

Happiness through Persecution

Matthew 5:10

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

God made us to love and to be loved. We like to be liked. **Friendship** is the atmosphere in which we breathe most freely. **To be ridiculed as a child is a heart breaking experience, but the pain is not lessened as one becomes an adult.** *Persecution* is a form of *harassment* and *unfair accusations* may destroy our private castles of security. Of all the injuries that can be afflicted on a human being, **persecution** comes the closest to **making life hell on earth.**

This is the eighth of Jesus' principles for finding happiness in an unhappy world. **The first four deals with what God wants to do in us.**

“Happy are the poor in spirit.”

“Happy are those who mourn for their sin.”

“Happy are the meek.”

“Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

The next three reveal what comes out of us because of what God has done within us.

“Happy are the merciful.”

“Happy are the pure in heart.”

“Happy are the peacemakers.”

The proud Jews of Jesus’ day would certainly have been puzzled by these words of Jesus, “Blessed (happy) are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for there is the kingdom of heaven.” **They thought that when the kingdom of God arrived they**

would dominate their enemies and perhaps do a little persecuting themselves. But Jesus not only says that those in the kingdom of God would be persecuted, an idea that was already odd enough, but he also says that this persecution was to be viewed as a blessing. How could this be?

The problem was the kingdom that Jesus was about to establish was not going to be a secular, earthly kingdom. It was going to be a spiritual kingdom with citizens whose inner character and personal behavior conformed to the nature of God. They would be humble in spirit, sorry for sin, gentle toward others, anxious to do good, merciful, pure in their thoughts, and desirous of peace. Rather than working for earthly power or wealth, they would work to please God in their thinking and conduct.

Now we come to the bottom line. How does the world receive us? One would think that a world saturated with violence, hatred and greed would be overjoyed to meet a group of merciful, meek, pure--hearted peacemakers.

But that is not the case at all! What is the grand and glorious result of living a vibrant Christian life? The result of living a victorious Christian life in a world gone berserk is PERSECUTION! In 2 Timothy 3:12 Paul says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." The Greek reads something like this, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Jesus did not just predict persecution; He promised it, as seen in John 15:20, "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

Notice that Jesus does not say, "...if they are persecuted." Instead He says "have been" and "when." Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus stresses that living a spiritual life entails physical loss and sacrifice.

When God gathers all His children in heaven, they will bear the marks of persecution. There will be apostles who were beheaded, boiled in oil, burned at the stake, crucified upside down. There will be the believers who were covered with pitch, fastened to a stake and set afire to light Nero's gardens. There will be the millions murdered in cold blood by their communist captors for their testimony. Missionaries from around the globe who were slaughtered by those they were trying to win for Christ will walk heaven's streets of gold. The history of the church is soaked through with the blood of believers.

Even today, in the civilized Western world, the church of Jesus Christ suffers persecution from the secular humanist culture. The wounds of the tongue - especially when magnified by fellow churchmen - heal more slowly than the wounds of the sword. A person's influence and godly character can be assassinated by the gossip of a carnal church member as effectively as by a gangland execution.

As one studies the Bible, it becomes clear that a clash of two supernatural kingdoms rages on the battlefield of earth. It is a battle for survival between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. The kingdom of light is led by God the Father, with His host of heavenly angels. The kingdom of darkness is led by Satan and the demonic powers and principalities that obey his every command.

Paul alerted us to this fact in Ephesians 6:12, when he says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

The clash of the kingdoms began on the first Christmas morning, when God's own Son launched His invasion of planet Earth at Bethlehem. He did not come to pursue "peaceful coexistence" with Satan. He came to destroy him. The Bible says in 1 John 3: 8 that "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the

devil's work." The angels' announcement of Jesus' birth was a formal declaration of war against the devil.

The final battle for the souls of men began in the sobs of Gethsemane. Arrested, falsely accused, tried and convicted illegally, Jesus was flogged mercilessly for our healing. He knew the pain of persecution.

On a windswept hill called Calvary, just outside the walls of Jerusalem, hell made its final attack - and lost. When the Son of God bowed His head and mustered His last ounce of strength to say, "It is finished," the legions of hell cried out in terror.

Ephesians 4:7-10 tells us that He descended into the bowels of the earth, looked Satan straight in the face and introduced Himself as the lion of the tribe of Judah, the conqueror from Calvary, the Son of the living God. He ripped the gates of death and hell off their hinges and led the Old Testament believers into paradise. Now, today, the gates of hell cannot prevail against us, because the Prince of glory has defeated Satan and his demonic forces forever!

Two thousand years have passed. And the battle between God and Satan still rages on earth. John 10:10 makes it very clear that Satan's purpose is "to steal and kill and destroy" the inhabitants of earth. **It is his revenge for his expulsion from heaven and his defeat at Calvary.** Knowing he is doomed to an eternity in the "lake of fire," he does his utmost to drag those whom God created to hell with him!

Among his weapons for destroying the church and the children of God are persecution, slander, character assassination, ridicule, suspicion, confusion and lying. After the religious leaders questioned the legitimacy of His birth, Jesus gave this response in John 8:42-44, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My

word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it." **Jesus said that Satan is the father of lies.** **Those who follow him think nothing about lying to get their way.** **Those church members who are religious but lost, are nothing more than enemy agents in our midst, whose purpose is to destroy the unity of the faith and to sabotage the peace of God's people!**

Notice that Jesus *does not* say, "Happy are those who are having a hard time in their Christian life because they try at all times to be as difficult as possible."

He *does not* say, "Happy are those who suffer because of their own poor judgment." **I have known professing Christians who had rotten dispositions, made foolish decisions and used poor manners - and then thought people were opposing them because of their stand for Jesus.** But it was not their righteousness that was bringing them grief; it was their lack of common sense to make wise decisions.

Jesus *does not* say, "Happy are those who are scorned because they are over zealous and over bearing." **There are some really concerned Christians who have every good intention, but they try to "force feed" the gospel down the throat of everyone they see!** Please do not misunderstand what I am trying to say, because I think everyone that is lost needs to be saved, but folks, we simply cannot do the work of the Holy Spirit. Just share the truth of what Jesus has done for you, and God will take it from there!

Jesus *does not* say, "Happy are those who turn others off because they are such busybodies." Peter warns us in 1 Peter 4:15, "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler." Peter is saying, "Keep your nose out of other

people's business." If we stick our noses in someone else's business and get them cut off, that is *not* persecution. We had it coming.

Notice that Jesus *did* say, "Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." Why do the righteous suffer persecution? Because goodness always provokes opposition from a fallen world!

Worldly, carnal Christians are a poor advertisement for the gospel. Why? Because worldly, carnal Christians are uncommitted and lukewarm when it comes to obeying God's will and Word for their lives. Worldly, carnal Christians are content to walk by sight and not by faith. Worldly, carnal Christians are usually steeped in tradition and unwilling to change. Worldly, carnal Christians are a disgrace to the cause of Christ. With that though in mind, Paul scolded the Roman Christians in Romans 2:24, because "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." As he wrote Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12, he insisted that we should "set an example...in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity."

Consider Jesus. He was *meek*. He was *merciful*. He was loving. He was a *peacemaker*. He was *without sin*. Yet He was persecuted and finally murdered.

How would today's liberal press treat the Son of God? The headlines would scream, "Jesus Found Guilty of Treason!" The article would read something like this, "Jesus of Nazareth is being labeled a blasphemer, a heretic, a liar, a glutton and a drunkard by local religious leaders. In worship services yesterday, He was allegedly 'casting out evil spirits.' But confidential sources close to the controversial evangelist say He is Himself demonized. Local courts have pronounced Jesus guilty of treason for inflammatory statements directed against the establishment."

Persecution sent Jesus to the Cross!

But what is the problem? What causes the world to hold such contempt for Christians?

The answer is simple – a genuine Christian provokes opposition because he is different. We do not fit in. **Our speech is different. Our attitudes are different.** We have changed from hateful and vindictive personalities and discovered the blueprint to happiness in meekness, mercy and peacemaking. **Our differences make us hated by the carnal world which is controlled by Satan.**

It is because those who wish to practice sin and live in darkness are threatened and convicted by the righteousness of the godly. In Matthew 5:14-16 Jesus tells us to let the light of our good works shine so that other might see and glorify God. **Yet, John 3:20 tells us that many people will hate that light because it exposes their sin and makes them feel guilty. Truth, righteousness, and purity become hateful things to those who embrace wickedness.** And the truth of the matter is that we really are different.

Abel was murdered by **Cain** because he was different.

Joseph was sent to prison for refusing to have sex with the boss's wife. **That was different!**

The **three Hebrew children** refused to bow to the idol of Nebuchadnezzar when the masses of humanity did not dare defy the king's order. **They were different.**

Daniel preferred to be sent to the lion's den than to give up his morning prayer time with the true God. **He was different.**

The question that we need to answer today is this – How should we respond to persecution? The Bible is not silent on this issue and gives us some concrete answers.

Matthew 5:12 tells us that we should rejoice because we know that we are doing the right thing and that the reward we will receive from God will far outweigh any loss that we may suffer in this life.

1 Peter 4:12-16 tells us that we should be glad because we are following in the footsteps of our Savior and sharing in His sufferings.

James 1:2-4 tells us that we should consider it all joy because we know that by enduring trials and persecution we will become stronger and more patient Christians.

Matthew 10:28 and Philippians 1:28 tell us that we should not be afraid in the face of persecution, but instead we should let our commitment and lack of fear make an impression on our persecutors.

The question today is this - Are WE different from the world around us? How does your attitude rate with the Word and will of God for those whom He desires to be filled with happiness?

My prayer is that God will ignite His flame in our hearts that we may stand fast in the day of adversity and rejoice forevermore.