

Lesson 9

Resisting the Enemy: The Reality of Persecution

Enduring for the Sake of Righteousness

Introduction

It was Jesus who said:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. “You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you, Matthew 5.10-12.

Christians have been called to pursue peace, Romans 12.18, but often come to experience hostility. Our commitment to righteousness will stir some up, causing them to dislike us, slander us, or worse yet, hurt us physically. This is because some will be repelled by the righteousness Jesus calls for and they in turn will begin to hate Jesus and His followers. John R. Stott has said, *persecution is simply the clash between two irreconcilable value-systems.*^{xi} We can be assured that if we are true to our Lord then at some point, we will experience what Jesus speaks of in the eighth beatitude. There will be a price to be paid. *In fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,* 2 Timothy 3.12.

The importance of this final beatitude can be seen in how Jesus repeats Himself. First, He begins in the same manner as all the previous: *blessed are those . . .* But as verse 11 begins, note the change of the pronoun: *you are blessed . . . when they insult you . . . and falsely say every kind of evil against you . . .* It’s personal. Finally, its position at the end of the list of beatitudes also emphasizes its significance.

It should also be noted as we begin that the persecution in view here is not joyous. In fact, it can be downright awful, brutal, and intensely painful. Christ is not calling upon us to *enjoy* persecution. But He does teach us that joy can result from persecution. This was certainly the case with Peter and the apostles after being persecuted by the Sanhedrin. Luke records, *They went out from the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be treated shamefully on behalf of the Name,* Acts 5.41.

The Nature of Persecution

This word has several meanings, the root being “to move rapidly and decisively toward an objective,” to pursue. The form here means “to harass someone, because of beliefs,” to persecute.^{xii} Jesus further explains the persecution in v. 11: *you are blessed when they insult you.* “Insult” is a loaded word filled with powerful imagery. Generally, words associated with it are “reproach,” “revile,” “mock,” “heap insults upon,” or “reprimand.” One dictionary explains it as “to cast in one’s teeth,”^{xiii} which carries the sense of throwing insults in one’s face.^{xiv}

Obviously, persecution can involve torture and death, as history has shown. Christians were stoned, covered with pitch, and burned, wrapped in animal skins, and thrown to wild animals. They were tortured in the most painful ways. One of the obvious lessons from our passage is that we must be prepared, if necessary, to lay our life down for the cause of Christ. But persecution more often involves verbal insults, abuse, and social separation. During the first century the Roman government often made-up charges against Christians, accusing them of cannibalism, orgies, and fomenting disloyalty to Rome. As century progressed Christians were called to publicly acclaim their loyalty to the emperor through speaking an oath of allegiance. If a Christian failed to do so, they could be subjected to the confiscation of their property, be excommunicated from their guild, be imprisoned, or be executed. MacArthur mentions a Roman poet who referred to Christians as “the panting, huddling flock whose only crime was Christ.”^{xv}

Today, in the West, Christians are rarely persecuted physically. The day may be coming. However, how many Christians suffer, because of their conscientious beliefs and Christian example, through being passed over for a promotion? How many students have in the classroom because of their refusal to go along with the new secular religion of “science?” How many Christian women suffered in the workplace for their refusal to be participants in office gossip?^{xvi}

Persecution for Righteousness

The more we manifest Christ’s righteousness, the more we will share in the reproach of Christ. There is a direct correlation. When we live for Christ, we are living in opposition to the world-system created by Satan.

An Attitude We Must Come to Possess

How strong is our spiritual character? In Matthew 5.10-12, Jesus does focus on physical things we may have to endure, but it also has to do with an attitude we must come to possess. Are we willing to allow persecution to come, if necessary? The wording in v. 10 is in perfect form and could be translated as those who “allow themselves to be persecuted.” This denotes a continuous spirit that says if persecution comes, it will be endured because it is what is required of loyalty to Christ. If persecution comes, so be it. What matters is faithfulness to Christ. It is here where things get real. When the test comes, will we be ready to stand firm? It may not be easy. Compromise always promises short-term benefits, like avoiding the stigma Christianity often brings, and/or the various conflicts and problems faithfulness will bring.

“Therefore, everyone who will acknowledge me before others, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven. Don’t assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household. The one who loves a father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever doesn’t take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life because of me will find it,” Matthew 10.32-39.

The Reason for Persecution

Righteousness, in and of itself is confrontational . . . and does not need many words to confront wickedness. Every day, Abel preached a silent sermon of righteous devotion to Cain . . . causing Cain to eventually rise and kill him. Moses' decision to stand up for the persecuted Hebrew people of his heritage rather than partake in the treasures of Egypt caused him to be rejected by the elite. He is described as having to *endure* what he experienced as he fled from the king. For Moses, *the reproach of Christ was greater wealth* than anything Egypt could provide, Hebrews 11.26-27.

As you read Matthew 5.10-11, see how *the reason* for the persecution is emphasized. We are persecuted *because of righteousness*, v. 10. We are also persecuted *because of me*, v. 11. When we are like Christ, we will have trouble with those of this world. Jesus said:

“If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, the world hates you. Remember the word I spoke to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours, John 15.18-20.

Paul said:

And we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you concerning your faith, so that no one will be shaken by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. In fact, when we were with you, we told you in advance that we were going to experience affliction, and as you know, it happened, 1 Thessalonians 3.2-4.

After they had preached the gospel in that town and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch, strengthening the disciples by encouraging them to continue in the faith and by telling them, “It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” Acts 14.21-22.

Peter said:

Who then will harm you if you are devoted to what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear them or be intimidated, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do this with gentleness and reverence, keeping a clear conscience, so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, 1 Peter 3.13-18.

Being persecuted for righteous living is far different than the persecution we can bring on ourselves through hypocrisy and pride. Some display their spirituality to the point of being obnoxious. They can be rude, judgmental, insensitive, and thoughtless. These people do more harm than good. The world will easily see through a person's inconsistency when his or her performance does not match up with his or her profession.

What Keeps Many Christians from Persecution?

Obviously, we should not go out looking for trouble . . . or creating situations that bring on persecution. The passages we've read above assure us it will come . . . because righteous living is so contrary to the norms of the world. But what about the vast number of Christians who rarely, if ever experience any persecution? Could it be because so many do not look that different from the world? How many marriages among Christians end in divorce? How many struggle with various forms of immorality? How

many are caught up in pornography? And think of the more subtle things where we constantly bend our morals to blend in and not stand out so much? How many laugh at worldly humor, take in the world's entertainment with little thought about the damaging impact violence, sexuality, and abuse do to our mind? How many say nothing when God is mocked? How many are embarrassed to mention the reality of judgment and certainty of eternal death for those who do not know God? How many fail to share their faith?

Far too many Christians avoid any persecution because they have not fully committed themselves to the righteousness that is called for in the beatitudes. Living for Christ costs something.

Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

Note the specificity of the blessing. *The kingdom of heaven is theirs*, 5.10. Next Jesus says, *be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you*, 5.12. Those who suffer will not go home without a reward.

For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal, 2 Corinthians 4.17-18.

In another place, Paul said:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. There is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but to all those who have loved his appearing, 2 Timothy 4.7-8.

“God will preserve and welcome into the Kingdom those who in the conflict of life pay the cost of discipleship.”^{xvii}

Our troubles do not go unnoticed by God. He will always remain true to those who have given Him their hearts.

Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my instruction: do not fear disgrace by men, and do not be shattered by their taunts, Isaiah 51.7.

Where is your heart? Is your supreme allegiance with God?

For Discussion

1. According to Matthew 5:10-12, what did Jesus say about those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake?
2. How does John 15:18-19 describe the relationship between the world and believers?
3. In 2 Timothy 3:12, what does Paul say about living a godly life in Christ Jesus?

4. What is the significance of the eighth beatitude being placed at the end of the list of beatitudes, as mentioned in the lesson?
5. Although persecution can involve physical suffering, what are some other forms of persecution mentioned in the lesson?
6. How does the lesson describe the nature of persecution?
7. What attitude should Christians possess regarding persecution, as mentioned in the lesson?
8. According to Matthew 10:32-39, what did Jesus say about the consequences of acknowledging or denying Him before others?
9. What is the reason for persecution, as emphasized in Matthew 5:10-11 and other passages mentioned in the lesson?
10. What can prevent many Christians from experiencing persecution, and how does the lesson encourage believers to commit to righteousness?
11. What is the specific blessing mentioned in Matthew 5:10, and how is it related to the Kingdom of Heaven?
12. In what ways does the lesson encourage Christians to focus on the eternal rewards and blessings that come from enduring persecution??