

“No Pain, No Gain”

Matthew 5:10-12

Christ Presbyterian Church
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In God’s family, a lot of heroes have come before us. I think of Protestant Christians in the sixteenth century, and how they had to suffer for the faith. In France and in other places across Europe, many of them died at the stake, burned to death for their faith. The French Protestants, called Huguenots, had a phrase for their suffering. They called it “living under the cross,” because it was following Jesus in his suffering. They even had a symbol for it, a Maltese cross with a teardrop, representing the persecutions of the follower of Jesus. It reminded them that the Christian life means bearing your cross.

Today’s message is about persecution. Paul wrote,

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (1 Tim. 3:12).

Jesus tells us the same thing: if he was treated badly, we can expect the same treatment as his followers. He said,

Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you, too. (John 15:20).

The first four beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-6) have to do with our emptiness and God’s grace, and they conclude with “righteousness”—“blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

The second group of four blessings (Matthew 5:7-10) have to do with our fullness, and how we should respond to God’s grace, and they conclude with “righteousness,” too—“blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

In other words, in our emptiness, we hunger. And God fills that hunger with mercy, purity, and peacemaking. Those characteristics describe righteousness, and sometimes that generates persecution.

There’s such a divide between the way of the world and the way of God that conflict is inevitable sometimes. And we see that happening around the world, in places like Afghanistan, the Middle East, China, and North Africa. Millions of Christians live under pressure from the state. Even in Europe, there’s pressure against outspoken Christian faith. Eventually, if you live like Jesus, you’ll face some kind of pressure or opposition. Anyone who takes seriously following Jesus is going to face opposition in some way or another, at one time or another. So, what does Jesus teach us about that opposition?

First, not all persecution is blessed.

Jesus talks about a particular kind of condition:

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

Then he adds,

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

It's common in Hebrew thought to repeat an idea with different words. It happens all over the Psalms, for instance. So the idea of persecution is repeated and explained. So, "blessed are those who are persecuted" parallels "blessed are you when people insult you and falsely say...evil against you." Those mean the same thing. The second phrase expands on the first.

Then, when Jesus said "because of righteousness," that thought is repeated and amplified by the phrase, "because of me." *Jesus* is our righteousness before God, the perfect representation of God. When we're mistreated for doing right, that's for his sake. It's honoring *him*.

That means, not all persecution is blessed. Peter writes,

For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God (1 Peter 2:19-20).

Peter's saying, if you suffer because you're being a jerk, that's not blessed. The kind of persecution that's blessed is persecution for righteousness, for Jesus' sake.

Second, persecution that is blessed is when we're connected with Christ.

You're blessed when you're persecuted for righteousness' sake—for being like Jesus. Righteousness is being in a right relationship with Jesus. It's not some kind of abstract idealism. It always has to do with what we do for him, and how we're becoming like him. Jesus says, "apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5c), and so mercy and purity and peacemaking are always about a relationship with Jesus. It's what he's like himself. When we pray, we represent that connection to Jesus with the words "in Jesus' name." It's more than just a magical phrase that makes our prayers be answered. How do I know? Jesus tells us to ask "in his name," but when he gives an actual prayer, the Lord's Prayer, he doesn't add that phrase. Then, he puts it in other places: he refers to welcoming little children "in my name" (Matthew 18:5), gives you a cup of water in my name" (Mark 9:41), and he says "whenever two or three are gathered in my " (Matthew 18:20). That means in his authority, acting as his representative.

The book of Acts tells us that when the apostles Peter and the apostles were flogged by the Sanhedrin, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy of suffering for Jesus (Acts 5:41-42). That's because they were participating, in a sense, in Jesus' sufferings (1 Peter 4:13) and proving that they really belonged to him. Paul teaches that same thing when he wrote,

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with , if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:17)

But why would our belonging to Jesus make anyone else unhappy? Why would that cause offense, and generate persecution? Because Jesus is the great pivot, the decisive dividing line. It's why he warned people he came to bring division. Ultimately, people are either for him or against him. If you're committed to serving yourself, you'll be angry at someone who is committed to Christ. If people love something that's wrong, then they get upset by someone who insists on right.

Whenever you're serious about following the Lord's commands in the Sermon on the Mount, you start to see how people can suffer for righteousness' sake. Think about how this can happen:

- If you put Jesus first, people might call you a fanatic.
- If you support the traditional family, they might call you a bigot.
- If you decide to be sexually pure, they might call you puritanical or judgmental.
- If you turn the other cheek, they might call you a weakling.
- If you love your enemy, they might call you unpatriotic.

Isn't that what happened to Martin Luther King, Jr.? He took seriously Jesus' call to be agents of reconciliation, and to return good for evil. He was a peacemaker like Jesus told us to be, and he paid the price.

One time my brother was driving in a city and he saw a man beating someone and people just standing around watching, so he pulled the car over, jumped out, leaving the car door open, ran over, and pulled him off. All of a sudden, both people turned on him and starting pounding him. That's paying the price for doing the right thing!

It's like Proverbs says,

“Bloodthirsty men hate a man of integrity
and seek to kill the upright” (Prov. 29:11).

So, when the kingdom clashes with the world, people can change or they can chop you down, depending on whether they love the light or love the darkness.

Third, if you're *never* persecuted, ask why.

If we never cause a reaction, it might be that we're not doing much to share Jesus with others.

Paul talks about this movement in his letter to the Corinthians. He says,

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God (2 Cor. 2:13-17).

Paul is using the image of a Roman general after winning a battle. The general would bring prisoners of war into the city in a parade before the emperor. The prisoners would be brought to make them slaves or to kill them. When the incense drifted through the crowd, it would remind the winners of victory, and the losers of death. Kind of like after a football game when somebody lights up a cigar. If your team has won, you can say, hey, it's all part of the celebration. If it's the other team who won, though, that's all like rubbing your face in defeat.

Paul's saying, people are going to react differently, and it comes down to if they're moving toward the light or away from it, and we're the catalyst that triggers the reaction. If there's no reaction at all, the catalyst hasn't made contact.

Another thing going on might be that the person is quietly moving toward the light, or toward the darkness. Ultimately, one movement or the other is going on.

So, we've got to look at ourselves. Maybe I'm more worried about looking cool, or about my own personal space, or about not making waves, and I'm not even bringing the catalyst of the gospel into contact with another person's life.

Fourth, persecution is blessed when it leads to something better.

So, how is persecution blessed? Jesus is saying, when it happens, we ought to be happy? What! How are we supposed to be happy when people hate us and we get hurt or killed? After all, that's what he's talking about, because that's what happened to the prophets. He even tells about it in his teaching about the end times:

Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. (Matt. 24:9)

Persecution will come, but the pain is preparing us for something better. God is shaping us and using even the pressure for our ultimate good. The writer of Hebrews said,

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ...No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:7, 11)

Jesus says persecution for the right reason is blessed because he knows the incredible joy that waits for us in heaven that far outweighs anything we face down here. "Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven." And this side of heaven there is a kind of miracle where you can experience joy even in the middle of suffering. The world doesn't get it, but it happens nonetheless, and I know some of you know what that's about. That's the deep mystery of faith. Like Paul says,

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

So, we should be happy when we suffer for Jesus, because we're going to get a great reward. "Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven!"

That tells me I should want the rewards of heaven more than I want the rewards of this world. I should build up my treasure there rather than here on earth. I should set my heart on heaven, so that going home to be with Jesus is reason for joy. Like Jesus, when he endured the pain of the cross, it was for the joy set before him.

The only way we can possibly be happy in the sadness and loss in this present darkness, when all we have is eventually taken from us down here, is if we've learned to love up there more.

God has a purpose in suffering.

Here's one thing: contemplate sometimes what other Christians have had to endure. You might read a biography of what a Christian hero had to go through, and how their faith stayed strong. The the old Puritans used to read *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. Sometimes it's hard to see what people have suffered for Jesus, but it also strengthens our faith to see how they stayed faithful, and how "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). Or, read Hebrews 11, and look at what other righteous people had to suffer:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground (Heb. 11:36-38).

So, if you're never persecuted, ask yourself why.

Because not all persecuted people are righteous, but all righteous people are persecuted sooner or later.

But *persecuted* is *blessed* when it leads to something better. We've got a home in heaven that's going to make all earth's tears worthwhile one day.

We've got nothing to fear. Remember the acronym, F.E.A.R...it stands for "False Evidence Appearing Real." The reality is, we have a treasure in heaven that far outweighs any price we pay on earth. So, do what it takes to cultivate a longing for heaven.