

DIFFERENT than LAST TIME

a series in the beatitudes

PERSECUTED TO BE BLESSED

Shane Philip

February 28, 2021

The Crossing Church
Las Vegas, Nevada

OPENING

This week we are completing our study called **Different Than Last Time**. We have studied the portrait of a Christian disciple pleasing to God and we are challenged by the words and wisdom of Jesus. In this final week, He is speaking about persecution -- its reality, its source and how to find joy in the midst of it.

SCRIPTURE¹

Matthew 5:1-10 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and he sat down. His disciples came to him and he began to teach them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 5:11-12 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.

2 Timothy 3:12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

James 1:2-4 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

1 Peter 4:12-16 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

Matthew 5:44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

OBSERVATION

In Jesus' day, there was persecution everywhere. The Romans tolerated no insult from the Jewish people and any punishment greatly outweighed the "crime". Consider crucifixion: it was used to keep the people under rigid control as the Romans threatened it at will. Therefore, Jesus and His followers became well aware that their Kingdom philosophy could cause the religious leaders to feel threatened by it and lead to a terrible death at any time. Ultimately, of the twelve Apostles ten were martyred in various awful ways. They went forward toward their fates and didn't recant their faith. This is a powerful proof of their belief in Jesus. Today, more than 340 million Christians live in a place where they experience persecution for following Jesus. The most extreme forms are taking place in North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan and Iran. And we remember the vicious beheadings perpetrated by ISIS against Coptic Egyptians a few years ago, don't we? So, it is still a horrific world of persecution playing out today – and we need to be praying for all of those who are facing it and yet go forward bravely in the name of Jesus.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture referenced here is NIV

APPLICATION

We aren't saying that we should live in fear or have some type of victim mentality about people taking away Christians' rights in our society. What we need to acknowledge is that there is a legitimate, growing secularism around us. When our faith is brought up in public, it is often mocked, ridiculed and demeaned, and we can expect a future full of conflict and resistance. We have begun to think that if we live a life of mercy, if we are meek and have a pure heart, if we hunger for God and seek to be a peacemaker, that we will gain approval from the people around us. Jesus says the opposite -- that it will create resistance rather than approval and will lead to persecution. But He promises rewards for our faithfulness in a future Kingdom.

QUESTION: What insults, mocking or ridicule have you suffered because of your faith?

QUESTION: What types of persecution of Christians do you expect to occur in our society in the next ten years?

Some Christians have experienced a form of persecution because they have brought it on themselves. They are obnoxious or hostile with their faith. This is not biblical persecution – it is human resistance to a lack of kindness or to hostility, and that kind of attitude often damages Christianity. Peter tells us that we get no credit if we are persecuted for doing wrong – that is called punishment. We are talking about persecution for **righteousness – the commitment to inward holiness and outward justice.**

QUESTION: When have you encountered someone who caused resistance to faith in Jesus by their behavior?

QUESTION: How do you evaluate the level of righteousness in your behavior toward others?

There are different kinds of persecution: **1) Physical.** In Greek this is the idea of someone chasing after us – pursuing, arresting, throwing us in prison and killing us; **2) Verbal.** This happens when accusations are leveled at us that are not true. Jesus was accused of being crazy, of working by the power of Satan, of being a false prophet and of committing heresy. We are accused of being irrelevant and extreme. So, I guess others think that Christianity has nothing relevant to say to our current culture and that it is harmful, toxic and dangerous. If we hold a biblical view of life, marriage, or sexuality, or believe in the exclusivity of Jesus, then we are narrow-minded and bigoted; **3) Emotional.** This is causing public shame by using abusive words to cause injury or to mock viciously. We often experience this at work or at home and it can weigh us down if our families or co-workers belittle us because of our faith. Also, we ache because of the pain Jesus must feel, too. But He says we are blessed when we are insulted because of Him. Following Him will cost us. When we choose to align with Him, we will be persecuted.

QUESTION: Tell us about the times you have been persecuted physically, or verbally or emotionally. How do you respond when someone argues that the Bible is irrelevant today?

So, how should we respond to persecution? **1) Rejoice! 2) Be glad!** Really? Don't we love comfort too much to believe it is possible to rejoice in persecution? We need to recall Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: The bottom of his pyramid is food, water, shelter; then comes safety and security; next is belonging and love; and at the top is self-actualization. For a follower of Jesus, the top goal is not to be self-actualized -- it is to realize our full potential as we are formed in the likeness of Christ.

QUESTION: What does self-actualization mean?

QUESTION: When have you prayed for someone who has persecuted you in some way? How did you feel the next time you saw them?

If we are persecuted for righteousness because of Jesus, we are in good company – all of the heroes of our faith went through the same thing and God used their circumstances to produce a faith that was mature and complete -- not lacking.

QUESTION: Name five biblical heroes who were persecuted. What do their lives teach you about persecution?

Persecution exposes the authenticity of our confidence in God. It demonstrates the truth of our faith; it produces perseverance; it holds up under pressure; it makes our faith stronger and enduring. We discover something about us – what we are pretending to believe, what our parents taught us to believe, and what we really believe. We also discover something about our faith and our relationship with our Heavenly Father. We discover how much we really love Him and are willing to sacrifice for Him.

QUESTION: What have you found out about what you really believe?

We are blessed because His Kingdom has come for us. We are blessed because we are not alone. We are blessed because our Father in Heaven comforts us. We are blessed because Jesus has shown mercy to us. We are blessed because, in spite of our bad choices, the best is yet to come. We are blessed because there is nothing more satisfying and fulfilling than to be completely surrendered to Him. And we are blessed because He has invited us in to be different than last time.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we pray for the persecuted saints throughout the world. Help them to be strong and courageous. Thank You for Your many blessings. We are grateful for Your mercy, grace, forgiveness and never-ending love and care. Help us to respond by surrendering to Your will as we try to emulate the Christian behavior You taught us in Your Beatitudes. In Jesus' name. Amen.

QUESTIONS

QUESTION: What insults, mocking or ridicule have you suffered because of your faith?

QUESTION: What types of persecution of Christians do you expect to occur in our society in the next ten years?

QUESTION: When have you encountered someone who caused resistance to faith in Jesus by their behavior?

QUESTION: How do you evaluate the level of righteousness in your behavior toward others?

QUESTION: Tell us about the times you have been persecuted physically, or verbally or emotionally. How do you respond when someone argues that the Bible is irrelevant today?

QUESTION: What do you consider to be the main goal of your life today? In what ways are you becoming more Like Christ?

QUESTION: What does self-actualization mean?

QUESTION: When have you prayed for someone who has persecuted you in some way? How did you feel the next time you saw them?

QUESTION: Name five biblical heroes who were persecuted. What do their lives teach you about persecution?

QUESTION: What have you found out about what you really believe?