

Sermon Series: The Beatitudes  
Matthew 5:10-12  
Daniel 3:13-18; 1 Peter 4:12-19

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### *Being Like Christ*

Matthew 5: 1-12:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

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

**'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'**

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Today we complete our portrait of Christian discipleship as we encounter it in the beginning section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount known as the Beatitudes. Our journey began with our being face-to-face with God recognizing our own spiritual emptiness and being humbled to mourn over sin in our lives and our world leading us to approach God and others in meekness and gentleness. Out of that need we are led to hunger and thirst for a restored relationship with God and others, desiring all to be returned to the intentions God has for his creation. We then are led to relate to others with mercy, simplicity of heart and purpose in our words and actions, and the desire to seek peace in God's name in all dimensions of our lives and world.

As we shared in today's recitation of the Beatitudes we read Jesus' final double Beatitude, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake..." and "Blessed are **you** when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account..." (Matt. 5:10-11) **WAIT A MINUTE! STOP THE PRESSES!** That's not how the saga is supposed to conclude! These disciples who are humble and meek and sorrowful over sin, who hunger and thirst for God's righteousness and reach out to others in mercy and peace and purity of heart are supposed to live happily ever after as God's faithful disciples! Proverbs 4:18 tells us "The path of the righteous is like the light of the dawn which shines brighter and brighter until full day." Where does this persecution deal enter the picture?

Well, Jesus did tell his disciples just before his own death "In the world you face persecution. But take courage, I have conquered the world." (John 16:33) As he prepared them for his departure, something they still didn't truly understand at that time, he reminded them that "Servants are not greater than their master. If they persecute me, they will persecute you." (John 15:20) They had watched as Jesus met opposition, ridicule, and outright scorn for his preaching, teaching, and miraculous works. They had walked with Jesus as he set his face toward Jerusalem and reminded them they were going up to the city where Jesus would be betrayed, condemned, and crucified before their very eyes. And Jesus was the embodiment of all the principles he had taught his disciples on the Mount by the Sea of Galilee at the beginning of his ministry with them. If it could happen to him, perhaps it could happen to anyone.

It would not be long before his disciples found this promise to be true in their own experiences.<sup>1</sup> The only apostle whose death is recorded in the Bible is James in Acts 12:2 where it tells us that King Herod had James "put to death with the sword," a likely reference to beheading. The circumstances of the deaths of the other apostles are related through church tradition, so we should not put too much weight on other accounts, although they are often repeated in very similar manner. The most commonly accepted tradition is that of the death of Peter being crucified upside-down on an X-shaped cross in Rome fulfilling Jesus' prophecy (John 21:28). The following are the most popular "traditions" concerning the deaths of the other apostles:

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<sup>1</sup> Information from [www.gotquestions.org/apostles-die](http://www.gotquestions.org/apostles-die)

- **Matthew** suffered martyrdom in Ethiopia, killed by a sword wound.
- **John** faced persecution when he was boiled in a huge basin of boiling oil during a wave of persecution in Rome. However, as tradition has it, he was miraculously delivered from death and sentenced to labor in the mines on the prison island of Patmos, where he experienced the prophetic visions that led to the book of Revelation. He was later freed and returned to what is now modern-day Turkey. He died an old man, the only apostle to die peacefully though he certainly faced his share of persecution on account of his faith.
- **James** the brother of Jesus (not officially an apostle) was leader of the church in Jerusalem. He was thrown off the southwest pinnacle of the Temple (over a hundred feet down) when he refused to deny his faith in Christ. When his persecutors discovered he had barely survived the fall he was beaten to death. This is thought to be the same pinnacle where Jesus was tempted by Satan to throw himself down on the rocks below.
- **Bartholomew**, also known as **Nathanael**, was a missionary to Asia in what is now present day Turkey. He was martyred for his preaching of the Gospel in Armenia, being flayed to death with a whip.
- **Andrew** was crucified on an X-shaped cross in Greece. After being whipped by seven soldiers according to tradition, he was tied to the cross with cords to prolong the agony. His followers reported that when he was led toward the cross he said “I have long desired and expected this happy hour. The cross has been consecrated by the body of Christ hanging on it.”
- **Thomas**, the doubting apostle, was stabbed with a spear in India during one of his missionary trips to help establish the church there.
- **Matthias**, the apostle chosen to replace Judas Iscariot, was stoned and beheaded.
- **The Apostle Paul** was tortured and then beheaded by the evil Roman Emperor Nero in 67 A.D. during a widespread persecution of Christians in that city.

There are traditions regarding the other apostles as well but none with enough reliable historical evidence and support. How right Jesus was that if the world persecuted him, it would also persecute those identified with him by living out the teachings he had proclaimed.

John Stott has said that “Persecution is the clash between two irreconcilable value systems...a token of genuineness, a certificate of Christian authenticity.”<sup>2</sup> The Beatitudes are the essence of the value system found in God’s rule of righteousness as it is meant to be lived out in our lives and world. This is who we are called to be as disciples of Jesus. This is what God’s rule and reign in our world is meant to accomplish. The more we live according to these principles, the more we become like Jesus ourselves, never perfectly or completely of course, but more and more nonetheless as we live the life of faith. And the more we become like Jesus, the more likely we will be at odds with the value system represented in the world around us. It’s the same idea we see if you ask Yankee and Red Sox fans to co-exist with one another, or Steelers and Browns fans in the world of pro football, or dare I say it, like Red Wings and Penguins fans in the world of hockey. We witnessed in person at the Civic Arena in Pittsburgh last year the chant of Penguins fans (good-natured, of course!) to Red Wings fans on the balcony of a hotel across the street: “Jump! Jump! Jump!” It’s why individuals who stood bravely for peace or reconciliation between factions or groups have been martyred through the years – people like Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr. or Oscar Romero or Mahatma Gandhi. It’s why the Scriptures tell us that Jesus made peace through the blood of the cross (Colossians 1:20).

And these are not just things of past history as we read of Daniel’s friends who refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s statue in worship to remain faithful to the one true God. In the past several months, right down the road in Dearborn, four Christians seeking to share their faith were arrested while simply having open and peaceful discussions about their Christian faith at the Arab International Festival. They reported later “No one was screamed at, no one was accused. There was not a disrespectful tone toward Islam. There were not verbal attacks against Islam or against Mohammed. It was simply a theological discussion, which in the United States we should be free to do.” None of those involved in the conversations appeared to have called police but rather a convention volunteer standing nearby. The individuals were arrested for disorderly conduct even though a video they were shooting showed nothing but respectful conversation taking place.

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<sup>2</sup> John Stott, [Sermon on the Mount](#), *The Bible Speaks Today Series*, p. 52.

Then there is the account of the Hindu extremists who attacked a group of Christians at a prayer meeting in Madhya Pradesh, India on April 17<sup>th</sup> of this year. The radicals disrupted the meeting of more than 400 Christians and began destroying Bibles and other property. They attacked the Christians with sticks and iron rods, accusing them of participating in forcible conversions. During the attack, Amit Gilbert, a master of divinity student, fell into an open well, hit his head on the well's outer wall, and drowned. One other person injured sustained a broken back and remains in critical condition. Simply do an internet search with the phrase "persecution of Christians" and you will find many stories of persecution facing followers of Jesus around the world. One wonders how much longer we will go before facing similar situations right here in our own country.

Yet, in the face of these realities and knowing full well the road Jesus himself faced in his earthly ministry, Jesus told those disciples then and tells us now, "Rejoice and be glad!" when faced with the reality of insults and attacks and persecution on his account. Why this call to joy in the face of such horror? Persecution in the name of Jesus because we are reflecting his teaching and spirit and practices is **confirmation** of our identity in Christ, the certificate of authenticity as Stott called it for our faith identity. "For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" Jesus said. Faithful believers facing persecution for their faith continue a long tradition of those who have had the courage to stand for God in the face of all the world throws at them to derail them from their faith journey. In Luke's version of Jesus' words he adds a word of caution – "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." (Luke 6:26) Persecution in the name of Jesus is an **affirmation** of our true home and calling – our reward in heaven! In this world we will always experience the clash in values between God's kingdom values and the world's human values. Our true and final home is not in this world but in the eternal presence of the living God surrounded by the communion of faithful saints who have gone before us. While we are here on this earth we live our life of faith to the fullest and work for the reconciliation of the world knowing full well it will often not be an easy road. But we await the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan and the new heavens and new earth it will bring. And finally, persecution in Jesus' name is an **exhortation** to press on in the faith like Jesus and the apostles and all the faithful disciples who

have travelled the road of faith before us. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on. Revelation pictures the souls of those who have been martyred for the word and work of God resting in heaven and awaiting the others who will soon be killed for their faith as they have been themselves. So we press on – entrusting ourselves to the hands of our faithful God and doing good as Peter exhorts in his letter to the persecuted believers of his day.

That is exactly what one of the great saints of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did in living out his Christian faith during the dark days of Nazi terror and domination. Dietrich Bonhoeffer lived out his Christian faith in the face of persecution and opposition from within and outside the church of his day, refusing to flee to the West for safety and refusing to stand by and watch evil triumph unhindered. For this devotion he paid the ultimate price as he was killed by personal order of Heinrich Himmler on August 9, 1945 only days before his concentration camp was liberated by the Allies. Hear his words, written years before his ultimate sacrifice, but echoing down to our day of following faithful in the path of Jesus Christ:

The fellowship of the Beatitudes is the fellowship of the Crucified. With him it has lost all, and with him it has found all. From the cross there comes the call “blessed, blessed.” The last beatitude is addressed directly to the disciples, for only then can they understand it, “Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven: for so they persecuted the prophets before you.”...The curse, the deadly persecution and evil slander confirm the blessed state of the disciples in their fellowship with Jesus. It could not be otherwise, for these meek strangers are bound to provoke the world to insult, violence, and slander. Too menacing, too loud are the voices of these poor meek men, too patient and too silent their suffering. Too powerful are the testimony of their poverty and their endurance of the wrongs of this world. This is fatal, and so, while Jesus calls them blessed, the world cries “Away with them, away with them!” Yes, but whither? To the kingdom of heaven. “Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven.” There shall the poor be seen in the halls of joy. With his own hand God wipes away the tears from the eyes of those who had mourned upon earth. He feeds the hungry at this Banquet. There stand the scarred bodies of the martyrs, now glorified and clothed in the white robes of eternal righteousness instead of the rags of sin and repentance. The echoes of this joy reach across the little flock as it stands beneath the cross, and they hear Jesus saying: “Blessed are ye!”<sup>3</sup>

Amen, Brother Dietrich, Amen! Let us pray...

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, pp. 127-28