

Matthew 5:10-12

Bearing the Marks of Christ

I will never forget Katie and I's first purchase as a soon to be married couple. Like most newlyweds, we needed everything. We heard of a friend from First Atlanta who would be moving back to India named Ignatius. We went over to his house to see if he had anything that we could use. When we arrived, we quickly found out the reason that he was leaving. He had become a Christian since coming to Atlanta and decided to move back to his home country to be a missionary. Katie and I were married in 2008. That same year was the year that severe persecution broke out in Orissa India. Hindu radicals killed over 100 Christians and destroyed some 6,000 churches. Orissa was the place that Ignatius planned to move to.¹

In the words of Ignatius, "everything must go, because we have to go to India." This resilience for the gospel left an indelible mark on Katie and me. Here we were getting ready for seminary, preparing of ministry, and before us was this man who was literally selling everything to run to a country where his life would be in danger; all because he loved Jesus. To this day, Katie and I put our clothes in the dresser from Ignatius' house. Some of my books rest on the bookcase from his office that is now in my home office. We still have a painting from his mantle on our wall, all so that we can remember that we, like our friend Ignatius, are pilgrims passing through this world seeking a better one.

Ignatius' story is not a story of a super Christian. He is just an ordinary lover of Jesus. We have made it all the way to the end of the beatitudes. Hear the Word of the Lord this morning.

READ TEXT

What kind of people are these that do not fear the fires of persecution? In a word, these are Christians. Let's think about the beatitudes for just a moment. We have come to the end of these blessed statements and at the end we have a word about persecution. Notice the language. What is said about the persecuted? They are blessed, and to them belong the kingdom of heaven. This beatitude is as much a characteristic of the Christian as any of the other beatitudes. How so? Look at the text.

There is a literary device that helps us to see that this beatitude is as much a characteristics as any other. Notice where we began. In verse 3 we see the phrase *kingdom of heaven*. Verse 3 is the beginning of the beatitudes. Now look at our text today, verse 11. Notice that we see the phrase *kingdom of heaven* again. This is called an *inclusio* and it links together, or includes everything between the two statements *kingdom of heaven*.

The Beatitudes paint a portrait of the believer. Here we have an individual whom God has come to redeem; an individual who has heard the call of God. The realization of his condition has forced him to his knees. He is mourning over his own sinfulness and seeking satisfaction by hungering and thirsting for the righteousness that Christ gives. The knowledge of his condition and the satisfaction that he finds through hungering and thirsting for righteousness, leads him to engage with other people. He is not reclusive but engaging; he is not insulated from the world's problems, but seeks to find those needing mercy and those in need of peace to be merciful and to be a peacemaker. But as he seeks to bring peace, as he seeks to bind the wounds of the brokenhearted, his work is not appreciated. Instead of being received he is shunned. Instead of being thanked he is persecuted. The very ones that he seeks, the very ones that need his help the most, are the ones that turn against him. This man, though persecuted for righteousness, is blessed because to him belong the Kingdom of Heaven. This one who is persecuted is a joint heir with the One who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.

¹ Read about the Orissa persecution here: <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christian-faithstrengthening-in-orissa-on-7th-anniversary-of-horrific-violence-where-100-believers-wheremassacred-by-hundu-radicals-144228/>

How did the One who has authority received all authority? Through a cross. He has called us to follow him. In our following him, he calls us blessed and guarantees us the kingdom of heaven.

Today we have a Word from God about being a Christian. I know some who have an idea that if things are going wrong there must be something wrong with them. However, this beatitude rounds off any misguided thinking about what it means to be a Christian.

1. Expect Persecution

Each month, 322 Christians are killed for their faith. Each month, 214 churches and properties are destroyed. Each month 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians (such as beatings, abductions, rapes, arrests, and forced marriages).² We live in a land that does not know much persecution. At least not in a sweeping way. Most of us have never experience the types of persecution that many of our brothers and sisters face on a daily basis. Some of you have never experienced persecution. This beatitude is a great reversal for some of us. We should be surprised at the lack of persecution, not that we are persecuted.

Listen carefully and closely. We aren't to go out and seek persecution, a point I will get to in a minute. But, if we have never experienced persecution for the name of Jesus in some form or fashion, we must truly examine our hearts to see if when we look to the beatitudes we see ourselves. These beatitudes form a golden chain of blessedness telling us the characteristics of a Christian. We are not talking about anything radical, we are talking plainly about what is normal for the Christian.

Listen to the witness of Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:12 - This is Paul's last letter. He is in prison, never to get out, will be beheaded under Emperor Nero. How does he choose to encourage a young pastor? Listen to him: 2 Timothy 3:10-12: *You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. **Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...*** That's the same context as the passage for preaching. Later, just 3 verses later he tells us that *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.* Now we know, from the life of Paul, what he means when he says, "every good work", - the work is good even if the good that we work results in persecution

Think about it. If there was a man who knew persecution for righteousness sake it was Paul. He tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (ESV)

Yes Paul bore on his body the marks of Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:17). What about you?

Jesus told his disciples that he was sending them out as sheep amongst wolves. Persecution shouldn't strike us as strange. Let me ask you a question. Do you love Jesus? Are you seeking to live a godly life in Christ Jesus? Expect persecution. Don't just Expect it #2 - Embrace it.

2. Embrace Persecution

How many of you want to be like Jesus? If you hesitated to respond, let me assure you that this is what being a Christian is all about. Making us like Jesus is the reason that God sent the Son. Listen to this truth: *Without*

² <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>

*ceasing to be what he was, he became what he was not, so that he could make us partakers of the divine nature.*³ Christ has come to reform humanity - this is the message of the Beatitudes, the message of the gospel - God coming to us to give us life amongst the dead. This new life that we have, all these characteristics that we see in the beatitude are ours, and are the cause of our friction with the world. Look at the Beatitudes. Each one of them is a great reversal of the world's value system.

Why are we persecuted? Because we are becoming like Jesus. I remember hearing of Gandhi saying "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." We use this quote to point to hypocrisy, and there may be some truth to that quote. But the Bible challenges the false worldview that says that the world loves Jesus. I am like many of you, I don't know why anyone would not love Jesus. But let's be real, Jesus was crucified for being Jesus. The Bible says that Jesus was meek and lowly. When the Bible describes Jesus, it says, *A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench (Isaiah 42:2)*. But look at what the world did to him. The world that "loves Jesus" is a world that does not know Jesus. Jesus warned us (right after the Beatitudes in Luke), *Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets (Luke 6:26)*.

As Jesus was facing the cross he 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. 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 15:18-20)

Paul understood this and told the Thessalonians afflictions are the destiny of the Christian (1 Thessalonians 3:3-4). But before we get too carried away, remember this persecution is specific. Look at the text again. This is not just persecution for any sake, this is persecution for righteousness sake. Do you see the difference? I know some people who have a martyr complex. Remember this same Jesus who said to expect persecution is the same Jesus who taught us to pray deliver us from evil.

The persecution that Christ commends is persecution for righteousness sake. What does that mean? This persecution is persecution that is a natural result of Christ forming in us his own righteousness. This persecution is a clash of two kingdoms, one who is fading away and a new one that Christ is bringing. We are not seeking this persecution, we are not fanatical or over zealous. Persecution for self-righteousness is not blessed. This persecution is because of us being unapologetically Christian. We must discern the difference.

Perhaps Peter will help us understand the difference. Peter says,

*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. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (1 Peter 4:12-16
ESV)*

Persecution as a Christian is inevitable and comes in many forms. Look at the list that Jesus gives. There is no reason for us to go and seek it. There was a story of a man who came to Tertullian who was having a hard time deciding what to do. He was a business owner who had come to faith in Christ. His business interests were conflicting with his loyalties to Christ and so he came to Tertullian and said, "What am I to do, I must live?" Tertullian said to him, "Must you?" Don't just expect persecution, embrace it.

³ The language of 2 Peter 1:4. Also this is the way that many of the Early Church Fathers spoke including, Athanasius, Cyril, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Augustine, Justin, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and many more.

There is a reason that we embrace it. Listen to what Christ says. *For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* We have eternity waiting for us. We are able to embrace persecution because of the one who has embraced the cruel Cross for us all so that not even the hottest fires of persecution could separate us from himself.

3. Remember Eternity

In closing today I want to stand and read the way that Paul encouraged a church when it came to persecution. Please stand as we read 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 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.

(ESV)

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (ESV)

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we pray for eyes to see beyond what can be seen. Please fill our longing for the only righteousness that satisfies. We don't want to enter the fiery trials of persecution, but let us never shy away from them. When we are called to bear the marks of Christ then let us do so willingly and with joy set before us. When we face the moment when living for Jesus means persecution and living for the flesh means ease then Lord let us choose to live for Jesus no matter the cost. May we see even the most sever trial as a light momentary affliction not worthy to be compared to your glory. We cannot live this way apart from your grace, and so today, a fresh and anew, we give ourselves to you. May we never lose heart. We trust you. We love you. In Jesus name, Amen.