

**2023 Theme - Focus On What Matters**  
**Sermon Series - Focus on The Heart**  
**Sermon Title - Blessed are the Persecuted**  
**Sermon Text - Matthew 5:10-12**  
**Sermon Presenter - Pastor Larry**

“Come Holy Spirit, move in power, ignite my heart with Your holy fire  
Show me the Father, show me the Son, revive my soul again, O Spirit come”

When life comes at you hard and heavy, as a believer in Jesus Christ, you have the blessing of knowing The Holy Spirit is bringing the very presence of God into your situation because The Holy Spirit, He is the Spirit of the Almighty God literally living and residing in you! Jesus gave His life to pay the price for you and me to be reconciled with the Father and to be able to have His presence with us through His Holy Spirit! That’s good news, because as followers of Jesus we are not exempt from difficulties in life, and may even encounter additional difficulties because of the persecution we might experience due to our faith in Him. Let’s pray and we’ll tackle one of the toughest realities of a true Christ follower’s life, persecution! Prayer

One of the things I love most about Jesus was His honesty with His followers. He didn’t promise us a life of ease and prosperity as the world defines ease and prosperity. In fact He said this...

John 16:33 “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

While followers of Christ may not have it easy in terms of being free from trials and tribulations, we are however at ease in our hearts, our minds and souls! And while we may not have the prosperity that some enjoy when it comes to the world’s treasures, we have riches and blessings the world cannot give us and which the world has no understanding! Jesus said this about the persecution His followers would face in our text for today...

Matthew 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Matthew 5:12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Why did Jesus say blessed are those who are persecuted? I mean surely He was kidding right? R.T. Kendall puts it this way...

“Yes This beatitude is an incongruous combination—“happy are the persecuted.” It is almost talking about a hot snowball. And yet James said we should consider it “pure joy” when this happens to us (James 1:2). How can happiness and persecution be put together? Surely they don’t fit. Can one be happy in jail? “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign

land?" asked the psalmist (Psalm 137:4). And yet Paul and Silas were singing hymns to God in prison in the middle of the night (Acts 16:25)!

Kendall, R. T.. The Sermon on the Mount (p. 62). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

What possible good could come from persecution? More than you might think! I believe Jesus said you are blessed when you are persecuted for at least four reasons...

**Because you did the right thing!**  
**Because you did it for the right person!**  
**Because you will be rewarded!**  
**Because you're in good company!**

So let's look at the first reason you are blessed when you are persecuted.

**You're blessed because you did the right thing!**

Matthew 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Last week we talked about how Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers, and now He says those who are persecuted are blessed. Why would He say this when it seems that if you are being persecuted it's only logical to conclude that your peacemaking efforts have failed! Right? So what's going on here? Why are peacemakers blessed? Why are the persecuted blessed? Because they chose to take the high road and do the right thing, the righteous thing regardless of the personal costs! You see when a peacemaker has done all that they can do to make peace, but the other side, refuses, and goes on the attack, attacking your character, what you believe, and what you stand for, you can still have peace in your heart because you know that you've really tried to bring about peace and restore the relationship. You can sleep at night knowing you've done what is right, as the word of God says "as far as it depends on you be at peace with everyone!" And you can be at peace and be blessed because you don't fear those who can destroy the body but have no control over the soul! You have a healthy respect and fear for the one who could destroy the soul for an eternity, but who offers grace, and mercy to anyone who is willing to confess their sin and call upon the name of the Lord for salvation! In fact Jesus said this...

Matthew 10:28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Matthew 10:29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care.

Matthew 10:30 And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

Matthew 10:31 So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows...

**And what does Jesus mean when He says kingdom of heaven?**

The Kingdom of God is where God rules. So we know the Kingdom of God exists in Heaven because God absolutely rules there. We also know that He is God of heaven and earth, but in this world He has given us choices as to whether or not we allow Him to rule in our lives. That in no way diminishes the Sovereignty of God! In His sovereignty He made the choice to give us choice! He made us in His image and thereby gave us free will. So we have the choice of whether or not to allow Jesus to be our Savior and give us salvation, but we also have the choice after salvation to decide whether or not we will allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives on a daily basis. You've heard me say this many times before, but accepting Jesus as Savior is a one and done, but letting Him be our Lord is a daily decision! Only when we submit to His Lordship are we truly living in the Kingdom of God. A person can be saved, having accepted Jesus as their Savior by admitting they are a sinner, believing Jesus died on the cross to be their Savior and then asking Jesus to be their Savior by calling upon His Name and making a commitment to Him. However, we must still make the decision daily whether or not we're going to live in the Kingdom of Heaven by allowing Jesus to be the Lord of our choices, decisions, actions and attitudes! And this happens in a believer's life when they consciously allow the Holy Spirit to be in control of their lives. That's called being filled with the Spirit and that's not you getting more of the Spirit but allowing the Spirit to get more of you. Letting Him be a part of every aspect of your life. Work life, school life, family life, hobby life, entertainment life, etc.

When you start living for Jesus and building God's kingdom, get ready for a battle! It's game on, because Satan is not gonna be happy. When you start winning people to Jesus, transforming lives, saving marriages, teaching the little children the truth of God's Word, giving teenagers purpose in life by letting them know they have the capacity and the opportunity to change their world, and when you begin transforming communities, Satan's gonna fight back. And you know I talked to you about my plans for the next phase and chapter of ministry that Debbie and I feel led to accomplish? I'm not naive, it's not gonna be easy! Satan's gonna fight. If I were going to just retire and spend my time recreating, he might let me off the hook. But here's the good news...

Romans 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

Romans 8:36 As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

Romans 8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Romans 8:38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

Romans 8:39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So we have to remember those promises of God's Word when Satan fights us and causes us to undergo persecution! God is God Almighty and as such certainly has the power to just stop the persecution, but God sees a bigger picture and a bigger Kingdom goal than we can see. We

have to decide to trust that while not all things are good, God can make good come out of all things and circumstances. In fact, you know one of my favorite verses says it so clearly....

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

I like the way Frank Stagg put it in the Broadman Commentary...

“Persecution or abuse as such is not a blessing, but there is blessing for Christians in their suffering for Christ (Phil. 1:29)...

Philippians 1:29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him,

And this brings us to the second reason you are blessed when you are persecuted.

### **You're blessed because you're living for the right person!**

Matthew 5:11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

If you are persecuted because of Jesus, that's a noble and even a glorious thing. Notice I didn't say it's an enjoyable thing! Paul never enjoyed the suffering he endured because of his decision to follow Christ but he knew all that Christ had endured for him and so he counted it a high honor to suffer persecution for the sake of Christ. At the end of the message we're going to talk about Paul's testimony, but listen to what he said in Philippians 3:7-11...

Philippians 3:7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

Philippians 3:8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ

Philippians 3:9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

Philippians 3:10 I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

Philippians 3:11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

If things you have done for Christ were done the right way and have brought about persecution, then you are participating in His sufferings! However, we must consider something else that Dr. Stagg says...

“The blessedness holds only when one suffers in the service of Christ and righteousness and when the charges of evil doing are false. One may be opposed because he is wrong, wicked, or simply a disturber.”

Frank Stagg, “Matthew,” in *Matthew–Mark*, ed. Clifton J. Allen, Broadman Bible Commentary (Broadman Press, 1969), 106.

So we can only consider persecution to be persecution when we are truly being persecuted because of our faithfulness to Christ and doing what is right! We should never claim persecution in the Name of Jesus if the persecution we are going through is because of our own unrighteousness or the fact that we are not being Christlike or kind in our interactions with others. I’ve talked about this recently, but I’ve met some pretty obnoxious Christians who were turning people away from the kingdom of God and falsely claiming persecution. God knows the truth, and I love the way Dr. Stagg put it, sometimes we are persecuted because we are being a “disturber!” But here’s something I feel we all go through from time to time: When we are doing all we can to do the right thing for the right reasons and persecution follows, is it not human nature to cry out, “Why me Lord? Why this? What did I do to deserve this? Why now?” Jon Walker wrote a book called *Costly Grace: A Contemporary View of Bonhoeffer's The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he states the following...

“As the righteousness of Jesus flows through you, you will be persecuted. This is part of the cost of your union with Christ. Fallen Thinking says: ‘I’m being persecuted: God, why are You letting this happen to me? What God is telling me doesn’t make sense: I have the facts; I need to make a decision.’ Kingdom Thinking says: ‘I am being persecuted: God, this hurts, but I know You have a loving nature, and I know this is the result of the life of Christ flowing through me. This is the cost of grace, but I also know this shows I will share in Christ’s inheritance. God, this doesn’t make sense to me, but I will let you interpret the circumstances. You have a better perspective than me, and there may be something I am not seeing.’ Isn’t that what faith must be? Trusting God, even if we don’t agree... We’re to step into the will of God, and stay there, trusting He has our best interest at heart...”

I love that: “We’re to step into the will of God, and stay there, trusting He has our best interest at heart...” Do you trust that God has your best interest in mind or have you decided that persecution for the cause of Christ is just not worth it and you just can’t see the benefits? Well, let me say this: if you follow Christ and do certain righteous things only for what you can selfishly get out of the relationship, then I can assure you that you will be one of the first to walk away from Jesus when the persecution comes. Because your motivation for following Jesus was self-serving! You know some people want all the amenities of a relationship but none of the responsibilities. It’s like some folks in their human relationships: they’re in it for what’s in it for them and if they don’t feel like they’re not coming out on top, they will abandon the relationship, especially if they feel like they’re having to give more than they’re getting. But I want you to know this: when you fall in love with Jesus because you’ve seen what He’s already done for you on the old rugged cross, then you’ll have a burning desire to serve Him regardless of any extra rewards! You’ll be so grateful for the forgiveness, grace, mercy, salvation and freedom from sin

that you'll gladly suffer persecution for your Lord, Savior and best friend Jesus. R.T. Kendall said this in his commentary on the sermon on the mount...

"The truth is, there is no spiritual victory, no state of grace, no level of vindication, no sphere of wealth or prosperity that will exempt you from the threat of persecution if you are a true follower of Jesus Christ. If it is an easy life you want, look elsewhere. If Christianity has been presented to you as the "good life" because of the promise of health and wealth, you have not been given the full picture of the Christian life."

Kendall, R. T.. The Sermon on the Mount (p. 61). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

He goes on to say this...

"Persecution will present a challenge to your whole being, your entire personality and, of course, your faith. It therefore challenges you spiritually, emotionally and, in a worst-case scenario, physically. Persecution at any level never becomes fun.

Kendall, R. T.. The Sermon on the Mount (p. 61). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

But make no mistake about it, for those who truly love Jesus for who He is and what He's done, and not just for His blessings, they will come to realize that even when you are persecuted...

### **You are blessed because you will be rewarded!**

Matthew 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Matthew 5:12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...

### **Rewards in heaven**

We can't even imagine how amazing our reward will be in heaven for being faithful to live in God's Kingdom on the earth. Of course, you may feel as I do, just being able to make it to heaven by the grace and mercy of God shown to me in Jesus' death on the cross is enough for me! I don't need any other rewards. My reward will be getting to thank Jesus in person. Back before the song "I Can Only Imagine" came out, I was co-writing with a friend of mine who worked for Brentwood Music. Last I heard he's with Curb Records. He had come to do a concert for our single adults at the church I served. He stayed overnight so we could write together. I had told him I had an idea for a song and here was the only line I had...

"When I get to heaven and see Jesus will I run for His embrace or will I fall on my face?"

We sat in the chapel of First Baptist Pleasant Grove Alabama around the baby grand piano and he played the music. I don't remember the other lyrics we experimented with that day, but we agreed to continue writing long distance via email. A few months later I heard the song "I Can Only Imagine," and thought he had finished our song and went ahead and published it. I called him and he laughed and said, "I guess the Lord got tired of waiting on us to write the song, so He gave it to the band Mercy Me!" But think about it...

"When you get to heaven and see Jesus will you run for His embrace or will you fall on your face?" For me, I can only imagine what I will do. Paul gives us an insight into how amazing it will be...

1 Corinthians 2:9 However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—

And then Paul told his young apprentice, Timothy this...

2 Timothy 4:6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near.

2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

### **Rewards here on earth**

The disciples had some questions for Jesus and of course it was Peter who spoke up...

Mark 10:28 Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!"

Mark 10:29 "Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel

Mark 10:30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.

Mark 10:31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

And what in the world would He be talking about when He said to the disciples who had left family and their jobs to follow Jesus, "You will receive a hundred times as much in this present age: Homes, brothers or sisters, mother or father or children or fields?" I believe Jesus was talking about the fact that they were now a part of the larger family of God and that they would be cared for by that larger family with all of its resources. And while we don't know any details, I'm quite sure that there was a way God provided for their families during the time they left to follow Jesus. But the point is God provides for His children. We'll see that later in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. But don't dismiss the rewards of being a disciple of Jesus and being used by Him to transform this old world which is so upside down and mixed up and lost! Sure we're going to

be persecuted and spoken of in condescending ways by people who consider our commitment to a Jewish Carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus, outdated and foolish. St. Peter the apostle said this...

1 Peter 4:12 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.

1 Peter 4:13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

1 Peter 4:14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

1 Peter 4:15 If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.

1 Peter 4:16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

Some of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are undergoing unspeakable persecution that we can't even fathom, understand what a powerful reward it is to have the very presence of the Creator of the Universe living in their hearts and lives by way of His Holy Spirit! They know they have access to God's wisdom, and His power 24/7/365! We should understand this as well! And this brings us to our last point. When you are persecuted you are...

### **Blessed because you're in good company!**

Matthew 5:12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Of course Jesus was thinking about some of the Old Testament prophets, but we can also think about John the Baptist who was beheaded by King Herod. We can think about Jesus Himself and how He was constantly persecuted by the religious leaders of His day. They tried to discredit Him at every turn. They sought to kill Him on numerous occasions and finally did so by nailing Him to the cross! Jesus had told them about His coming persecution and also warned them of the trials they would face. He said...

John 15:18 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

John 15:19 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.

John 15:20 Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

John 15:21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.

And now I want to end with an illustration from God's Word and a closing statement...



Think about Stephen who was stoned to death! And yet, Stephen, the way he handled things, could not have imagined the good that would come from his death. He had no way of knowing what one young man in the crowd would someday become! Stephen had been arrested on false charges, just like Jesus. And while the charges were being read God's Word tells us this...

Acts 6:15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

The high priest then asked Stephen if the charges were true. Stephen knew the only hope for those people was the truth of the gospel. He spoke to them of their history and God's attempts to reach them from Abraham to Moses. It was a powerful message, and at the end, Stephen, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit said...

Acts 7:51 "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

Acts 7:52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—

Acts 7:53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

Acts 7:54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

Acts 7:55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Acts 7:56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Acts 7:57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,

Acts 7:58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Acts 7:59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Acts 7:60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 8:1 And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Acts 8:1 And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Acts 8:2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.

Acts 8:3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

But I believe Saul, also known as Paul, couldn't get the words or the face of Stephen out of his mind. I believe the Holy Spirit used that to bring about great conviction to Paul's heart until one day as Paul was on the road to Damascus this happened...

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest

Acts 9:2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Acts 9:3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

Acts 9:4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Acts 9:5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

God sent Paul to a believer named Ananias and this happened...

Acts 9:17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Acts 9:18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,

Acts 9:19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

Acts 9:20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Acts 9:21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?"

Acts 9:22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

Paul would end up being used by God to write up to half of the New Testament! I believe Stephen would consider that a huge blessing that came from his persecution! And as Paul would later write...

2 Corinthians 4:8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

2 Corinthians 4:9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

2 Corinthians 4:10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

Let's pray!