

## BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED

Text: Matthew 5:10-12

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

LHUMC 4/6/14

Beatitudes Series #9

- I. Introduction—Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
  - A. This beatitude has been called the result of all the others.
    1. Here's the analogy—After we've filled our shopping carts/lives with the others (we've been meek, we've been poor in spirit, we've tried to be peacemakers with pure hearts, etc.) now we are in the checkout line and we find out how much all of that costs.
    2. While this analogy may be helpful, it also makes us a little nervous because after we hear Paul's words in 2 Corinthians, we realize once again that these days, our quest towards righteousness doesn't cost as much as it used to. (You might call it the "deflation of discipleship"—deflation being the term that economists use when prices go down.)
    3. When Paul talks about being "surrounded and battered and tortured and murdered" for living out the faith—things that we haven't probably experienced and in all likelihood never will, we're afraid that the bar has been raised so high in this beatitude, that it's completely out of the stadium.
    4. And then we feel guilty because we're okay with that. Who wants to be battered and tortured for the faith?
    5. And while it is perfectly correct to praise God that we live in a time and place where we can worship and live out our discipleship without the kind of cost that Paul was talking about, at the same time, we have to confess that we'll play that freedom card for all its worth.
    6. That given the choice, most of us would even avoid the small costs that we might have to pay.
    7. Do you remember when TV stations actually signed off at night? There would be The Star Spangled Banner and then a "thought for the day". With that in mind, check out this video that is only somewhat tongue-in-cheek.

- B. And so in light of all this, perhaps the most basic question that this beatitude raises for us 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christians is “Does it even apply?”
1. Which leads to the related questions: “Are we even in the same check-out line as those Corinthian Christians with the incredible costs they had to pay?” Can we ever be as blessed as they were? Is the whole notion of persecution even in our spiritual vocabulary as it was in Jesus’ and Paul’s? Can we even expect to be given the kingdom as those who apparently have a much smaller bill to pay for living out the beatitudes?
- II. So—Does this beatitude apply? Are we still blessed these days by being persecuted because of our righteousness? A couple of thoughts:
- A. When people ask me these kinds of questions, my first response is “Go ask a teenager”. Or more specifically, “Go ask a teenager who has the guts to pursue righteousness”.
1. A teenager who is trying to do that will tell you about the cost that sometimes comes with making certain choices about what they will do and won’t do.
  2. They will tell you about persecution in the form of being ostracized and left out and spending Friday and Saturday nights at alone at home.
  3. And perhaps at a literal level that kind of persecution doesn’t match up to what Paul was experiencing, but when you are fifteen or sixteen and trying to find your place in the world and trying to figure out who your friends really are, and trying to fit in as best you can while making choices that reflect your faith, it can be painful.
  4. And it’s not all that different for us adults.
    - a) While we older folks have by and large figured out who our friends are, usually people who make the same kind of life choices as we do, there still are times where following Christ can make us less than popular to the point that we might very well experience some subtle or not-so-subtle persecution.
    - b) Maybe it happens at work or on the golf course or in the course of everyday life somehow where all of a sudden we are faced with some small “moment of truth” where we make a choice for Christ and pay the price.

B. And then there were a couple of things that Erik Kolbell noted that caught my attention.

1. First was his use of the word “eccentric”

- a) I had never thought of myself as “eccentric” until I read this chapter.
- b) I had always thought of people who were “eccentric” as being weird or strange, and I know I’m never weird or strange.
- c) His use of the word made me interested enough to look it up on dictionary.com, where I found it meant “deviating from regular practice”.
- d) When I read that, I realized his point.
- e) If we are “eccentric” from a faith perspective, it simply means that in our behavior and in how we treat other people, we deviate from regular practice.
- f) “Regular practice” being the way the world tends to operate.
- g) So when Kolbell talks about the “Risks of Eccentricity”, he’s simply talking about the risks that come from being different.
- h) When we Christians operate differently than the world does, when we display that kind of eccentricity, it can be risky business, because those who are firmly in the ways of the world typically don’t like to be pushed.
- i) And so they tend to push us back. That push-back in whatever form becomes 21<sup>st</sup> century persecution.
- j) Again, think back to junior high. How were those kids treated who were perceived as different, strange, and eccentric? Not well.
- k) So it can be for us as we live out our Christian eccentricities in a world that is so often not Christian.

2. The other thing that caught my attention was his notion that for those earliest followers of Jesus, the whole notion of persecution may have been easier to face in the sense that they had so little to lose.

- a) A typical early follower of Christ knew what it meant to be persecuted before they ever joined his movement.
- b) When you’ve already been trampled on by those above you, when you’re already poor and an outcast in your society as most of those first disciples were, what is anyone going to do

to you that can be any worse than what you've already experienced?

- c) What are you afraid of losing when you have nothing to lose?
- d) When you are not afraid of what people can do to you because you've already experienced it, that can lead to awesome acts of faith, as it did for those original followers of Jesus.
- e) Our problem is that we have so much to lose.
- f) We who have so much, who haven't had to suffer for much of anything, who are well-acquainted with and comfortable in the ways of the world, we are the ones who tend to be afraid of making waves, of bringing about that push-back.
- g) And so because of that fear, that statement by the shallow Christian that we saw on the video so often hits uncomfortably close to home.
- h) For the early Christians, they had already experienced the blessings that come from persecution.
- i) If that's what it takes to be blessed, we're not sure we want to wait in that line to find out how much it might cost because for us, it might cost a lot.

III. Which brings us to the last half of the beatitude—for theirs in the kingdom of heaven.

A. Where have we heard that before?

- 1. That would be week one—"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven."
- 2. Exactly the same promise! Interesting!
- 3. You get the idea that over these last few weeks, Jesus has brought us full circle?
- 4. It's kind of like the Beatitudes are bookended by Jesus' vision of the kingdom of heaven being given to those who have pursued the kind of righteousness described in them.

B. And remember what else we've been saying—that when Jesus talks about the "kingdom of heaven", it's not just about the "sweet-by-and-by", but the kingdom here and now, in this time and in this place.

- 1. It's a kingdom where everything is not yet perfect, where we may have to suffer and be persecuted in our attempts to make it that way.

2. But it is a place where we are blessed even in those times and situations.
- C. And now as we gather for communion, we come to the table to remember the greatest blessing of all, that Jesus has already paid the cost of living out the Beatitudes for us. It's like getting to the front of the line with your cart and finding out that it's already been paid for. How cool is that?
1. By going to the cross, he showed us not just the eternal power in persecution and how to face it with courage and strength, he also showed us the power of his body and blood given for us.
  2. So we gather here knowing that Jesus didn't just talk the Beatitudes talk, but he walked that walk, and he continues to walk with us, as we live as those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful and pure in heart, and peacemakers, and those who even today are persecuted because of our righteousness.
  3. Thanks be to God for the gift of the beatitudes and the opportunity we get to walk that beatitudes walk every day.