

## Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake

Matthew 5:6

### Overview of the Beatitudes

Our study of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) has shown us a three-fold structure. In each beatitude, there is . . . (1) a statement of **condition** (“blessed”), (2) a statement about the **character** (or actions leading from that character) of those in that condition, and (3) the **cause** for that condition

### Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake

In this eighth beatitude, Jesus declares that those who are persecuted are blessed. Of course, this surprises and puzzles us, because we don't normally put persecution and blessedness on the same thought train! Nevertheless, Jesus sees them as perfectly compatible. This will become clear to us as we consider (1) the **reality** of persecution (5:10), (2) the **reason** for persecution (5:10-11), and (3) the **response** to persecution (5:12).

#### 1. The reality of persecution (Matthew 5:10)

Jesus presents persecution not as a possibility in extreme circumstances but as a reality in normal circumstances. He speaks of *when*—not *if*—his followers are reviled and slandered.

Likewise, the rest of the New Testament reports that believers experienced persecution and teaches them to expect persecution. In the book of Acts, we read that the apostles were beaten and unfairly imprisoned (Acts 5:40; 16:37; 21:32; 2 Corinthians 11:23-25). Stephen the deacon was stoned to death because of what he preached (Acts 9:23). Jesus himself prepared his followers by telling them that the world would hate them (John 15:18-20). Peter told his readers not to think it strange when they were persecuted, and Paul wrote to Timothy that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

#### 2. The reason for persecution (Matthew 5:10-11).

But it is possible for us to wrongly assume that *any* persecution of Christians is Christian persecution. We could (wrongly!) reason as follows: Persecution involves mistreating Christians. I am a Christian being mistreated. Therefore I am being persecuted. On the contrary, Jesus is speaking of a particular kind of mistreatment: *for righteousness' sake*. He goes on to clarify that persecution is “on account of me,” and that it somehow bears resemblance to the way the Old Testament prophets were persecuted (“for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you,” 5:12). Based on this text, then, we may say that *Christian persecution is the mistreatment that arises specifically because of one's allegiance to Christ*.

This means that we must carefully distinguish what this persecution is *not*. Jesus did *not* say: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for being difficult,” or “Blessed are those who are persecuted for a particular cause,” or “Blessed are those who are persecuted for being good.” We must be careful not to expect that this blessing applies when we suffer on account of our own foolish or tactless behavior, or even for standing up for some cause, no matter how good. It might be necessary to suffer for a noble cause, but such suffering might not be properly called *Christian* persecution.

### 3. The Response to Persecution (Matthew 5:12)

But when we *do* suffer on account of Christ, how do we respond? The answer is here: “Rejoice and be glad!” In Luke’s account, we read: “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy” (Luke 6:23). It is important to bear in mind that Jesus does not tell us to rejoice *because of* the persecution; rather, the persecution becomes the catalyst for us to rejoice in something else: “for your reward is great in heaven.”

Suppose someone happily parts with \$1,000 to buy a piece of artwork. This tells you a couple things. It tells you that this piece of art is somehow worth at least \$1,000 and it tells you that the person who bought it is the sort of person who highly values such a thing. In a similar way, when you happily part with your comfort, reputation, or wealth, for Christ’s sake, you learn something that can be discovered only through that experience. You learn more about the supreme worth of Christ. You learn how thrilling it is to be assured that you know this.

The reason we can rejoice in persecution is that the worth of our reward in heaven is so much greater than the worth of all that we lose through suffering on earth. Therefore suffering with joy proves to the world that our treasure is in heaven and not on the earth, and that this treasure is greater than anything the world has to offer. The supremacy of God’s worth shines through the pain that his people will gladly bear for his name.<sup>1</sup>

When they hear stories of persecution and martyrdom, Christians often worry, “Would I be willing to suffer in that way? Would I stay faithful?” Instead of asking yourself whether you are willing to suffer in extreme ways you are not yet experiencing, ask yourself whether you are prizing Christ *right now* in the everyday things you *are* experiencing. Carefully consider whether you are really valuing the temporary fringe benefits of being associated with Christ, (respect, friendship, status, etc) or whether you value Christ for who he is in himself.

#### Questions for Discussion and Application

1. The persecution Jesus talks about here is specifically “for righteousness’ sake” and “on my account.” Name some causes that might be worth suffering for, but which could not be properly called *Christian* persecution.
2. Give some reasons why it is so important to tell the difference between *Christian* persecution and other kinds of persecution.
3. What do you think would happen to the Christian church in America if we began to experience intense persecution for our faith?
4. Explain how suffering for Christ displays the supreme worth of Christ. Can you provide examples of Christian suffering or martyrdom that have inspired you in your love for Christ?
5. As mentioned above, Christians often worry about whether they would be able to be faithful if faced with persecution. Instead of worrying, discuss what might be better approaches to cultivate faithfulness to Christ in the face of persecution.

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Baker, 1993), 103.