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The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-12 - The Character of the Kingdom
Part Nine: Blessed Are Those Who Have Been Persecuted - Matthew 5:10-12

By Tal Davis

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Let's face it, most of us have no idea what it is to actually suffer persecution for our faith. Oh, we may have been ridiculed at school or at work because we read the Bible or pray. But I dare say, few of us really know what real persecution is like. In America, we can still pray, read the Bible, or go to church (no matter what kind) basically anywhere and anytime we want to.

Nonetheless, it has become somewhat more difficult to express our faith in public, as the U.S. Supreme Court and a few state governments have restricted some religious practices from public institutions. Also, Christians can be prosecuted in many jurisdictions for refusing to provide business services for activities they deem immoral. Restrictions are becoming even more narrowly and tightly enforced in Canada.

Many colleges and universities are placing stricter regulations on religious organizations, requiring them to include members who do not share their doctrinal and/or moral beliefs. Even Christian colleges and universities are being forced to compromise their student ethics codes or face loss of government grants and scholarship dollars. This

kinds of subtle intimidation is likely to increase in the coming years in this country and others, as the influence of secularism grows.

So, while we in North America can safely say we enjoy a high degree of religious freedom and security, such is not the case in much of the world. Recently, Open Doors, a Christian research organization that monitors religious persecution around the world, released its annual *WORLD WATCH LIST* for 2019. That report is subtitled *The 50 countries where it's most dangerous to follow Jesus*. The report ranks those 50 nations as to the level of danger faced by Christians from government persecution and/or other anti-Christian forces.

The top ten in order for 2018 were: 1. North Korea; 2. Afghanistan; 3. Somalia; 4. Libya ; 5. Pakistan; 6. Sudan; 7. Eritrea; 8. Yemen; 9. Iran; 10. India. Perhaps the most telling aspect of the list is that of the 50 worst offenders, 35 are predominantly Muslim countries. Other significant countries on the list are China (#27), Mexico (#39), and Russia (#41). In one Egyptian city (#16 on the list), evangelical Christians are a forced to conduct their worship services in a garbage dump.

A few other of their important findings for 2018 include the following: The number of Christians in the world currently experiencing harsh persecution is 245 million (30 million more than the previous report). That is about 11% of all Christians in the world. 4,136 believers were killed for their faith (about 11 a day). 2,625 were arrested and imprisoned. 1266 churches were intentionally destroyed or damaged. (To download the full report go to www.opendoorsusa.org/2019-world-watch-list-report)

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Given these present realities, the words of Jesus in this passage, His final Beatitude, are especially relevant. Though we American believers may not feel the full impact of His blessing and promise, millions of our brothers and sisters in Christ are struggling and suffering as we sit here comfortably secure. However, if some trends continue, someday we may need to claim this principle ourselves.

All that being said, let's analyze exactly what Jesus said and meant in this Beatitude. Actually it is sort of a double blessing. First he states, *"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness."* Soon after, he reiterates it by saying, *"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me."*

The verb translated "persecuted," in verse 10, in Greek is *dediognenoi* and literally means "having been persecuted." The verb "insult you" is *oneidisosin*, and can also be translated as "revile you" or "reproach you." "Persecute you," in verse 11, is *dioxosin* and is literally "shall persecute you." So what did Jesus mean by these terms and how can we be blessed by them?

Let's begin by analyzing what Jesus is not saying in this Beatitude. First, He is not saying that we will be blessed anytime people mistreat or offend us. In recent years there has grown a cultural mindset that no one should ever say or do anything offensive or hurtful to another person. In most ways that is a good thing. We should not condone physical bullying or offensive language, especially involving children. However, it seems that many people today have extremely thin-skinned. They are offended by even the mildest of criticisms or invectives, even when meant in jest or

when done unintentionally. In any case, that is not what Jesus is referring to here.

He is also not saying we will be blessed just because someone tells a lie about us. We all, at one time or another, have had someone say something about us that was not true. Kids, especially, are prone to place the blame on someone else if they get caught doing something wrong. I recall as teenager, a guy I knew in school was accosted by the police for a minor offense. Someone who was there told me that when the boy was asked his name, he gave the officer my name. Fortunately, nothing ever came of it. But his lie could have been a lot of trouble for me and my parents. No matter what, I would not have been blessed by it.

So what does Jesus mean by being persecuted? He is obviously referring to being wrongly mistreated, beaten, jailed, or even killed. Being insulted means being verbally abused, denounced, or accused unjustly. Now, these things happen to people all the time for many reasons. The question we need to address is this: For what reasons will we be persecuted and insulted wherein Jesus says we will be blessed?

He gives two reasons in these verses. First, in verse 10, he says, "for the sake of righteousness." He means coming under attack for doing what is right in God's sight. Thus, if we see society engaging in, or endorsing, activities that are contrary to what the Bible teaches and we take a stand, we may expect to be reviled. In the 20th century, many Christian leaders challenged the morality of racial segregation. Some of them were physically and verbally assailed for taking a stand. Some southern white pastors lost their jobs.

We could list a host of other such moral issues that, if Christians stand

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for what is right, could cost them their liberty, sources of income, even physical harm. A few ethical matters Christians face today include the right to life, sexual immorality, legalizing drugs, legalizing gambling, pornography, and so forth. In some cases we may be harassed or vilified for our stands.

But more importantly, in verse 11, Jesus focuses on the most praiseworthy reason for possible persecution, insults, and lies. He says they are, "because of Me." A believer who takes a public stand for Christ and is actively sharing the Gospel can expect to get, and will get, opposition. The Gospel is by its very nature offensive to many people. Why? Because it challenges their self assurance that they are doing good and believe the right things. They do not want to hear that they are sinners and will be held accountable for the things they do. Also, when we assert that salvation is only available through faith in Jesus Christ, it stings those who deny Him or don't want to hear that they are sinners in need of a Savior.

In many cases around the world, as we illustrated in the introduction to this article, the attacks may come from government powers or anti-Christian cultural forces. Most American Christians probably think religious persecution and martyrdom ended with the Middle-ages. Not so, as the statistics we cited demonstrate. Millions of Christians are, at this moment, suffering extreme hardships or even the threat of imprisonment and death. Of course, we need to pray for them.

We also need to encourage our U.S. government to exert whatever influence it has to get offending countries to reform their unjust laws or to protect their Christian citizens from attacks. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly passed the Uni-

versal Declaration of Human Rights which was supposed to codify specific rights worldwide, including religious freedom. Clearly that declaration has been ignored in many parts of the world.

The key point is, if we or believers in other lands are persecuted, it should be for Christ's sake. We cannot expect God to bless us if we are persecuted or prosecuted for being obnoxious or arbitrarily breaking the law. As we pointed out in the last installment, Paul told his Roman readers:

For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. (Romans 13:3-5)

He also advised: *If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.* (Romans 12:18)

Jesus does not want us to go around looking for, or stirring up, trouble in order to be persecuted. We should, as far as possible, avoid it. However, when the Gospel is preached, opposition is inevitable to one degree or another.

Thankfully, the antagonism is still at a low level in America. But there is no reason to assume it will always stay that way – especially as the secular culture moves further away from what the Bible teaches. Evangelical Christians are already being labeled in the media as bigots, haters, intolerant, etc. for advocating biblical standards for marriage and sexual behavior. Also, greater restrictions in

the U.S. are being imposed on when and where believers can pray, preach, or teach the Bible. It is even worse in Europe and Canada. It will likely get worse here.

The danger, as we said before, is that Christian churches, businesses, and educational institutions, in order to maintain their legal and academic status, or to continue receiving government grants, will compromise their moral and curriculum standards. This has already happened in the cases of several historically evangelical colleges which have altered their student ethical codes to accommodate societies changing unbiblical moral values.

All that being said, Jesus assures those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, and because of Him, will be blessed. He closes this Beatitude with this promise: *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*"

Jesus guarantees those who suffer in His name (like the Hebrew prophets) will be greatly rewarded. Note, He does not say it will necessarily be in this life. He says it will be in heaven. The millions of faithful Christians throughout history who have endured pain and even death probably did not feel very blessed while it was happening. But our ultimate blessing does not come in this life. It will be in the life to come. The 4,136 believers who were martyred for their faith last year will receive a great reward in heaven. They will be among the millions described in the book of Revelation standing at the throne of God.

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands ... Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:9, 13-17)

Thus, Jesus concludes The Beatitudes – the first section of the Sermon on the Mount. He says that if we obey and live out the characteristics of the Beatitudes, we will be blessed. Hopefully to some extent in this world, but ultimately blessed with eternal life in the world to come. In the next and last installment of this series we will review the meanings of the Beatitudes and assess their applications for our lives.

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