be glad...” Why? “For great is your reward in heaven.” By persecuting you, the world is declaring that you don’t belong to it. Remember Jesus said, If you [belonged to] the world, the world would love you as its own, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” John 15:19. Persecution should fill our hearts with joyful anticipation of our heavenly home. 1 Peter 2:11 reminds us that we are aliens and strangers in this world. Paul tells us in Philippians 3:20 that our citizenship is in heaven.

Our perspective as it pertains to persecution should be governed by three things:

- A. A realization of who I am.
- B. A consciousness of where I am going.
- C. A knowledge of what awaits me when I get there!

3. We rejoice in that persecution for Christ’s sake is coupled with the promise of heavenly reward.

Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 that our focus is always to be heavenward. He says, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. Some Christians struggle with the idea that we, as believers, should be motivated by reward, but it’s an inescapable reality that is woven throughout the Bible.

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul tells us that what really controlled his life and ministry was the reality that a day was coming when every man’s work would be tried by fire and rewarded accordingly. He

said, “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, *he will receive a reward*. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” 1 Corinthians 3:12–15.

Paul continues this theme in 2 Corinthians 5:10 when he writes, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may *receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*” In 2 Timothy 4 Paul charges his disciple Timothy to fulfill his ministry by faithfully preaching the word. As a final encouragement shortly before his own death Paul tells Timothy, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. *Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing*” 2 Timothy 4:6–8.

We see motivation by way of reward in Christ himself as the writer of Hebrews tells us, “[Jesus] *for the joy set before him* endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” Hebrews 12:2. Jesus endured the cross by looking beyond it to the joy that was coming. Likewise when we are persecuted for Christ’s sake, we can unashamedly rejoice in the promise that as we cross the threshold of eternity we will be blessed with “great reward”.

What about grace? I thought the Christian life was all about grace. How do you square the idea of reward with grace? Martyn Lloyd Jones says that the reward itself is of grace. He says:

God treats us as a Father. The father tells the child that there are certain things he wants him to do, and that it is his duty to do them. He also tells him that if he does them he will give him a reward. It’s not that the child merits the reward. It is given of grace, and it is an expression of the father’s love. So God, of His infinite grace, ‘throws these things into the bargain’ as it were, and encourages us, and fills us with a sense of love and gratitude.

4. Rejoice that Christ is near in the moment of persecution.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.” Daniel 3:24–25

WHAT IS THE REWARD THAT AWAITS THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

The Bible doesn't tell us much about this glorious reward. We know that heaven will be unmixed joy, glory, holiness, purity, and wonder. In an ultimate sense our reward will be Christ Himself. John tells that we shall see Him as He is and worship in His glorious presence (1 John 3:1-2). This thought should be the cause for great joy in our hearts. As a believer who suffers for the sake of Christ, you have joy unspeakable and full of glory awaiting you (1 Peter 1:8)! Everything that happens to you this side of glory cannot affect what waits for you in the slightest. Paul reminds us, "To live is Christ and to die is gain" Philippians 1:21. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven!