

The Glory of Persecution

The Beatitudes

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Our Scripture text for our message this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew 5 and I invite you to turn there with me for our text which we started last time and now we will come and finish it here this morning. Matthew 5:10-12. These are Jesus' words on the persecution of true believers in Christ and they are a critical text for us. Matthew 5:10-12 as we begin.

10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Now, beloved, it's a blessed thing from the Lord for us to be able to consider this text at this particular time in life and in our society when there is a comparative measure of peace that attends our lives. We need to take advantage of that opportunity and study persecution and consider it when we're not suffering the effects of it. To be able to think deeply when somebody is pursuing you and persecuting you as happened in the early church, it's difficult to take the time to step back and meditate on a way that goes deep into your heart. Here in a time of prosperity and relative peace where there is not so much persecution hitting upon us, this is an opportunity for us to drink from the well and to prepare ourselves for what might lie ahead and indeed for the lesser forms of persecution that we go through on a day-to-day basis.

Beloved, one of the things about the nature of the persecution that Jesus describes here and one of the reasons that we need this text so desperately to take root in our hearts is this, if we respond in a fleshly way, if we respond just immediately to the false accusations or the insults or the lies and the slander that people bring against us because of our devotion to Christ, in a fleshly way you might want to respond with hurt feelings or with anger or at a protestation against the injustice of it all. "How could they say such a thing? I'm a nice guy, why are they doing this to me?" And to respond in a completely wrong way to it as if we were unmindful of the spiritual dynamic that was going on. You see, what the blessing is for us here is that if we settle these things in our heart now, we

are in a position to respond rightly when the time comes and we are suffering in the name of Christ and so I want us to take advantage of that here today and think through the nature of what it means to be a true believer.

You know, we said last time that it is a false premise to think that you could be a true Christian and also be popular with the world. Jesus said just the opposite in John 15 as we saw last time. He said that, "If the world hated Me, understand that it will hate you also. If it persecuted Me, it will persecute you also." You see, we must understand that to truly follow Christ means that we will truly pay a price for it. There will be relational costs. There may be vocational costs to it. There may be a price of blood for others in the world, maybe one day for us as well. We must understand that there is a cost to following Christ; that there is no such thing as following the one who suffered in his flesh, there is no such thing as following the one who gave his blood at the cost of the hatred of this world and to think that we could walk through feeling no effects from following him at all. And one of the marks that you can find, one of the things that you can ask in your heart is to test the reality of your devotion to Christ, to say, "Am I willing to pay a price to follow Christ? Do I love him, am I content to know him enough that I'm willing for the world to inflict a price on me for my devotion to him?" You see, Christ doesn't call us to simply a rose-lined path with rose petals and cream to drink along the way. He calls us to take up our cross and to follow after him, to deny ourselves, and one of the ways that self-denial comes into reality is when we face persecution.

So as we introduced this passage last time, we introduced six questions; we asked three of the first six questions that I think we see coming up from this passage. And just by way of very brief and quick review for you, last time at length we considered the first question: will true Christians be persecuted? Will true Christians be persecuted? And we said that the answer to that question is yes, without exception, because the Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy, he said, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Jesus said, "If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you." So we expect some form of persecution. We expect some form of alienation from the world. We expect in accordance with the teaching of Christ that sometimes even our nearest and dearest of flesh and blood will oppose us, resist us, reject us, separate from us as a result of our faith in Christ.

You know, sometimes the funny thing of it is that this will come at the hands of those who profess to know Christ as well; that they'll think they're rendering service to Christ when they reject those who are truly his. The point for today simply is this: is that in some manner or form, persecution is inevitable so when you find that there is a relational cost to following Christ, you should not think immediately that you've done something wrong or something has gone wrong. You should step back and say, "Oh, this is what Scripture told me to expect, that there would be times when people would dislike me and be hostile toward me as a result of my faith in Christ." And knowing the reality of it, you're no longer thrown off and into a spiritual tailspin as a result.

The second question that we asked and answered last time was this: when will persecution come? When will persecution come? And we said that there is no way to

know. Sometimes it will just surprise us out of nowhere. Sometimes you can see the storm clouds building on the horizon. But look at chapter 5, verse 11 with me as we just dive into the text a little bit by way of reminder of what we looked at last time. Jesus said in verse 11, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me." What he's saying there and what the sense of the passage is, is that whenever this happens, have this response. It's not an indication that persecution will be the unbroken pattern of life and that we'll always suffer under a heavy hand of opposition. That's not what Scripture tells us to expect, but it says that there will be times in life where this comes. There will be times in the life of a church where it will come, where there is a cost paid for following Christ.

So we recognize this in advance. We understand that it will come and when it comes we are not surprised and quite importantly, beloved, when it comes, we're not intimidated, and when it comes, we're not afraid, and when it comes, we don't step back and shrink back in fear simply because opposition has come. Can you imagine a soldier trained in battle, trained to go out as a Marine or to go out as a Green Beret or to go out as a Navy SEAL trained for the fiercest of battles and when battle comes, to shrink back in fear? To say, "I didn't sign up for this. No one told me about this." This would be nonsense. The soldier is trained and prepared for battle. This is why he exists. Well, in the spiritual realm, we realize that when opposition comes, when people call on us to denounce the truth, to renounce righteousness, to stop following Christ, or to betray the things that society says are right when Scripture says that they are wrong, no, we don't back down from that. This is why we exist. We exist to live for righteousness. We exist to live for Christ. We exist to be faithful to him, especially when the conflict comes. That is when the valor of a soldier is proven and so we realize when we understand that persecution is inevitable, when we recognize that it will come, then we are prepared to respond with courage and arise to duty when that comes. So we thank the Lord for this teaching on persecution because it prepares us and equips us for when the time comes and then we can stand like men, we can stand like true women of valor that say, "This is what Christ has called me to. No, I don't back down. No, I'm all the more strong when the fire starts to flame up, when the opposition comes."

The third question that we asked: how does persecution come to us? In what form does it come? And we said this: that it comes in many forms. You know, and one of the things that I like about this passage is the gracious way that Jesus expands the blessing to those who suffer only in verbal ways and don't go to the point of shedding blood. Indeed, Scripture talks about that, doesn't it, that you haven't yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. Shedding blood is not the only sense in which we think about persecution and it certainly is not the only way that Jesus spoke about it.

Look at verse 10 with me again just by way of reminder. He said, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Then he expands on the thought as he moves into verse 11. He says, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me." You see, we shouldn't have a romantic, a kind of falsely distorted view of a romantic view of persecution that only thinks about it in terms of the martyrs who

gave their lives and shed their blood for the faith. Oh, that's true persecution, true enough and that has happened in Scripture, it happened to the apostles and it happened to many of our beloved brethren throughout the course of church history, but persecution isn't always like that and it's not only that. Jesus says that there will be times where persecution is simply in the matter of insult and personal rejection. So it can come in a variety of forms, some very severe, some that seem so mild that you don't even really contemplate it, yet when you step back and you realize, "That insult came to me simply because of Christ. Those family members are pushing me away because of Christ." Not to the point of shedding blood or anything like that but there are costs. The cost of discipleship is paid in the currency of persecution. So we realize that there is a breadth to persecution as Jesus teaches on it here that helps us understand what he is referring to.

That's a review from last time. Now we're going to turn our attention to three more questions here this morning. Question 4: why will we be persecuted? Why will you be persecuted, you could say? And Jesus puts it this way and this is really really sweet when you think about it. This is just really really sweet: you will be persecuted for righteousness loyalty to Christ. You will be persecuted for righteousness loyalty to Christ. Look at verses 10 and 11 with me again and notice, I'll point this out, notice the parallel statements that help us see that this is something tied personally to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 10, "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," watch it here, "because of Me." "Because of Me," Jesus says. It's parallel with the phrase in verse 10, "for the sake of righteousness." Jesus says, "Blessed are you when you are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Blessed are you when people insult you because of Me." It's a parallel statement and the parallelism shows us that this is a righteousness that is specifically identified with loyalty to Christ. It's because of your loyalty to Christ, because of your obedience to him, because of your holding to the truth of God's word, that this persecution comes. And you see, this is coming at the climax of that section, this opening section of the Sermon on the Mount called the Beatitudes where Jesus expands on the whole nature of the character of the true believer as someone who is repentant; someone who is meek; someone who is hungering and thirsting after righteousness; someone whose heart is united and undivided in its devotion and seeking after Christ; someone who is a peacemaker; someone who is pure in heart. That is a character, beloved, that does not fit in a world that is hostile to God. You must understand that. It is this character, this righteous character that comes from the new birth that is aligned and loyal to Christ that creates all of the conflict with the world. The world does not hate its own. It hates that, it hates those which step apart from the world, say "I reject the world and my affections and loyalty belong to someone else. They belong to Christ, not to you." The world does not like that. The world rejects that. The world attacks that as being something which is an assault on them. What you must understand then is this: is that the man of the Beatitudes is someone who has consciously aligned himself with Christ, the King of the kingdom of heaven. He says, "My King, my Lord, my devotion belongs to him." And that brings inevitable conflict. It is about a Christ-centered righteousness.

Why do I make such a fuss over that? Why do I make such a point about that particular point? So that we'll understand generally but it's for this reason: what you need to understand is that this righteousness of which Jesus speaks is not simply a matter of being a good guy, being a good person, being someone who is fair in his dealings with his fellow man. That is not the point of what Jesus is speaking here. Jesus is speaking far more profoundly. He's speaking in that which flows from a character that has been thoroughly renewed by the Spirit of God; someone in whom old things have passed away, behold new things have come. You see, Jesus is talking about, in the context here this is unavoidable and you can't miss it when you just pay attention to the context, Jesus is talking about someone whose entire heart and entire life is oriented toward Christ and toward his will. That is what draws the conflict like a magnet drawing steel flakes to it. It comes at a personal cost and it comes because of righteous loyalty to Christ. So it's not simply that someone lives a morally upright life, it's when at the center of that moral life is a devotion and a testimony to Christ. When that brings persecution, that's what Christ is talking about here.

So, beloved, I say this sympathetically, I say it to help clarify things for you, to understand that Jesus is talking about something in one sense that is narrow. When a so-called Christian is criticized for being obnoxious or proud or lazy, he's not the subject of this blessing that Jesus describes here. It's not when people rightly criticize you or confront you over ungodliness and you experience inner turmoil as a result of that. That's not it. That conflict is simply coming from being sinful. It's not righteous loyalty to Christ that provokes that. Let me go a step further just by way of clarifying, by way of negative illustrations what we're talking about here. A Christian who – follow every word here because it's all important so that you don't misunderstand what I'm saying – picture a Christian in the marketplace who neglects his job duties, who does a poor job for his employer while at the same time on company time and against company policy shares the Gospel with his coworkers and the boss comes and imposes vocational discipline upon that employee saying, "You cannot do that on company time." It's quite common for Christians in that position to post on social media things that are designed to arouse sympathy, to create a sense that this is suffering for Christ. That is not what Jesus is talking about here. That is not suffering for Christ because it is not suffering for Christ when you are not honoring the Scriptures which tell you to submit to your boss and to do your work in a way that brings blessing to him. So a Christian who neglects his job duties to share the Gospel with coworkers is not being persecuted for the sake of righteousness when the boss steps in and stops it. We have to understand what's going on here. That is the boss's prerogative to say, "I am paying you for a job, not for you to be a witness for Christ." And the Christian who says, "No, I don't want to do my job, I want to do this," that's not what Christ is talking about here. You see, it's different. It's a righteous loyalty to Christ where being righteous and being in submission to those who are in authority over you, when that brings persecution, that's when Scripture is describing it.

Look over at 1 Peter 4, if you would. 1 Peter 4:12 and you see here the sense that this is to be expected and it also clarifies the source of suffering, persecution. 1 Peter 4:12, the Apostle Peter says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which

comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." Notice the distinction he makes: not all suffering is righteous suffering; not all suffering is persecution for the sake of Christ. Look at verse 15, "Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name." Then he sums it up in verse 19, "Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." So a godly character that brings insults for the simplicity of devotion to Christ, that is where Jesus is speaking. Not in disobedience to authority. Not for being a troublesome meddler. Not for being someone who is unsanctified and fleshly and you get on people's nerves because you're hard to live with. That's not it. No, this is the man who is poor in spirit, mourning over sin, gentle in spirit, hungering and thirsting after righteousness out of a love and devotion to the Christ who suffered and bled and died for our sins. When you suffer for that reason, when people assault you because of Christ, that's what Jesus is talking about here. So why is it that we suffer? Why is it that we're persecuted? It's for the sake of righteous loyalty to Christ.

That leads us to another question: when that comes, what do you do? How should you respond to persecution? Jesus makes this clear. Go back to Matthew 5. I still have Revelation on my mind from the Scripture reading earlier. Go back to Matthew 5, beginning in verse 11. This is so counter-intuitive. This is not what you would expect at a superficial level if perhaps you were new to Christianity because everything in life, everything in culture, everything in marketing, conditions you to develop your own comfort, to find that which pleases you, to be self-centered in your approach and whatever makes you happy, to pursue that, and if suffering comes, well, that's something to be avoided. Jesus says, "When this kind of suffering comes, have a completely different reaction."

Look at verse 11. How should you respond to persecution? You should respond with joy, with glad delight. Look at verse 11, "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." Jesus here is talking about something that you respond with gladness to and at a superficial level, that just seems to be in conflict. You are insulted, someone speaks lies about you, someone makes life difficult for you, for the sake of our brethren maybe in Muslim countries who are fleeing in the dark of night from the persecutors who would silence their testimony for Christ, God bless them, right? We think of them as we think about this kind of persecution that is foreign to our own spiritual experience, but Jesus says when this happens, consider it a blessing. Consider it something that is a gift from God. Consider it something that you respond with joy to. Look at what he says there in verse 10, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted." Verse 11, he repeats himself lest we miss said, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you." Verse 12, "Rejoice and be glad." He is saying, "You are the

privileged recipient of divine favor when this happens to you." Far from viewing this as something that is unpleasant, something that you reject, something that you resent and, God forbid, something that you would retaliate against Jesus says, "Respond with the fullness of a heart that receives it as a blessing from God."

This is positive joy that overwhelms the soul. This is not a grudging acceptance that simply says, "This is inevitable. Jesus said it would happen and I can't do anything about it. I'm going to grit my teeth and get through it." No. No, that is not a godly response, beloved. That is not the way to think when your job is on the line, when you lose work on account of your testimony for Christ, a true testimony for Christ. That's not the response. Jesus commands us, Jesus gives an imperative and says, "No, you rejoice. You be glad that this is happening to you." This turns the world upside down to think like that. This is totally contrary to how we are conditioned to think about our personal comfort and our personal reputations. This is completely different.

You see, persecution isn't designed to make you bitter and it is not a Christian response to respond that way and we have biblical examples abounding to us of those who responded in just this way. Let's start with the supreme example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Remember that you're following him. Remember that he saved you and bought you as his own that you might belong to him; that he might be your Master and you be his slave; that he would be the teacher and you would be his disciple. And that you are under his authority, under his teaching, and his example, gladly belonging to him. And what was it like for him? In his severest test of the most unjust persecution as they plucked out his beard, as they thrust thorns into his head, as they beat him with whips? He maintained silence. No response. No retaliation even though he could've called legions of angels to his defense.

Go further down the road with Christ. Go further and see him there on the cross, see him hanging on the cross crucified for your sins. And looking down on those who hated him, those who had nailed him there, those who were mocking him in his hour of extremity, and what did Christ say? "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." This is supernatural. When Christ himself was suffering unrighteously at the hands of unrighteous men, let's say it that way, when Christ himself was following in this path of suffering, he himself said, "Father, forgive them." When Stephen was stoned in Acts 7, in like manner, as the rocks are raining down on him and in hatred and vitriol they are stoning him to silence him after he had rebuked them from the Old Testament Scriptures and shown that they were just like those who had persecuted the prophets in the past, Stephen looked up into heaven and said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Do you see the composure of spirit? Do you see the generosity of attitude toward those who were inflicting the punishment? And this is repeated often in the course of church history. This is a noble – oh, beloved, listen to me, I'm about to get excited, about to get animated – this is the noble tradition that belongs to us as those who belong to Christ. This is the inheritance that has been given to us starting from the fountainhead of Christ flowing through the apostles who were all martyred, with the exception of John and he

was exiled, through the blood of martyrs shed throughout church history. This is what we have received as our inheritance: noble, godly suffering in response to unjust persecution.

Look over at Acts 5. And you see, beloved, this is not about Jesus wanting you to be healthy, wealthy and prosperous. Scripture gives us a completely different picture of that which would bring us joy. It is not the earthly circumstances aligned to our satisfaction that are the root of true Christian joy. It is found in the righteous character of the Beatitudes and even when that flows over into opposition from the world, it is counted a blessing.

Acts 5:40, "They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them." They had physically suffered for Christ. They had been the unjust recipients of authority exercised against them and how did they respond? Verse 41, "they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." They had just been beaten and they go out singing, rejoicing. Why? Because their focus was heavenward. Because they understood that persecution was a blessing. Because they realized that it was a great privilege as a sinner to be identified with the holy righteous suffering Son of God. That's a privilege that it pains me that I know so little of personally in my own experience. It's a privilege to suffer with Christ, not something to be angry about, not something to resist. "You mean I can be identified with such a lovely one as Christ? That I could share a small portion of that which he endured for the salvation of my soul? Oh, let me into that realm. That's a blessing to be with him." The apostles understood that.

Look at Acts 16. This is no isolated illustration from Scripture. Acts 16. Paul and Silas suffered again. Acts 16:22, "The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks." They had been beaten. They had been imprisoned. They were in chains all unjustly. And what do you see in verse 25? "But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them," and then the story proceeds. There they were in stocks, in chains, no doubt still bleeding from their wounds, and they are singing and rejoicing and praising God. This is what it looks like. When suffering in the name of Christ comes, realize that God has brought a blessing into your life. This is a testimony of the reality of your salvation. This is an opportunity to identify more closely with the Christ who saved you; the Christ who was accused of being the devil himself; the Christ who was beaten; the Christ who suffered. And when a small portion of that splashes over to you as one of his disciples what do you do? "O God, thank you for the privilege of belonging to you. This is a matter of joy to me. I don't live for this world anyway. I rejoice in the fact that people who hate you want nothing to do with me either. It's a testimony to where my true heart is." And that becomes a ground for joy.

And not only do you respond with joy, go back to Matthew 5, you not only respond with joy, you remember your heritage. You remember what has been given to you. You remember the flow that you stand in spiritually. Look at verse 12. Jesus tells us why it is that you can rejoice like this under the rejection of the world. Matthew 5:12, Jesus says, "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 says, "What you're experiencing when this comes into your life is nothing new." He says, "It has always been thus with the righteous people of God. Always. From the beginning it has always been this way." So you should rejoice with the opportunity to identify with such noble people who have gone before you; to stand and to be associated with men of honor, with men of valor, with men who belonged to the true Christ, who testified to him against a hostile world. Think about it, beloved, think about it and let it strengthen your resolve. Let it draw your affections closer to the suffering of Christ.

Just on a human level, what can we remember from Scripture as we just walked through a few high points? Cain killed righteous Abel. From the very beginning this was the case. Cain killed Abel. Saul persecuted David, the man after God's own heart. The Jews persecuted the prophets. Jeremiah spent his decades of ministry alone and rejected by everyone to whom he spoke. The Jews killed Jesus. Saul persecuted the church, went after them with violent hatred, held the coats, watched the coats of those who were stoning Stephen. Persecuted the church before his conversion. The apostles were martyred. You can get volumes of church history about those who suffered in the name of Christ, tortured and then killed and slaughtered in the most unimaginable ways. We have spoken of how Nero, the Roman Emperor, would encase Christians in wax, set them on fire and use them to light his nighttime garden.

Beloved, do you understand that these are all men of flesh and blood like you and I? And do you further understand that these are men and women who had the same simple affections of heart and loyalties to Christ that you and I do? And we look at them now, we look at them in retrospect and we look at them with respect. We look at those who suffered for the name of Christ, who spilled their blood simply for the sake of being true to the testimony of God and to the testimony of Christ, to the testimony of the Gospel. We look at the courage of Luther after he posted his 95 theses and was pursued relentlessly by the Catholic Church and we look back and say that was a noble man. Those were noble people. Now forgotten by the world but not forgotten in the books of heaven. And we respect them and we say they were noble. They showed the way to us that we might see how far devotion to Christ goes, that we put no limits, we don't withhold even our blood from this one who didn't withhold his blood from us. And we see in their example, we see in their lives, we see from the scriptural testimonies, we see, "Ah, this is what true discipleship looks like," and we realize that we benefit from their example and that we draw strength and courage from it in our own way.

Now, when Jesus says this is how they treated them in the past, now you bring it in and you let it inform your own response. How can I rejoice and be glad? Well, 1. it's a great privilege to be identified with such a rich tradition of Christian nobility and you say, "Do you know what? And maybe in the little sacrifices that I get, maybe someone down the

road would draw courage from my example and be stronger than they otherwise would have been when they know my suffering, when they know my loyalty to Christ." In the words that the song that Steve Green made famous in which we sang at the founding of our church on October 19, 2014, "May all who come behind us find us faithful." And it would be a blessing if we collectively, if we individually, somehow had a life testimony that others looked back on. That's how you do it. That's how I'm going to be today and 2050. And to be in a position to encourage even future believers through your response to suffering is grounds for joy. This is a grounds to rejoice, to say, "I am living in the realm of the kingdom of God. God has blessed me to give me a life that has transcendent value and meaning beyond my own personal comfort and physical well-being. I am glad. I rejoice to share in that," you say to yourself. And that's how you respond. And the cost teaches you, the cost sobers you, the cost makes you realize the great value of the Gospel. It makes you realize the great value of the Lord Jesus Christ; that he is so preeminently worthy of praise, devotion and affection that no earthly cost, that no earthly relationship is worth valuing over him. And if it cost me an earthly relationship, I embrace that. I gladly accept that even though it wasn't my choice. That wasn't what I would have had but if that's the cost that they put on it, I'm glad to be identified with Christ. And the suffering teaches you how preeminently worthy the Lord Jesus Christ is and he is, beloved, preeminently worthy. There is no one more lovely than Jesus Christ. There is no one more worthy of your devotion.

So, beloved, just applying this a little bit, when the time comes in your own life, you'll know the moment when it comes, some time down the future, maybe tomorrow, maybe ten years from now, remember this now, remember what I'm telling you right now: when the time comes for you when you realize that if you maintain your loyalty to Christ you'll lose a relationship, when the time comes that you realize that righteous living might cost you your job, when you realize that if you would just bend the truth a little bit to take the edge off the persecution or just stay silent in the moment, when it cries out for you to be faithful to Christ, when that moment comes, remember this text and don't back away. Don't step away from it. Don't shrink back. Don't be disloyal to the Christ who gave himself to you and for you. When the time comes when your kids are on the verge of rejecting you because of your testimony to Christ, let that be the moment when you graciously, dependently, looking to Christ, step forward and say with your life, with your words, with whatever the situation calls for, "I belong to Christ. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen." And stand alone for him if you must. Stand alone for the Christ who suffered alone on the tree for you. That's true Christianity and we value loyalty to Christ more than we value popularity with the world. We love Christ more than we love our families. We love Christ more than we love life itself. That's how great he is and that is the right way to respond to him. That is his true and righteous claim on your affections. This is what it means to be a Christian. I am a Christian to the point that I am willing to suffer for him. "If he brings it, I won't flinch," you say in your heart, you settle it as a matter of conviction, "I will not flinch when it comes to that. When people say compromise, I say, no, I won't compromise. I can't. Don't you understand, I cannot compromise righteousness for the sake of your approval."

Some of you young people, I like to say these things to you from time-to-time, some of you young people, to realize that you're in a position where you could give your life for Christ. Not in the sense of dying for him but in the sense of saying, "I'm going to give myself over to his service. I will rise up and become a man who preaches the word of God. I will go where Christ has not been named. I will give myself for him. This is the cost that I gladly pay. This life means nothing to me by comparison of belonging to Christ and I want to give everything that I have in righteous devotion to him."

So, beloved, when you're persecuted for the sake of Christ, you remember that you stand in a noble tradition and count yourself blessed. "You mean that I might somehow be associated with the prophets who suffered for loyalty to the Christ who was still yet to come? You mean that I could be in that group? That I could be under the favor of God this way? I am greatly blessed," you say to yourself. One older writer said this, a commentator on the book of Matthew, he said and I quote, "The witnesses for unwelcome truths have never had anywhere at any time a light or easy task." To which we say, "I embrace that. I welcome that. I am blessed to be in a position to do that."

That brings us to our sixth and final question for this morning: what is the reward for persecution? What is the reward for persecution? Beloved, let's do this, let's just kind of make a mutual commitment to one another and vertically toward God and amongst ourselves and in our own private hearts, let's stop thinking stingy thoughts about God. Let's stop thinking about God as being someone who is perhaps a little bit harsh, reluctant to bless us, never quite satisfied, someone who deals out his blessings with reluctance. Let's not think that way about God. Let's realize that to the extent that we would pay a price for following Christ, God is not going to forget that. Scripture says God is not unjust so as to forget your labor for him. And here Christ makes this plain, look at verse 12, what is the reward for persecution? Point number 6: what is the reward for persecution? Jesus says the reward is great glory. Great glory. Look at verse 12 with me. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great."

You see, beloved, you have to think about these things from an eternal perspective. We have to think completely differently. We get it all wrong when we start calculating human cost and relational separations when these things come into our lives, when persecution and insults and suffering comes because of Christ. We cannot think about it from a human perspective. We think about it from an eternal perspective. Oh listen, this is so simple, this is so obvious what I'm about to say: when you start to suffer for Christ, the first thing that you should do is go to Christ. The one who brings and is the occasion for your suffering, you go to him so that he can help you understand what's happening and what the outcome of this is and the way that you should think about it. I'm suffering for Christ, rather than calculating human consequences which don't matter at all in the big picture of things, you go to Christ and say, "Christ, how should I think about this?" And Jesus in effect says, "God is no man's debtor. God is not indifferent to those who suffer for the name of his Son." This is something that is precious in the sight of God when his children follow and obey him and are loyal to him even when it costs them. That matters eternally and so you evaluate opposition from the eternal perspective and what do you find in verse 12? Your reward in heaven is great. Jesus says, "The Father rewards those

who patiently endure suffering for the sake of My name." How precious is that, that an unseen God who has revealed himself in his word makes promises, the work of the Spirit in your heart is such to change you and change your affections, that you disregard, you discount the opposition from the world and when God sees those motions in a believing heart, it pleases him and he bestows a reward upon that when you arrive in heaven. Indeed, the reward has already started. Look at verse 10, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Present tense. When this happens you can say, "Ah, I know the King now." You are tasting his blessings now. To be in the kingdom now, to know his truth now, to know Christ now is a great great blessing worth far more than anything that this world has to offer.

But then you realize, then you go to verse 11 and it says your reward in heaven is great. There is a reward waiting for you as you patiently endure these unjust sufferings in the name of righteous fidelity to Christ and that when you enter into heaven, however that comes to pass, when we receive our reward from Christ, however and whatever that's going to look like, we don't know exactly what it's going to be, the Bible doesn't tell us all the details that we might like to know but, oh beloved, God will bring you into his eternal kingdom. The Apostle Paul spoke with confidence, "He will lead me safely into His kingdom," in the pastoral epistles. And beloved, when you are there, all opposition to you for your faith in Christ will be over. You will simply be surrounded, those of you who are walking alone for Christ in the midst of a lot of family hostility, you will be surrounded in heaven not just with the glory of God but also with others who have known him. You will be with those of like minded faith, perfected and free from sin. What will this great reward be? I can't tell you in detail, I can only point out the shadows from a distance but it will be something of unmixed joy, of unmixed glory, of unmixed unspeakable wonder that tongue today could not describe. This will be a reward where there are no sorrow, tear or regrets. No one, no one will be in heaven and look back at their earthly sufferings in the name of Christ and say, "This really wasn't worth it." That's not going to happen. The truth of the matter is that the nature of God, the grace of God, the goodness of God is such that the blessing that awaits you in heaven for suffering for him will be eternally, geometrically, exponentially, completely disproportionate, inversely proportionate to the measure of the brief temporary sorrow that you had here on earth. God is a generous gracious God and when he designs to give blessing on his people, he'll go overboard. Your reward in heaven will be great and the earthly price will seem like flipping a penny and getting Buckingham Palace in return except that our earthly sufferings are even less than the penny and heaven is infinitely greater than Buckingham Palace. That's how great this is. That's how good God is. This is how perfect the promise of Christ is and I live in no fear of overstating the promise of his goodness to you. I have no doubt that as much as I try to exalt these things with my limited human language, I have no doubt that I have fallen miserably short of showing you the grandeur that awaits. No doubt. That's why you can rejoice. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 4:17 that momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.

So, friends, have loved ones rejected you? Have you lost opportunity because you were a Christian? Have people insulted you? Abandoned you? Lied about you because you are a

Christian? Remember your heritage. Remember the promise of Christ and respond with joy. Rest in Christ because the rejection proves that you belong to him and one day soon enough you will know unspeakable joy and glory yonder all compare.

Let's bow together in prayer.

O God, we thank you for your faithfulness. We know that you will bring these things to pass. Cultivate in us a biblical perspective that rightly sees persecution and responds to it with joy. And Father, in the midst of the flames, not just for us but for all those who name your name and suffer for it around the world, in the midst of the flames, Father, let courage rise in your people to meet the danger. Let patience rise to meet the opposition of men. Let trust rise instead of fear. That we might show by godly reaction to persecution the great surpassing value of the Christ that you have so graciously made known to us. Lord Jesus, there is no suffering on earth that we could ever go through that would begin to compare the suffering of eternal judgment that you bore on our behalf for our sins and rebellion against you when we had no claim on you and you suffered like that. O Lord, if following you brings a measure of injustice, a measure of suffering, a measure of persecution to our lives, let us look past the momentary affliction and see the smile of our Lord upon our lives for, Lord, your smile, your approval, your favor is better to us than all the riches on earth, than every relationship that we could ever have. In response to this passage, O God, we bless your majestic name. In the name of our suffering and risen Christ we pray. Amen.

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