

Not All Suffering Is Persecution

Matthew 5:10-12; 2 Timothy 3:12

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Persecution for Christ and His righteousness is one way in which the Lord separates the wheat from the chaff—true Christians from those who pretend to be Christians. It is a gracious gift given to every true Christian to suffer for Jesus and His truth (Philippians 1:29). Such a gift is not given to hypocrites who are Christians in name only (Matthew 13:20-21).

It is natural for us to want a comfortable life (free of persecution) in this world. It is, however, supernatural for us to want a faithful life in this world, even when it means suffering persecution because we will not cast away or compromise our faith in Christ in order to make it easier for us in a world that despises the Lord Jesus and His truth.

It is not an option for a Christian to be a persecuted Christian or not. This Beatitude (like the other seven) is part of your spiritual DNA in Christ without which one is not a true Christian (2 Timothy 3:12). To the contrary, Jesus says there is something wrong with one who professes to be a Christian when there is no evidence of persecution for Jesus and His truth (Luke 6:26). You live in a world that is hostile to Jesus, His supreme authority, and His commandments. You are surrounded by those who despise the light of Jesus. If you don't have people trying to put out that light of truth and righteousness, it is because that light is hidden under a bushel and offends no one. We don't want to unnecessarily offend others by the way we speak the truth (Ephesians 4:15), but we also don't want to be secret Christians who are ashamed of Jesus (Mark 8:38).

Let us be teachable and ready learners of Jesus today. The questions we seek to answer are the following: (1) What Is Persecution? (2) How Does Persecution Come Against the Christian? (3) What Is the Response of the Christian When Persecution Comes? (4) What Is the Promise to the Christian Who Faithfully Endures Persecution?

I. What Is Persecution?

A. It is no accident that the grace of suffering for Christ follows the grace of being a peacemaker.

1. For in seeking to remove the enmity (sin and error) that separates God and man and that separates people from each other, the anger often turns against those who are willing to address the sin and error that causes conflicts. Standing in the middle to resolve conflicts will often turn both parties against the peacemaker. The Pharisees and Sadducees were in constant conflict, but when Jesus reproved the errors of both groups, they joined forces to oppose Jesus and crucify Him.

2. When the Beatitudes are living in and through the Christian, there will be no one as offensive to the world as a faithful Christian. Just as the world hated Jesus for who He was and what He taught, so the world will hate you who stand for Jesus and His truth (John 15:18-20). Therefore, it is no secret why persecutions will come your way—it is actually a badge of honor, for it says that you are talking and acting like Jesus. They see Jesus in you (Acts 4:13).

B. **Definition of persecution.**

1. **The world's definition.** Harming (physically or verbally) someone (or some group or someone's property) who is different from you due to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or politics.

a. This definition implies that the laws of God which forbid false religions, Sabbath breaking, murder of the unborn, adultery, fornication, sodomy, and incest are persecuting laws. For this definition says that those who practice such wickedness have a right to do so, even if God forbids it. People

are supreme—not God.

b. Thus, to speak against those who practice such violations against God’s Law is verbally to persecute them. This is how Christians are/will be persecuted by governments and wicked laws—they will accuse you of hate speech and persecuting individuals and groups because the gospel calls sinners to repent of their sins and errors in coming to Jesus Christ for salvation. Christians will be accused of persecution when it is Christians that are being persecuted (John 16:2).

2. **Christ’s definition of persecution** is hated by the world: Persecution “for righteousness’ sake” (Matthew 5:10); “for my sake” (Matthew 5:11).

a. The biblical definition of persecution IS NOT speaking against whatever “rights” people believe they have to practice their wickedness, but rather persecution is against the God-given rights and duties we have to obey God and His commandments. No one has a human or civil “right” to disobey God. Therefore, it is not persecution for a government to forbid what God forbids (or for a Christian to speak against what God forbids). It is, however, persecution (tyranny) for a government to forbid what God commands (e.g. forbidding Christ’s Church to gather for worship); for civil government is instituted by God to be His minister first and foremost (Romans 13:4).

b. Thus, it is persecution when governments threaten and impose laws that forbid Christians from practicing God’s righteous commandments found in His Moral Law. You can only be persecuted for speaking and doing what is righteous, not for doing what is evil, wicked, and contrary to God’s Law (1 Peter 4:15-16). When we suffer the consequences and discipline for our sins, we are not being persecuted (vulgar mouth—discipline; lying and misrepresenting the truth—confronted).

II. How Does Persecution Come Against the Christian?

A. By words (words may be more painful than fists).

1. Reviling words (“when men shall revile you” Matthew 5:11). To revile a Christian is to send hateful words (like burning arrows) not only into his/her ears but into his/her heart on account of Christ’s truth. It also involves mockery and ridicule because you will not join in the wicked activities of others (“cruel mockings” Hebrew 12:36). The Lord Jesus suffered this as well (Matthew 27:29). Teasing and mocking one another is cruel and reveals how little you are that you have to put someone else down to exalt yourself. If every idle word will be judged by the Lord (Matthew 12:36), how much more will cruel words be judged against those who defend Jesus, the gospel, and His commandments? It is wrong to revile and speak angry, cruel words, but it is particularly evil to do so against those who are standing for the truth.

2. Slandering words (“and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely” Matthew 5:11). It is persecution when people frame lies about you because you are standing for the truth (Psalm 35:11; Matthew 12:24). This is painful, but yet this evidences that you are citizens of different kingdoms. You are suffering for Christ and have fellowship in His sufferings (Philippians 3:10). Early Christians were slandered with lies and said to be cannibals because they ate the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper that signified the body and blood of the Lord. They were said to be involved in sexual orgies because they had love feasts in sharing meals together after their worship on the Lord’s Day. They were called insurrectionists because they called Jesus their King. Think it not strange when lies and perversions are spread about you. They also lied about Jesus. You are in the most exalted and blessed company.

B. By violence (“and persecute you” Matthew 5:11).

1. The faithful have always been willing to face all manner of suffering and persecution for the Lord Jesus (Hebrews 11:35-38).

2. A willingness to suffer for Christ distinguishes true faith from temporary faith (“I’ll follow Jesus as long as everything is comfortable and at ease”). Persecution for Christ is a grace not a curse. If you don’t remember that, your persecution will be meaningless and you will fall into hopelessness.

a. If we are unwilling to suffer minor persecution now, how shall we stand when more severe persecution comes our way? Biblical Christianity is not the road to riches, property, power, and fame. Biblical Christianity is the road to suffering with Christ now in order that we might reign with Him forever. If you cannot take a stand now with family, friends, and co-workers about the gospel, about the Lord's Day, about drunkenness, about immorality, about blasphemy, about pure worship, how will you stand when it is not evil words and lies that you will face but violence? Today is the quiz. Tomorrow is the major exam.

b. We don't want to be like Peter who proudly proclaimed he would suffer and die with Christ, but then denied Him three times. Jesus did, however, empower Peter to suffer for Jesus and to die for Him. Thank God for the faithful witnesses and martyrs for Jesus (past and present). Their faithfulness and love for Jesus and His truth bring me to shame and cause me to cry out to the Lord for His mercy over how I face persecution. If God strengthened them, He will also strengthen us when we face persecution. Early Christians were tested by Rome: Caesar is Lord. Covenanters were tested by Charles II: the king governs the Church. When governments call you to bow the knee supremely to them over Jesus and His commandments, will you be ready to stand for Jesus and His truth? Jesus has given to you the grace to suffer for His name in this Beatitude. Pray that you will exercise it daily. If Jesus is not worth suffering for, He is not worth having.

III. What Is the Response of the Christian When Persecution Comes?

A. Rejoice and be glad (Matthew 5:12). You have the honor of suffering a blow for Jesus. Would you suffer a blow for your daughter, your son, your wife, or your mother? Then do so for Jesus who has suffered for you in taking God's mighty blow for you that you might be forever forgiven and enjoy everlasting life. If soldiers count it an honor to lay down their lives for their country, will you not count it the highest honor and rejoice to suffer for your King (Acts 5:41)?

B. Don't repay evil for evil (Romans 12:17). You must not personally revenge yourself, but leave vengeance to God. This you will do only if you truly understand that you are suffering for Jesus, not for self.

C. Pray for those who cruelly abuse you (Matthew 5:44). The greatest prayer and blessing you can pray is for the salvation of your persecutors (Jesus prayed and the thief and the centurion believed).

IV. What Is the Promise to the Christian Who Faithfully Endures Persecution?

A. Jesus promises a heavenly rest from all suffering, persecution, and sorrow ("for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" Matthew 5:10; "for great is your reward in heaven" Matthew 5:12). Why do we not rejoice as we should in our suffering for Jesus Christ? It is because our heavenly reward is not as real to our faith as the suffering is real to our body and mind. When the glory of Jesus and His everlasting comfort and joy overcome the temporary suffering you endure in this life, your joy will not be contained (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). You are not alone in your suffering—even the prophets, apostles, and Jesus Himself suffered before you. Why should you be exempt from this honor? You are in great company (Hebrews 12:1-2)!

B. This is the joy that I pray for in my suffering for Christ. I leave you with the words of that faithful, young gospel minister and martyr, James Renwick (*Life and Letters of James Renwick*, p. 170).

Rejoice in light affliction which is but for a moment. Count your antagonists your greatest friends, for what are they doing by all the storms they raise against you, but contributing to the mass of your glory? O fear them not, but keep your Captain-general upon your right hand, and then cry to them to shoot to their fill.

They are contributing to your reward in heaven. Great is your reward!

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