

Series: “More Than Happiness”  
(Part 7) “Persecuted for Righteousness Sake”

Today we finish this series on the beatitudes. Jesus is telling us how to be deeply happy and blessed. His prescription for happiness is: recognize your spiritual poverty, mourn over your sins and the evil in the world, be humble and submissive to God’s control, crave a right relationship with God and the right kind of living that follows, show mercy to people, be focused on God and pure in your desires and motives be a peacemaker.

This is not how most people think you find happiness. In fact, if we live like Jesus tells us in the beatitudes, we’re going to be *different* from the way a lot of people live. This leads us to the last beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:10-12). To be “persecuted” means to be afflicted, harassed, annoyed, attacked – because of what you do or what stand for.

Have you ever been persecuted for righteousness’ sake? Notice, in this beatitude Jesus did not just say, “Blessed are those who are persecuted”. Sometimes people are criticized for being obnoxious, or for saying or doing stupid things. Sometimes people take heat for doing substandard work at their jobs, or not applying themselves in the classroom. Criminals, for instance, aren’t *persecuted*; they are *prosecuted* – and rightfully so! Sometimes *religious people*, and even *Christians*, aren’t treated very well because they don’t act very well!

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted *for righteousness’ sake*”. For *doing what is right*. Verse 11 says, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you *falsely and on my account*.” Notice: “falsely”. And on His account – in other words, we are opposed for *representing Him*.

Simon Peter writes about taking heat *for the right reason*: “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:14-16).

*The Bible makes it clear that if we follow Christ, we can expect opposition.* 2 Timothy 3:12 tells us: “Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Notice, “all”. Jesus once said, “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the *false* prophets” (Luke 6:26). Then there are these words of Christ: “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Slaves are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also” (John 15:18-20).

Notice, Jesus says to His followers “You are not of this world.” If we *really* follow Jesus, and obey Him, we’ll be out of step with the prevailing culture. Our values and morals will be different. We should be living differently than the neighbor, the friend, the relative, the coworker, who doesn’t claim to be a follower of Jesus! So, we shouldn’t act surprised if at some point we take some heat for living as a Christian. It’s not like Jesus never warned us this would happen!

*Persecution has been a part of the history of the church and of God’s people.* Jesus said, “In the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:12). Old Testament prophets endured taunts, ridicule, ostracism, physical harm, and death.

*Those who walked with Jesus as apostles suffered for their faith.* Other than Judas, who betrayed the Lord and committed suicide, tradition has it that every one of the 11 remaining apostles were martyred for their faith. Those in the beginning of the Christian movement – the first century church – endured persecution. Just read the Book of Acts, and you’ll see this!

*Over the first few centuries of Christianity, believers suffered greatly for their faith.* Early in my ministry I read the book, *Persecution in the Early Church*, and became more aware of what some of the first believers had to go through because of their faith. Some were stripped of their clothes and put in an arena with starving lions, while those in the stands enjoyed the show (the Roman version of Sunday afternoon football). Others were put in burlap bags filled with snakes, then thrown into a river. Some were crucified, just like our Lord. You’ve probably heard that in Emperor Nero’s gardens Christians were hung on crosses, covered with pitch, and used as human torches. Even for those who weren’t killed, to confess Christ might mean lose your job or place in community, or be shunned by family.

How much persecution is there today? *First, let’s look at the global church – the Body of Christ throughout the world.* Back in 1997 Nina Shea wrote a book called *In the Lion’s Den*. She gave evidence that more Christians around the world were martyred from 1900 to 1997 than in the combined 19 centuries prior to that! Unfortunately, things aren’t any better now. I’ve referred different times in my sermons to the organization called *Voice of the Martyrs*. It’s an organization that tries to alert believers of Christians throughout world who are being persecuted. It recommends practical ways to link up with suffering Christians to provide help and encouragement.

In a recent sermon I referred to their monthly magazine, that gives up to date stories of believers experiencing persecution somewhere in the world. I’m slowly reading through a book put out by the *Voice of the Martyrs*, a book called *Fox Voice of the Martyrs, A.D. 33 – Today*. It’s a 488-page book chronicling the martyrdom of Christian believers. Missionaries (even *medical* missionaries) murdered, whole families killed, even teenagers who are Christians. I read 1 or 2 stories in my devotions – it’s hard reading. It humbles me, saddens me, inspires me.

A few years back columnist Terry Mattingly wrote an article in the Lancaster Newspaper called “Christian Persecution Persists.” He mentioned how passive many American Christians are in

face of widespread persecution of Christians in world. He tells how former German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, said, ‘Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world.’ British historian Tom Holland told a London gathering that the world is witnessing the “effective extinction of Christianity from its birthplace” in the Middle East.

He also wrote that Pope Francis addressed this persecution of Christians in an address. The pope said: “When I think or hear it said that many Christians are persecuted and give their lives for their faith, does this touch my heart or does it not reach me? Am I open to that brother or that sister in my family who’s giving his or her life for Jesus Christ?...how many of you pray for Christians who are persecuted?...it’s important to look beyond one’s own fence, to feel oneself part of the Church, of one family of God.”

On my trips to Kenya I preached outdoor evangelistic services. There was no backlash from that. However, one of the other groups who did a mission trip there reported that there were Muslims who warned the group not to hold these services. And they didn’t, as a result. I learned recently that Muslims are providing materials in some of the schools in the village of Musese. This concerns me greatly, for much of the persecution of Christians comes from Muslim-dominated countries. *This is the world we live in today.*

*While we haven’t experienced this kind of intense persecution in our own country, the situation is changing – there is an increased hostility towards Christians in the U.S.* The columnist I mentioned before, Terry Mattingly, wrote another column titled, “The Death of Christian America.” He quotes the Rev. C. J. McCloskey of the Faith and Reason Institute, suggesting this: “No one in this country has ever really suffered for their faith in any meaningful way. Those days are ending.”

In the late 1990’s Russell Chandler, a Christian newspaper journalist, wrote a book called *Racing Toward 2001*. He predicted that bias against the historic Christian worldview would escalate, and said this kind of prejudice was already evident in *academic circles* and the *mainstream media*. He wrote: “Christian bashing is likely to be one of the few remaining discriminations acceptable in the twenty-first century.” His words seem to be prophetic!

I believe there is pretty sound evidence that our American culture is becoming less friendly, and more hostile, to Christians and the church. I realize that some people may disagree with this. I could use a number of examples to illustrate my point, but that’s not the sole purpose of my sermon. Let me just use a few examples.

David Horowitz is a *Jewish* man – an author and political commentator. He has written a disturbing book, *Dark Agenda, The War to Destroy Christian America*. In it he tells of a 5 year-old girl in the cafeteria of an elementary school in Florida who bowed her head to say grace before lunch. Moments later, a school employee, a lunchroom monitor, bent down beside the little girl, told her it was wrong to pray at school, and that she should never do that again. At Helen Hunt-Jackson Elementary School in California a teacher assigned a class of 1<sup>st</sup> graders to give a one-minute “show and tell” presentation about family holiday traditions. One girl,

Brynn Williams, held up a star of Bethlehem ornament from the family Christian tree, briefly told the class about the birth of Jesus, then began to recite a Bible verse. The teacher interrupted her and told her to take her seat. She was the only child forbidden to finish her talk. Brynn's father later said that she was hurt and humiliated, was afraid of being punished, and couldn't understand what she had done wrong.

One more thing from Horowitz's book to think about. The U.S. Capitol Visitor Center opened on December 2, 2008, to serve as a museum and information center for visitors to the nation's capitol. When this \$621 million center opened, all references to God and faith had been carefully, deliberately edited out of its photos and historical displays. A replica of the Speaker of the House's rostrum omits the gold-lettered inscription, "In God We Trust" above the chair. Photos of the actual House Speaker's rostrum had been cropped to hide the inscription. (This was later changed when a number of lawmakers complained. But other things were not changed). For instance, an enlarged image of the Constitution was photoshopped to remove the words, "In the year of our Lord" above the signatures of the signers. The table on which President Lincoln placed his Bible during his second inauguration was on display – just the table, not the Bible.

These are but a few of a myriad of examples that could be cited to suggest how our culture's view of Christianity has become more hostile.

But whatever country we live in, whatever period of history, we ought not to be surprised if we have to endure some amount of suffering for our faith! The Bible tells us – Jesus tells us – that if we're going to really follow Jesus and really live by His standards, we're going to clash with the world! Lloyd Ogilvie once said if you're not "in trouble" for your faith, you're probably not living out your faith. (Or else we're so cloistered in our own little Christian circle of friends that we rarely associate with any skeptics or ungodly people!)

Have you ever taken some heat for being a follower of Jesus? When I was about 30 years of age I left pastoral ministry and worked in a bank for a short time. I was in training to become a trust officer in the bank. Part of the training involved going offsite for a week of training. Apparently it was a time for a lot of drinking and carousing around. Shortly before the event was scheduled I overheard two of my coworkers talking about the week away. One of them (knowing that I had been a pastor) said that he had no intentions of toning things down just because I was going!

In this beatitude, Jesus says are *blessed* if we are persecuted and suffer for our faith! "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for.....what?.....for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).

And our response should be to rejoice! "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:12). Isn't that weird? Smile and be happy if people insult you, or say bad things about you, or hurt you, because you stand for Christ!

That's what apostles did! For instance, in Acts 5, Peter and some of the other apostles are in hot water for preaching Christ. Jewish religious leaders are having a fit! They call these apostles in, interrogate them, have them flogged, and as release them, warning them not to speak any more in the name of Jesus – which doesn't stop them from continuing their preaching!

Acts 5:41 says, "As they left the council, they *rejoiced* that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name."

So there you have it! Jesus' prescription for happiness! A lot different from the world's prescription for happiness!

Some of it seems weird. But Jesus tells us how to experience the deep, abiding joy of God and His kingdom even now, to some degree – and to the fullest extent when we share eternity with the Lord!

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