

Sunday, November 15, 2020 | Kingdom Manifesto

Matthew 5:10-12 | Persecuted Pilgrims

All the way back in week one, I said that the Beatitudes are a “messianic manifesto” that sets forth the *characteristics* already inherent in members of the Kingdom.¹ They are ***not*** a set of moral ethics which gives a person permission to enter the Kingdom of God. They are ***not*** a list of requirements we can work through to earn approval for entry. ***No***. Entry into the Kingdom is based on faith alone by grace alone in Christ alone (cf. Eph. 2:8-9). This means that the Beatitudes are features, ***not*** demands; they are “*now that’s*” and ***not*** “*how-tos*.”

By now, you've realized that these eight qualities make us stick out like a sore thumb. And there are three things we all know about people who stick out. First, the world is *exceptionally* cruel to those who are different. Second, they are *expressly* cruel to those who disagree with the world's characteristics. And lastly, they are *extraordinarily* cruel to those who seek to dismantle the world's invested interests.² Those who are different from the “normal”—that is, those who disagree with the established norms and then seek to dismantle normative systems—these kinds of people are seen as a threat to this world's order. And when someone is seen as a threat, the only rational thing to do is destroy them.

For instance, *Open Doors* is an organization that compiles data on the persecution of Evangelicals. They reported that from Oct. 31, 2017, to Nov. 1, 2018, one and nine Christians throughout the world were experiencing “high levels” of persecutions.³ That same study found that over four thousand believers were killed for their faith throughout those two years. And today, eleven countries (mostly those with a strong Islamic presence) are extremely hostile to Christianity. This is staggering when you consider that six years ago, North Korea was the only one that would've been considered “extremely hostile to Christians” as it is and has remained at the top for more than eighteen years.

Thankfully, we may not be killed for our faith in the West, but we are the exception to the rule, not the standard. From a historical perspective and a global perspective, Christians are more likely to die from persecution than old age.

¹ France, R. T., *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2007), p. 156.

² France (2007), p. 169-170.

³ Lowry, Lindy, “Christian Persecution by the Numbers,” January 16, 2019, *Open Doors*, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/christian-persecution-by-the-numbers/>, [accessed, November 15, 2020].

Though these targets may be poor in spirit, and though they mourn for their own failures, and even though they are meek, and while they want nothing more than for justice to have her day, whose default is mercy, and whose hearts are pure, who vie for peace in impossible situations, and though these abnormal pilgrims are nothing but a blessing on a cursed world, they are still seen as a threat. Their ideas are too dangerous. Their message undercuts everything the world has to offer. Such people cannot be allowed to walk freely. So, the world does the only thing it can do: it persecutes, oppresses, and torments these Kingdom Pilgrims.

This is because the Kingdom Pilgrim is not “a hermit engaged in the solitary pursuit of holiness but as one engaged in society.”⁴ We are not separatists distinguished by their disengagement with the world. Instead, we are ambassadors who actively try to reshape the world around us. Not surprisingly, this comes at a cost. The world does not want to be shaped by any hand, which is not their own. So, they lash out. They bite back in an attempt to stave off God’s perfect will. In so doing, they literally kill the messengers: *us*. This is why Jesus ends the Beatitudes by addressing religious discrimination. He wants His disciples to expect persecution and not praise.⁵

So, since persecution is inevitable, how should we react when it comes? How should we feel? What should we do? Well, before we answer those questions, we must first read through the beatitudes. It is time to memorize.

READ: Matthew 5:1-12 (NKJV)

¹ And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. ² Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, For theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed *are* those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.

⁵ Blessed *are* the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled.

⁷ Blessed *are* the merciful,
For they shall obtain mercy.

⁸ Blessed *are* the pure in heart,

⁴ France (2007), p. 170.

⁵ Turner, David, *Matthew*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2008), p. 153.

For they shall see God.

⁹ Blessed *are* the peacemakers,

For they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed *are* those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus says, "**Blessed *are* those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."**

Up until now, the beatitudes could be easily applied to any religious, particularly Jewish person. All seven Beatitudes are the kinds of qualities that any pious person would try to emulate. *However*, this eighth and final Beatitude is unquestionably addressed to followers of Christ.⁶ Meaning, Jesus is making a clear and stark distinction between two groups at that time: there is persecution for another's sake, and then there is persecution for righteousness' sake. And Jesus was addressing the sort of persecution that arises in the context of his own specific following and ***not*** a Jewish one. In fact, if it wasn't for what Jesus said next, most would've thought the "righteousness' sake" he was referring to was Israel's righteousness.

Instead, Jesus further clarifies this last Beatitude by saying,

READ: Matthew 5:11-12 (NKJV)

¹¹ Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Persecution is given companions in these verses. Where persecution is a general term that can refer to physical assaults on an individual to broad social discrimination, "revile," and false sayings are specifically verbal attacks.⁷

And, bear in mind, these attacks are not personal. They come as a result of our association to another. Jesus says they will persecute us for his sake. In fact, "my sake" and "righteousness' sake" are clearly referencing each other. They define each other. Meaning, Christ's sake is

⁶ Keener, Craig S., *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1999), p. 171.

⁷ France (2007), p. 172.

righteousness' sake, and righteousness' sake is Christ's sake.⁸ To do anything for one is to do something for the other. When we try to bring about God's justice in this world, we are not only suffering for what is unquestionably right, but we are also suffering for being connected to God and His Son. And do not underestimate how offensive "righteousness" or "rightness" can be to those who do not know God.⁹ Understand that "proper conduct before God"¹⁰ is by its nature invasive and distasteful to those who do not have proper conduct before God. It is salt to those who hate salt and light to those who love darkness (cf. Mat. 5:13-14).

Now it isn't unusual that Jesus would warn about persecution. Jewish rabbis would readily warn their students that they would be persecuted for their belief in God. However, they would never have implied that their students would suffer because they were their students. The rabbi's name would not have been significant enough to warrant such attention. But here, Jesus is warning about the persecution that arises because of his name.¹¹ In fact, throughout all four Gospels, this point is reiterated **twenty** times (cf. Mat. 5:10-11; 10:18, 22, 39; 16:25; 19:12, 29; 24:9; Mar. 4:17; 8:35; 10:29; 13:9, 13; Lu. 6:22; 9:24; 18:29; 21:12, 17; Jn. 15:21). Additionally, in the rest of the NT, persecution for Christ's sake is echoed at least **thirteen** times (cf. Ac. 5:41; 9:16; Rom. 8:36; 1 Cor. 4:10; 2 Cor. 4:5, 11; 12:10; Phil. 1:29; Col. 1:24; 2 Thess. 1:3-5; 2 Tim. 1:8-12; 3:12; 1 Pet. 3:13-17).

This is a crucial application of the famous "I am the Vine, you are the branches" discourse.

READ: John 15:18-21 (NKJV)

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before *it hated* you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said 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 keep yours also. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me.

The world hates Christians not because of who they are as people but because of the principles and the Person they represent. The world hates God, and so it hates God's children. The world

⁸ Carson D.A., *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew and Mark, Volume 9, Revised Edition, General Editors Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Academic, 2010), p. 167.

⁹ Carson (2010), p. 165.

¹⁰ Przybylski, Benno, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought*, Society for New Testament Studies: Monograph Series, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 99.

¹¹ Keener (1999), p. 171.

hated Christ, and so it hates Christians. The world hates righteousness, and so it hates those who are righteous. We are three times the target.

Interestingly, Paul talks about persecution in such casual terms, you would think he was talking about taking a walk or merely breathing rather than suffering for Christ's sake.

READ: 2 Timothy 3:12 (NKJV)

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

But notice, this is persecution because of our connection to God and His Son. Meaning, we must ensure that persecution results from our Christ-like deeds and not due to our flesh-like deeds.¹² The Christian suffers not for an ill-spoken word or unlawful action but for the Divine approval, which rests upon them (cf. Gen. 37:4).

The entire backbone of 1 Peter centers on suffering for Christ's sake. They were different. They suffered as oddities of a society. Being a Christian made them stick out like a sore thumb.¹³ But Peter wanted to make sure they suffered only because of their association with Christ and not because of the poor behavior.

READ: 1 Peter 3:13-17 (NKJV)

¹³ And who *is* he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, *you are* blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled." ¹⁵ But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; ¹⁶ having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. ¹⁷ For *it is* better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

READ: 1 Peter 4:12-16 (NKJV)

¹² Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; ¹³ but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. ¹⁴ If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part, He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a

¹² Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1992), p. 101.

¹³ France (2007), p. 172.

busybody in other people's matters. ¹⁶ Yet if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

Peter makes it abundantly clear that we can suffer in this life, and it can be for the wrong reasons. The Christian mustn't allow his poor behavior to reflect poorly on the cause of Christ. He must strive for good conduct, and if he should suffer because of it, he can be proud that he has glorified God in such a way that has merited abuse from the world.

This why Jesus says that persecution is cause for rejoicing and great happiness (cf. Mat. 5:12). The persecution made by human hands acts as a divine seal of approval. They are the marks of a true disciple. All doubt about a man's allegiance utterly evaporates when he can look at the scars resulting from his service to God. They are not cause for sorrow or regret but cause for celebration and delight. Every mark of suffering in life is a mark in our favor in the next life.

READ: Matthew 6:19-21 (NKJV)

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The sufferings of this world are the treasures of heaven.

Now, it is at this point that I need to make something abundantly clear. Jesus is not saying we should take pleasure in religious persecutions themselves. That would be ridiculous. The Christian is not a masochist. Instead, we are to draw comfort from the implications of the persecutions.¹⁴ Jesus says, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven." Do not rejoice because you are given pain but rejoice because you will be greatly rewarded for your pain. These sufferings indicate Christ's work in our lives, and they are an assurance of future blessings in the Kingdom.¹⁵ In fact, the stripes of our suffering earn us recognition by way of five specific crowns: "victor's crown" - 1 Cor. 9:25-27; "crown of rejoicing" - 1 Thess. 2:19; "crown of righteousness" - 2 Tim. 4:8; "crown of life" - Ja. 1:12 & Rev. 2:10; "crown of glory" - 1 Pet. 5:4.¹⁶

¹⁴ France (2007), p. 172.

¹⁵ Turner (2008), p. 153.

¹⁶ Jeremiah, David, "What Kind of Rewards Will Believers Receive in Heaven?", *DavidJeremiah.blog*, <https://davidjeremiah.blog/what-kind-of-rewards-will-believers-receive-in-heaven/>, [accessed, November 12, 2020].

These “rewards” and “treasure” are so great that they are not one-to-one compensations for the grievances we may incur while in God’s service.

READ: Romans 8:18 (NKJV)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

There is no meager reward for those who suffer for Christ’s sake.¹⁷ There is only a great reward, a reward with no comparison in this life, which defies all earthly explication and explanation.

What's more, our actions make us guilty by associations with some fantastic people of old. You see, not only does this persecution mark you as one of God’s own, which is quite remarkable in and of itself. And not only does this oppression for Christ’s sake guarantee a glorious reward in the future. But being tormented for the Kingdom also promotes us into the ranks of the very prophets themselves (cf. Jer. 26:20-23; 1 Ki. 18:4; Neh. 9:26).¹⁸ We are in good company when we are afflicted because of our association with Christ.¹⁹

Jesus said, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” That is high praise to be considered the equals of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and even John the Baptist (cf. Mat. 11:11). In our mission to the world, we are like the prophets of old (cf. Jer. 26:10-11).

For instance, in an abbreviated account of the fall of Jerusalem in 2 Chronicles, the proverbial last straw which precipitated God's judgments was that the people “mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets...” (2 Chr. 36:16). Those words seem eerily similar to, “they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.”

So, what’s the takeaway?

The Christian is a persecuted pilgrim, but great their reward in their own Kingdom.

Whether in Israel then or in our world today, any who proclaim the Good News of God are treated poorly. “Those who have spoken out for God have always been liable to the violent reprisals of the ungodly.”²⁰ This treatment is a badge of honor; it distinguishes the disciples from the non-disciples.²¹ And just as John the Baptist was a voice of one crying in the

¹⁷ Morris (1992), p. 103.

¹⁸ Keener (1999), p. 171.

¹⁹ Morris (1992), p. 102.

²⁰ France (2007), p. 173.

²¹ Turner (2008), p. 154.

wilderness of Israel, so are we the voices crying in the wilderness of our world (cf. Jn. 1:23). And just as they persecuted the prophets, they will crush us. But just as the prophets earned a great reward, so too will we.

So, what's the series takeaway?

THE BEATITUDES AND THE ANTI-BEATITUDES

“Blessed are the **poor** in spirit,
for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are those who **mourn**,
for they shall be comforted.”

“Blessed are the **meek**,
for they shall inherit the earth.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

“Blessed are the **merciful**,
for they shall obtain mercy.”

“Blessed are the **pure** in heart,
for they shall see God.”

“Blessed are the **peacemakers**,
for they shall be called sons of God.”

“Blessed are those who are **persecuted
for righteousness' sake**, for theirs is
the Kingdom of heaven.”

Blessed are the **materialistic**,
for theirs is the Kingdom of earth

Blessed are those who **do not repent**,
for ignorance is bliss.

Blessed are the **strongest**,
for their might makes right.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
anarchy, for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the **vengeful**,
for they shall obtain vengeance.

Blessed are the **cynical**,
for they shall see what they want to see.

Blessed are the **warmongers**,
for they shall be called the sons of victory.

Blessed are those who are **praised
for wrongdoing**, for theirs is the
Kingdom of earth.