

This winter, I have been preaching through a sermon series that I have entitled Revival. A simple definition of revival would be an increase in the presence and power of God in both a church and a community. This series came out of a conviction that God has so much more available for us individually and as a church, but if we choose complacency, if we are fine with the status quo, if we live for the things of this world while relegating God to an afterthought, then we will miss out on all the power, the joy, the love, and the wonder that He has for us. Oh, that we would not live our lives and never experience the power and reality of our great God! May we give ourselves to Him and earnestly plead for a revival of our souls and of our church, that His kingdom would come and His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Earlier in this series, I mentioned what Richard Lovelace calls in his book *Dynamics of Spiritual Renewal* the two preconditions of revival: an increased awareness of the holiness of God, and an increased awareness of the depth of our sin. By holiness, I mean that God is transcendentally separate from us in His perfection. By sin I mean our rebellion against God, our inability to measure up to His holy standard, and our brokenness. The more we are aware of the greatness of God, the high expectations of God, the incredible promises of God, along with our own inability to live up to His expectations and the terrible effect of our sin on ourselves and others, the closer we are to revival. You want to see revival in your life and in the church? Pray for those two things – Lord, increase my awareness of your holiness and the depth of my sin.

Few places in the Bible highlight the gap between God's holiness and our sin more than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Over the past seven weeks, I've been looking at the Beatitudes, the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The beatitudes describe the blessed life, the characteristics of the man or woman who is favored by God. So far, these are the beatitudes we have looked at:

Matthew 5:3-9 - *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.*

And today we finish the Beatitudes with this:

Matthew 5:10-12 - Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It's an odd passage, isn't it? Saying that those who are persecuted are blessed? It also seems like a strange juxtaposition to call Christians to be peacemakers, and then to follow that up by talking about persecution. After all, wouldn't we expect those who are concerned about peace to be embraced and not opposed? **I mean, who would persecute Mr. Rogers?**

In order to understand this passage, we need to answer three questions:

What is persecution?

Why will we be persecuted?

Why should we rejoice at persecution?

What is persecution?

Matthew 5:10-12 - Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Persecution is hostility and mistreatment because of our faith. Jesus says we should expect a few things from other people because we follow Jesus:

They will insult you – they will disparage, mock, and verbally shame you.

They will persecute you – pursue, harass you.

They will falsely say all kinds of evil against you – early Christians were accused of cannibalism, incest, and atheism.

These are sobering words to end the Beatitudes with, to think that God's favor is upon those who are insulted, harassed, and slandered because of their commitment to Jesus. But not all of the opposition that we experience is persecution. I think it can often be helpful to understand teachings like this by looking at them on a continuum, where there are two extreme sides and the truth is somewhere in the middle.

On the one end are those who see every opposition or struggle as persecution. Every time someone insults you or says something bad about you or harasses you, you're being persecuted. But let's be honest: sometimes people might not like you because you're acting like a jerk, not because you're a Christian.

1 Peter 4:14-16 - *If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.* ¹⁵ *If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.* ¹⁶ *However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

Or sometimes, opposition that we experience may be for something that has nothing do with Jesus, like your political views or odd behaviors. Not all opposition or suffering is persecution because of righteousness. So, on one end of the continuum are those who wrongly see all opposition as persecution because of Christ, instead of recognizing that it could be because of their own bad behavior.

But on the other end of the continuum would be those who think that everyone should like them, that if someone is offended by me, then I must be doing something wrong. These are people who believe that following Jesus should mean being generally kind and loving and never causing anyone to feel offended. And that if someone insults or slanders you, then you need to change your behavior so as to not offend people. To which Jesus would say:

Luke 6:26 - *Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.*

Do we have any people-pleasers in the house? I know I am one. This is a hard but necessary verse for you. The truth is that some of you are people-pleasers. You want everyone to like you. And so, if someone is offended by what you believe, your instinct is to hide your views or tone them down or try to show that you are just like them. You need to hear this sermon today.

Remember this verse from last week about the false prophets:

Jeremiah 6:14 - *They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace.*

These are the people-pleasers. They try hard to make sure everyone feels good about themselves, but they are too cowardly to speak the hard truths of God when they are called for. They lack the spine for those moments when standing for God will mean losing the approval of the crowd. But Jesus tells us here that a real Christ-follower will NOT be liked or praised by everybody. If you are walking in faithfulness to Jesus and believing and teaching what he taught, then you will offend some people, and there will be people who will insult you, slander you, and harass you. So, if you are not persecuted, if you are not offending anyone, you need to ask whether you are walking in the fear of the opinion of others, if you are a slave to the approval of the crowd. But, to return to the other side of the continuum, if you are offending people, you need to ask yourself whether you are offending people simply because you are a jerk, or whether they are taking offense to you because of Christ in you.

Why will we be persecuted?

Matthew 5:10-12 - Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Because of righteousness. Because you live faithful to God, because your desire is to bring glory to Him and to live a holy life. Because of me, because of Jesus. Why would someone living like Jesus be mocked, harassed, or slandered?

- 1) **Your conduct may be an indictment of their sin. Your holiness may be a silent indictment of their sinful lifestyle, inciting resentment and inspiring mistreatment.**

Certainly, this is why the Pharisees resented and eventually crucified Jesus. In view of Jesus, they were exposed as frauds. We may not be God, but as people experience God's Spirit working in us, they may feel the conviction of sin.

You ever have someone apologize for cursing around you? Ever have someone mock you for not joining them in what they are doing?

1 Peter 4:1-4 - Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. ² As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but

rather for the will of God. ³ For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do-- living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. ⁴ They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.

Sometimes your commitment to God confronts people with their guilt and sin and they want to tear you down in response. They want to slander you and say untrue things about you. Jesus tells us that this should be expected by the follower of Jesus.

***2 Timothy 3:10-12** - You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings-- what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,*

2) Your message is one of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus

Remember that peacemakers are not just peaceful people who avoid conflict, they are people who work through conflict in order to make peace. And that means confronting sin. How do I bring someone to peace with God? They must be confronted with their sin and brought to repentance. Some will persecute you, insult you, etc. for calling out sin instead of just letting everyone live as they see fit.

Think of the prophets. Their job was to call the people to repentance. And they were hated and killed. The false prophets proclaimed “peace, peace” where there was no peace (*slide*). Nobody wants to hear the prophet calling people out for sin. People want to hear a positive message that affirms everyone for who they are and what they choose.

If we have a view of Jesus that is like Mr. Rogers, then we are mistaken. If we think that Jesus just affirms everyone, we haven’t read our Bibles. Jesus was the master not only at loving people but at putting his finger on those things that people needed to repent of, like the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, or the rich young ruler. There is a reason that people threw stones at him and eventually killed him. And if you are faithful to Him, you can expect similar treatment.

John 15:18-21 - *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹ They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.*

Consider some :

John 14:6 - *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

If I understand this correctly, this tells me that the only way to God is through Jesus, because our problem is not that we are bad people who need to do good, but that we are sinners in need of forgiveness. And that is only found in Jesus, who died for our sins. Do you think there are some people who might find that belief offensive? Do you find that offensive?

Or consider this verse:

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 - *Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.*

If I read the Bible correctly, it seems that the consistent witness is that God created male and female, and that marriage was designed for a man and a women, and sex was designed to be enjoyed within the context of marriage. Does that offend you? Do you think there are some people who might find that offensive?

Now, once again, there is a difference between holding to the belief that God designed sex and marriage for a specific context, and being a jerk or bigot about it. If people abuse and slander you because you're a jerk, that's one thing. But if they call you names and harass you because you believe that the Bible is God's Word and you are living your life faithful to God, then Jesus calls you blessed.

Why should we rejoice?

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12)

We are not to retaliate or sulk, or grin and bear it, or pretend we enjoy it.

1) It means your faith is genuine

1 Peter 1:6-9 - In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Bonhoeffer – “Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of his grace.”

It means you belong to Jesus, the one who suffered and died for you.

Hebrews 12:1-3 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Acts 5:40-41 - His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

2) It means you are a threat to Satan

Acts 19:13-16 - Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say,

"In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." ¹⁴ Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. ¹⁵ One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" ¹⁶ Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

It means that Satan has identified you as a follower of Jesus. He sees you as a threat. And he wants to destroy you. – Ravenhill

We are in a spiritual battle. Behind every persecution and opposition is a spiritual enemy who hates God and hates you and wants to destroy all that God loves.

Ephesians 6:10-13 - Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² 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. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

And so you should expect opposition and persecution if you belong to God. If you're not persecuted, you're not a threat.

3) It means your reward is great.

Human insult will be replaced by divine commendation

Human rejection and harassment will be replaced by divine acceptance and favor.

Earthly punishment will be replaced by eternal bliss

Romans 8:18 - I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 - Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Your reward is great in heaven. Determine your values from the perspective of eternity

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If you follow Jesus, you will be persecuted. Rejoice, because it shows your faith is genuine, that you are a threat to Satan, and because your reward in heaven will be great.