

Now You're Getting It: Persecuted

Matthew 5: 10-12

2 Timothy 3: 10-17



As a pastor in a Methodist church, I believe there's a maximum number of weeks that can pass between mentions of the name John Wesley. As I fear I may be nearing that number, this week I will rectify that. Nobody can now turn me in for a lack of Wesley-isms.

In his biography of John Wesley titled *Crossing the Divide*, author Jake Hansen tells of many of the hardships Wesley faced during his ministry.

At the age of five, he nearly died in a fire likely started by someone who disagreed with his father's support of the Church of England.

Later in life, Wesley's own theological stances would attract similar attention. From Hanson's biography:

"The angry mobs could often be vicious, chasing Wesley and his companions with clubs, cleavers, or any other potentially deadly instrument at hand. He was often pelted with stones, smeared with dirt, grabbed by his 'soft hair'—as one of the rabble once noted in surprise—and chased into houses, which they threatened to burn or tear down."

This would become a regular occurrence for him to the point that he grew to *expect* this harsh treatment.

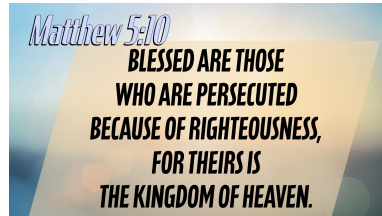
Case in point: after a set of visits to various towns in England that took several days to complete, he was riding his horse along the English countryside when he realized something odd. He had been welcomed in every town and nobody had said a cross word to him, let alone thrown something at him.

Sounds like a good trip, right? Not for John. For him, it must have meant he was doing something wrong. He immediately got off his horse and fell to the ground and prayed, "If I have sinned, Lord, show me where so I might confess it to Thee at once."

Now, the story goes that at that same moment there was a farmer who saw all this going on from the other side of the hedge along the road. Recognizing Wesley as a Methodist preacher, the farmer thought he'd fix him and he picked up a nearby brick from near the hedge and threw it at Wesley.

Fortunately, the brick missed. But it came near enough that Wesley felt he got the answer to his prayer and said, "Thank God, it's all right!" He then mounted his horse and went on his way.

Now, that is a funny little story. But I think it also tells us a very important truth about what we should expect when we start to really get what it means to be a Kingdom People.



Certainly, Jesus would have told us something similar. In fact, he did tell us that. Let's read from Matthew 5:10:

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I'm going to include the next two verses as well, because Jesus continues in verses 11 and 12:

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.

In our journey through the Beatitudes, I think we've come to see that the qualities of a people who are getting it are usually the opposite of the qualities we would expect.

While we know we have worth because we have a God who loves us, we found that we also need to admit that on our own we poor in spirit.

While we are a joyous people, we also need the capacity to mourn. That mourning brings us closer to a God that comforts us.

We do have strength, especially in Christ, but we aren't called to show off our strength. Instead, we're supposed to show gentleness.

We like to feel complete, but yet we need to keep a hunger and a thirst for living in harmony with God and His creation. Only then will we truly be filled.

Humans are great at keeping a record of wrongs, but if we want God to wipe away our wrongs, we first have to be willing to do the same for others.

We think we have a way to improve upon ourselves. But the only way to a pure heart is to be made pure through Christ.

We hope for peace across the entire world, and we wait for the day that happens. But it's our job not to wait for peace but to *make* peace wherever we go peace and with whomever we meet.



And after all of that, we would expect things to go well for us. We would normally expect smooth sailing from here. If we get all these other things right, we would think that the rest will fall into place, that we will be respected and life will be simple.

But that's not the case, is it? Instead, we should expect to be persecuted. We should expect insults. We should expect people to say false things about us.

That feels like stuff that should happen when we're getting it wrong. And yet, Jesus says that's actually what happens when we're getting it right. When we're finally getting it, that's when the persecution comes in.

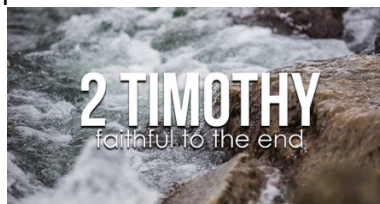
Now, sometimes, I think we take this to mean what it doesn't. This isn't a license to tick people off and call it persecution when they rightfully put us in our place.

But it is a reminder than when we do our very best to tell others the Good News of Jesus Christ...

...when we tell of how God stepped into our world to give Himself up for our sins, was crucified, died, and was buried, but then rose on the third day to defeat death and wash our sins away...

...and when we do that with love and compassion and meekness and gentleness, and when we continue to walk in the way that has been made known in all the other Beatitudes...

Jesus tells us that even then, perhaps especially then, we will experience persecution for doing these things. We will experience persecution when we do everything right.



And if that doesn't seem fair, I would turn us back to our first reading in Paul's letter to Timothy. Paul recounts to Timothy all the times and places he experienced terrible things for telling others of Christ.

And what is Paul's message to Timothy? Because it's not, "Look at all the bad stuff that happened to me as a result of the life I chose. Poor me!"

His advice to Timothy is two-fold:

First, Paul tells Timothy that *God will carry you through*.

Second, Paul tells Timothy to *stay the course*.



A couple once asked their friends to join them on a rafting trip down the rapids. They all wore their waterproof vests, took provisions, and they learned the greatest rule of whitewater rafting: never let go of the raft.

No matter what happens, no matter how rough it gets, no matter how inviting the shoreline looks or how easy it seems to jump off, never let go of the raft. Stay the course. The only way to survive is to go through.

And so off they went. They hit the rocks. The raft began to weave and pitch from one side to another. They were thrown between the rapids, and they approached a waterfall with fear and trepidation.

Fear gripped them, and they longed to jump out. But the voice of their coach stayed in their heads: "No matter what happens, never let go of the raft."

"Keep your eyes ahead."

"Focus on the path."

"Stay the course."

For a moment, it felt like the raft was flying aimlessly through the air. They gripped the sides of the raft and then felt the impact as the raft plunged into the white waters. Their ride was fast and furious.

But then, at last, the waters calmed and they were streaming down river toward their destination. They made it through because they stayed the course.



I believe that's the key. We are on a path to becoming a Kingdom people. We need to continue down that path. We need to stay that course. Getting off our path because things don't go as we expect serves nobody.

We can stay the course because we know God will deliver us from all troubles, just as Paul said He did for him. He calls us into service to Him, knowing that we will face things like this.

He tells us to stay the course, to keep our eyes ahead, and to go through the rough waters.

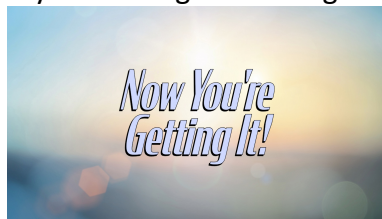
He tells us that because He can carry us through.

And just like we started this journey through the Beatitudes, so we finish it: "...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

I've said it over and over again these last eight weeks, the Beatitudes represent us becoming a Kingdom People. These are the qualities we develop over time as we allow Christ into our lives, as we give our lives over to him and allow him to mold them to his own image.

And when we do that, we experience what that kingdom of heaven is truly like. We get to experience that now, here on earth. We get to participate this kingdom today! Jesus doesn't say "theirs *will be* the kingdom of heaven." He says "theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven."

While our experience in that kingdom as it exists in this world that knows sin will involve things like mourning and persecution, we will also know what it is to become a people that live always and only for God, a people that truly thirst for good and right things, a people that love mercy.



This has been a long journey through what amounts to just 10 verses that serve as just the opening to the Sermon on the Mount.

But if you're anything like me, spending an entire week on each Beatitude has helped me to see better what Christ is trying to do with me. It's helped bring some clarity to the Kingdom People God is molding us into.

While we may see all of that a little bit clearer, I'm sure it also feels like there's more work to be done. I'm sure we have seen some of the ways we're still resisting that work of Christ in our lives.

But you know what? I think that's good. Because if we're able to see that, I think that means one thing:

We're finally starting to get it.

And all of God's Kingdom People said...