

Privileged to Suffer

The Beatitudes

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Those of you familiar with the military are obviously and thankfully familiar with the award called the Purple Heart that is given to those that are injured in combat in defense of our country, that is actually when a wound is sustained in battle with a foreign enemy under the Purple Heart you are actually entitled to that award rather than simply it being something that you are recommended to. It is something that is given to you as a result of suffering wounds in combat on behalf of the nation and it's an award given on behalf of the President to the injured military member who is injured in combat in such a way. Our government, our military structure understands that there is a particular honor that is sustained in battle and it is recognized in a visible way that we all recognize, that we all understand, and that there is a certain measure of respect and deference that is given to someone when we realize that they have won a Purple Heart, having suffered wounds on behalf of our country. It's right. It's good that we would honor someone in that way.

Well, keep that in mind as we enter into a spiritual realm and come to the eighth and final Beatitude that Jesus taught in Matthew 5:10-12 because Scripture tells us that believers are engaged in combat, that believers are engaged in a battle of a spiritual sort with a spiritual enemy that manifests itself often through the insults and difficulties and suffering that comes at the hands of humans who do not have regard for our Lord Jesus Christ. And what we find is we come to this passage is that our suffering, whether great or small, is not lost on our great spiritual Commander-in-Chief and that he blesses us in the end.

Look at Matthew 5:10-12 for our text not only this morning but also for next week. Jesus said,

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.

I realize that we have a number of people here that are visiting with us, we are so glad that you're with us and we welcome you, and mindful of that, I want to just give you a very brief kind of review for all of us about the Beatitudes as we come to this close of this opening section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is teaching us what true repentance looks like. Stated differently, he's teaching us what life in his kingdom looks like. His kingdom is a kingdom of grace. His kingdom is a kingdom that transforms people into someone new. You do not put new wine into old wineskins, new wine needs new wineskins and the life that Christ imparts to his disciples is something completely new, it is contrary to the world, it is something that is not found in the unregenerate man. So Jesus describes character for us as the beginning point of what life in the kingdom looks like, and if you look up at Matthew 5:3 you see that he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." And what we've said about that multiple times is that Jesus is describing the spiritual recognition of spiritual bankruptcy before God, that we are sinners who have nothing to offer him to commend ourselves to him, and the one who is blessed is the one who recognizes that, who mourns over his sinful condition and calls out to Christ for salvation from his sins. Well, that produces attitudes. Verse 5, "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth." Verse 6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." You see, salvation produces in someone an unquenchable desire to be like their Savior, to be like their Commander-in-Chief, to be like the Lord who saved them, and our Lord was one who was gentle and humble in heart and so Jesus pronounces blessing on those who bear the marks, who show the signs, the indications of carrying his life within them, those that he has saved and imparted new life to; blessing upon blessing upon blessing upon people of a particular character that repentance produces.

Look at verse 7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." And last time we saw this, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Anyone with a biblical sense, anyone who has truly been born again realizes that the Beatitudes describe a lofty and a noble character, a character that is rooted in self-denial, a character that is rooted in repentance from sin, a character that is rooted in love for Christ and longs to be with him and has the assurance that God will bless us in the end, that he saved us to bless us, not to abandon us. So there is great blessing. We are the privileged recipients of divine favor. Even though for now in this life we only approximate this character, we show signs of it, we don't live it out in perfection, but this is the direction of our heart. This is what we desire. This is what we want to be. And Jesus says the blessing of God is on someone like that. True salvation changes people. You don't come to Christ and then just continue living in an unbroken pattern of sin that's unchanged. No, every one of us in the sense has our own meeting with the Lord on the road to Damascus where life is no longer the same. Whether that's as someone converted as a young child who bears the marks of the fruit of righteousness throughout his life or whether it's somebody who comes to Christ as I did 33 years ago today out of a life of sin and life is changed and you become somebody new. Well, Jesus says that you are blessed.

Now, you might think that somebody that had in his heart to be a peacemaker, somebody that was gentle, somebody that was merciful, somebody that was pure in heart, you might think that a person like that would be well-liked. You might think that somebody like that would be someone who earned the respect of everyone around him to have a peaceful disposition like that. I mean, you know, this is what we're about, we're about proclaiming a Gospel of peace. "Sinners, you can be reconciled to God through the Lord Jesus Christ." And in our lives we desire peaceful relationships and do what we can to promote that. Where is the source for conflict in that? Why doesn't that just bring Christians a sense of accolade and affirmation from the world around saying that's what we should all be like? It's counterintuitive in one sense. You would suspect the people of the Beatitudes would be well-liked but that is not the case and Jesus makes it very plain, and this is in a sense as we come together here today, this is in a sense us coming together as soldiers realizing what the battle is and putting our armor on to be prepared for it.

We're going to answer six questions about persecution in the Christian life today and next week and what we find, what Jesus says and teaches us not only in this passage but elsewhere in the New Testament, is that rather than being the objects of the world's respect and admiration, Christians find instead rejection, hatred, insults, and sometimes even physical persecution because of their loyalty to Christ and Jesus makes this very plain. In fact in the words of Jesus, he made it obvious that there would be suffering that would come and he embeds it in his call to come to him for salvation. He says, "If anyone would be my disciple, let him pick up his cross, deny himself," he actually flipped it, "let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow after me." The cross was an instrument of torture, it was an instrument of execution in that day, and Jesus says, "Take up with a willingness to suffer on my behalf and come after me and follow me." Well, that means that we should expect persecution and not be surprised by it when it comes.

There are six questions that I want to answer about persecution in the Christian life from this text. We're going to look at three of them here this morning and the first question is this and kind of in a yes or no fashion: will true Christians be persecuted? Will true Christians be persecuted? This is kind of our fundamental starting point and the answer to that question is yes. Biblical Christians will inevitably and without exception face persecution of some sort.

Now, it's very important for us to talk about this freely, openly, calmly, in the midst of a relatively peaceful society that we have here today anyway, and it's important for us to talk about this in that context so that we are prepared for it when persecution comes. It's also important for us to teach on this in the context of an evangelical church which over the past several decades really have taught people that there can be a Christianity without cost, that there can be discipleship without a cross, that you can have the crown without the cross. That's not true. There is a cost to true discipleship to Christ and we cannot offer Christ on false premises to people and say that the whole idea of Christianity is so that God would bless you, that God would give you whatever you want, blessing and health and prosperity. "Just come and while you're at it, toss a check in the offering plate on the way out and everything will be good for you." That's not biblical Christianity, beloved, and Jesus makes that very plain. There is a cost to discipleship and before we dive into

the text, I want to point out a couple of passages to you that are really critical on this point.

Go to the Gospel of Luke 12. Luke 12, beginning in verse 51, Jesus said, "Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." Jesus is saying that, "Devotion to me, discipleship under my Lordship, will result in division in the closest of family relationships even." There is a cost that comes. People are not going to congratulate you for being a Christian and so don't expect that. Don't come to discipleship with Christ, don't live the Christian life, with a false sense of expectation that everything is going to be roses and cream and lovely peacefulness with everyone around you. That is not true Christianity.

If you look over at John 15, you'll see how explicit and clear our Lord was about this very point. John 15, I'll give you a moment to find it. John 15:18-20. Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion, knowing that the greatest suffering ever known in a human body was about to be inflicted upon him as he bore the sins of everyone who would ever believe in him on the cross, knowing that he was about to be betrayed by Judas, knowing that Roman soldiers would nail him and lift him up and hoist him on a cross for you and me, knowing all of that, he turns to the disciples who had been with him for three years and he says to them, preparing them and by extension us, preparing us says, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave 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." You see, Jesus tells us upfront that to follow him is to separate yourself from the world; to belong to him is to not belong to the world. We are in the world but not of it and the world doesn't like it that way. The world would claim you and when you step out apart from it, when you stand against it, when you declare even by the simplicity of a righteous life that, "I reject this world. I reject its values. I reject its mind. I reject what it loves. I live for another world. I live for another King," beloved, the world is going to react against that sooner or later. So what you find here in Scripture, what you find in the Sermon on the Mount, is our Lord Jesus Christ truthfully with the most profound of integrity stating up front what the cost of discipleship will be.

Look at Matthew 5:10 now as we return to our text. Matthew 5:10. And by the way, getting on a tangent before I even get to the text. That's not too good. That doesn't bode well. To recognize this is to take all of the fear out of persecution. It takes all of the fear out of it: the fear of rejection, the fear in other lands of being imprisoned, the fear of insults, the fear of family turning against you. This takes all of the fear out of it because you say, "Okay, Christ told me in advance. And do you know what? I owe my soul to him. I owe my soul to his self-sacrifice. He has graciously forgiven all of my sins. He has

graciously shared his kingdom with me. He is graciously going to bring me to heaven. Of course my higher loyalties are going to be to him. And if the Lord sees fit to allow me to go through persecution, if the Lord sees fit to let me be rejected by some that were closest to me, if the Lord sees fit to bring that upon our church in times to come, we are not afraid of that." We don't shrink back from that. We love the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of our Lord. He suffered for us. If we would suffer a little bit on his behalf in a much lesser degree, then we are glad to share that with him, to share in the sufferings of Christ with him. So we're not afraid of it. We don't resent it. We don't hide from it. We don't seek it but when it comes, we accept it knowing that this is part of the privilege and blessing of belonging to Christ.

Let go to Matthew 5:10 now. Jesus frames it in terms of blessing. Jesus terms it as being on the receiving end of divine favor when he says in verse 10, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Beloved, I get to say this one final time as we move out of the Beatitudes, maybe I'll get to say it again next week, but here in the Beatitudes Jesus is describing an exclusive group of people. When he says, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven," he's saying that, "These are the people who truly belong to me. These are the ones who are truly going to heaven. No one else does." It's an emphatic exclusive statement, "theirs and theirs alone is the kingdom of heaven," he says. And this is part of a multifaceted character as we said in the past like the colors of a rainbow, seven different colors making up one rainbow, the eight Beatitudes are describing eight different aspects of the same character of the one who has been born again, the one who belongs to his kingdom. So in different degrees, in different measures, all of these things are present because each time Jesus pronounces a Beatitude he says, "Theirs and theirs alone. These are the ones who are the real thing. This is the real deal." So he makes it clear for us, makes it easy for us to recognize the true from the false and Jesus says only the persecuted will enter.

Beloved, this is a universal trait of Christians just in the same way that being broken over sin is. This comes with the territory. This is part of the service that we render to Christ is to have this come. You know, the Apostle Paul said the same thing in 2 Timothy 3:12, he said, "Indeed, all those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." So over and over again in multiple repeated passages, Scripture tells us that the one who follows Christ will pay a price for it.

Now we step back and we realize, "Okay, that's pretty severe." Severe maybe not the right word. "That's pretty stunning. That's sobering to realize." You know, how often if you're not consistently in Scripture, who is telling you this except Jesus? Why don't they tell you that if it's true if they're actually representing Christ? Scripture tells us that true Christians will pay a price for following Christ and it will come at the hands of those sometimes that are closest to us; those that we thought were friends; those that we thought were loved ones who are within our families; those who have moistened our cheeks with their kisses only to find that it was a Judas kiss in the end. Will true Christians be persecuted? Yes. Scripture says it again and again and again. Sinclair Ferguson helpfully says, and I quote, "Christians are persecuted for the sake of righteousness because of their loyalty to Christ. Real loyalty to him creates friction in the

hearts of those who pay him only lip service. Loyalty arouses their consciences and leaves them with only two alternatives: follow Christ or silence him. Often their only way of silencing Christ is by silencing his servants. Persecution in subtle or less subtle forms is the result."

You see, beloved, what we have to understand is as we're thinking through this and why does it happen, is that there is something more fundamental in the heart of an unsaved man than his personal relationship with you. Even in family this is often going to be the case. Their love and commitment to sin is greater than their love and commitment to you. Their love and commitment to this world is something that puts them at hostility with Christ and when you begin to live a life that is manifesting the righteousness of Christ, sooner or later you can expect that that's going to create friction, that that's going to cause sparks as the testimony of your lips, as the testimony of your life brings into conflict in their conscience and in their heart the reality that this is not something that they like and it testifies to their conscience and it convicts their conscience in a way that makes them react against it. So don't be surprised when that happens. You see, there is far more at stake than just you being a nice person. Your godly life is testifying to a world that loves sin that sin ultimately results in judgment. Scripture tells us that our lives are like an aroma of life to those who are being saved and it is an aroma of death to those who are not saved. And do you know what? The aroma of death is like to them a stench and what do you do with the stench? You get rid of it. You wave it off so that you don't have to smell that. Persecution is the way that unbelievers try to get rid of the stench that comes to their own nostrils as a godly life convicts them that they do not truly belong to Christ.

So in answer to our first question, will true Christians be persecuted? Yes, it is inevitable. The second question for this morning then: when will persecution come? When will persecution come? And the answer to that question is based on the text that we are going to look at, when will persecution come? There is no way to know. There is no way to know. The language that Jesus uses makes this really obvious.

Look at verses 10 and 11. Jesus says, "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 because of Me." There are a couple of aspects, there is some grammar here in the passage that's very important for your understanding that evident in the Greek text and not necessarily as obvious in the English text but you can see it as it's there. Verse 10, look at it there with me, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness." Now, for those of you that know a little bit of Greek, this is the Greek perfect tense that is being described here. It describes something that has happened in the past and has continuing effects into the present even if it's not actually going on right now. It's expressing and what Jesus is describing here is a reality of past persecution that lingers in its effects to the present. So something happens in the past and then it continues on. So for example in the context that we're talking about here, maybe in times past someone has broken a relationship with you because they didn't want anything to do with your testimony of Christ and despite your efforts at reconciliation, reaching out to them in love, they want nothing to do with you. I know some of you are in that position. That's an

illustration of what's happening. Maybe they're not actively condemning you now, actively making life difficult for you now, but you feel the effects of it from the fact that a relationship that you used to have is no longer in place because they broke off contact with you. My point here is that is an example of what Jesus is talking about with this perfect tense: a past action with continuing results into the present; a broken relationship that has never been restored even if they're not causing problems for you right now.

Jesus says the blessing is upon those who have been persecuted. In other words, this is so very important for you to understand, this is very important for you to understand and I'm eager as your pastor to help you grasp this and embrace it. There are sometimes those who would speak about persecution in a way that makes you think if you're not presently being persecuted, that something is wrong with you. That's not what Jesus is saying here. Jesus does not say, "Blessed are those who are being persecuted right now because only they belong to the kingdom of heaven." This verbal distinction may seem subtle but it's very clear and important. You see, Jesus recognizes that there are times in the past where we have suffered for him, we feel the effects of it now even if we're not going through anything actively at the moment. Jesus is pronouncing blessing on that, not restricting it more narrowly to only those who are feeling the effects at the very moment at which he speaks. "I have been persecuted for Christ," you might say, "but right now I don't feel the weight of that." Jesus isn't excluding you from that blessing. He recognizes that persecution will come and persecution will go.

Now, there's another aspect of this, this verbal aspect, remember, we are answering the question: when will persecution come? Look at verse 11 with me. Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you." Look at it again, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you." This is speaking about persecution in an indefinite sense. He's saying, "Whenever this happens," is kind of the sense of it. He's not prescribing a timeframe in which it will happen. He's not giving you indications in which you would know that it happens. It's general. Whenever this happens, whenever you are insulted for Christ, whenever people speak falsely about you, whenever people abandon you in a relationship because of your commitment to righteousness, whenever that happens, understand that you are blessed. So the idea here is that Jesus takes this and leaves the door open for future trouble. He recognizes it in the past, maybe it's part of the present, maybe it's going to come in the future. He doesn't define the timeframe, he simply tells us that this is an aspect of Christian living and it's going to come in one form or another sooner or later. That's all the more definite than he gets about it and so what he is doing here is he is preparing you for persecution without telling you when it will occur or how it will occur in your particular circumstances.

Jesus describes those persecuted in the past, feeling the effects of it now, and here's the point, beloved, almost a little bit counterintuitive but important for you to understand: we need to know what to expect from the Christian life. We need to know how to interpret what happens around us, times of comparative peace or when affliction comes and people manifest their hostility. We need to know how to think and respond to that and what I'm about to say I think is important for your understanding. Persecution, beloved, will not be necessarily the unbroken pattern of life for all believers everywhere under all

circumstances. Let me say it again. Every adverb in that is important. Persecution will not necessarily be the unbroken pattern of life for all believers everywhere under all circumstances. That's not what Jesus is describing here. He says when this happens, whenever it might happen. If you have been persecuted, even though maybe now you're not. Jesus speaks to a reality that is embedded in the Christian life but which doesn't manifest itself at all times.

So, beloved, here's the point: maybe you're not suffering for Christ right now. That does not mean that you have to worry about your lack of spirituality. Maybe God is giving you a time of peace and comfort and respite from the hostility of the world. What's true of individuals is true of churches, churches go through times of peace, comparative prosperity, sometimes they go through hostility. What I want you to see is, especially in a place where we live in a land of comparative peace and prosperity, I don't want you to wrongly question your salvation simply because, "Well, right now life seems pretty good." That's not what Jesus is teaching. He's not saying it's the unbroken pattern for all time, but he is saying this: it is inevitable. It does happen. It may be brief and mild, it may be prolonged and painful and so Jesus tells us to expect it.

Having said that, looking for balance in what we say here, if you have claimed to be a Christian for any length of time at all and you would look at your life and say, "I have never ever once ever tasted any kind of opposition for being a Christian," you might want to step back and re-examine your whole spiritual life. If it has never cost you in any way, shape or form, in any conversation whatsoever, speaking at the most basic broad level, and it has never cost you, no one has ever reacted against your claim to know Christ, maybe you need to reconsider whether you're really in the faith because Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs," and theirs alone, "is the kingdom of heaven." And that's just especially so important when a weak Gospel dominates the church today, when it is made so simple for people supposedly to come to Christ. "Raise your hand and we won't ask you any questions later." And people are conditioned to think about Christianity in the most minimalistic way that never impacts their life. Jesus doesn't teach a Christianity like that. That's a false Gospel and in an environment where people have been conditioned to think that way, we need to bring the full weight of Scripture to bear and Scripture says those who love Christ will pay a price for it. And if that is the biblical reality of salvation, then we ask ourselves: have I tasted something of that or not? Have I ever been, have you ever been rejected for the sake of Christ? Has a family member ever spoken out against you and said, "You're too harsh. You're too narrow," as you're simply trying to talk about the Bible? "You're too negative. You're too harsh. You're too strict." Something like that indicating that someone is reacting against the inner convictions that true repentance produces in the human heart. If you have never ever faced anything like that, beloved, take a look at Scripture and examine yourself.

When does persecution come? There is no way to know. The timing of it is in his hands but it does come. Now, thirdly we ask this question: how does persecution come to us? How does persecution come to us? What is it like? And again, we have to guard against extremes. We're just trying to be balanced in our teaching here this morning, trying to be

even more important than balanced, we're trying to be biblical in our teaching here this morning and what I want you to do, those of us who live in the comparative bubble of peace that comes from being Americans in this time in our national history, recognizing that there is virtually no chance that someone is going to firebomb our building during our worship service, that no one is going to come in with machetes trying to shut us down or to slice up our leadership as happens in other parts of the world and we're not like that, it's easy for us to think and say, "Well, you know, there is no suffering in my life," and to feel somewhat diminished by it. Understand that that is not the terms on which Jesus presents it to us. Jesus tells us that persecution comes in many different forms, some of them are more painful than others.

Look at Matthew 5:11 with me. You know, you hear the grand stories of those who have spilled blood for the faith and we do respect that, we honor it, we recognize it, we would not run from it if it came to us, but the whole point here is this: Jesus doesn't limit it to that. Jesus is a gracious Commander-in-Chief who recognizes the smallest of flesh wounds for the spiritual Purple Heart, not simply those who give their lives on behalf of the Gospel. Look at verse 11 with me, Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me." Now, notice something here: Jesus has suddenly shifted from the third person, "Blessed are those who do such-and-such, are such-and-such," to verse 11, now he's speaking in the second person, he says, "Blessed are you." He elaborates and he makes it personal and we can come to these words from our Lord and realize that he speaks in the second person, you, to help us.

Now, how does persecution come to us? For some in whose wake we walk, for some it has come in the form of bloodshed. It has come in the form of awful human suffering. Look over at Hebrews 11. We have to teach on both sides of this today. In Hebrews 11:36, the writer of Hebrews is expressing the great hall of faith, honorable men and women who paid a price for following Christ and he says in verse 36, "others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground." And Scripture recognizes and honors those who suffered like that for Christ to the point of shedding blood, to the point of exile, to the point of whips crashing down again on the flesh of their backs as they did upon Christ. Severe bloodletting in fidelity to Christ and Scripture says that form of persecution is embedded in the broader reality of true Christianity.

Notice something, beloved, realizing that probably none of us in this room have suffered like that for Christ and you would be tempted to feel inferior, to feel like, "Why haven't I been more faithful?" And you start to ask questions, you know, "Maybe if I were more godly, maybe if I was more righteous then that would happen and that would vindicate and validate my faith." But Jesus doesn't put it that way. That's not the full teaching of Scripture. Does that happen? Yes. Is it happening in our world today? Yes. Are there people in prison simply for the love of the name of Christ today? Yes. Does that mean

that you're not a Christian because you're not in prison with them? No, because Jesus doesn't frame it that way. Go back to Matthew 5:11 and see how he frames it and be stunned by the condescending kindness, the gentle bowing down to our position, and the gentle, gracious way in which our Lord blesses and leads us.

Jesus says 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." Do you realize that Jesus is pronouncing blessing on forms of persecution, forms of suffering, that are of a much lesser degree than those more extreme examples that we saw in Hebrews 11? Sometimes in the blessing that Jesus pronounces here is simply on verbal harassment, like audible complaints to your face, or false accusations behind your back. No one actually lifts a dagger against you and causes your blood to spill, it's simply that they attack you with the tongue or give you the silence or leave your presence and say, "I want nothing to do with you." You see, beloved, what Jesus is saying is that he is pronouncing blessing even on that kind of persecution and I want to tell you something just speaking personally, I love him for that. I love him for that because this is not according to the way that the world operates. The world would magnify those who shed their blood, Jesus says, "I'll give honor also to those who simply suffer verbal harassment, who are insulted." And in humility you say, "But Lord, they just insulted me. They cut Isaiah in half with a saw and you're going to bless me along with him?" And the answer of the Lord is, "Yes." You see, when you're wounded in battle for this great Commander, he gives you, as it were, a spiritual Purple Heart and says, "You were injured by the enemy serving me. I won't forget that. I will honor that with my blessing."

And since this is the level that you and I kind of would deal with it more than whips and chains and execution in our day and age right now, I think it's important for us to probe this a little bit and maybe you find that you've suffered for Christ perhaps more than you realize. Things that you don't take into account as a matter of living life or being gracious and you don't say, "I don't think about these things. I don't rehearse the way people have wronged me. I don't have to dwell on the insults from family." But what I want you to see here is that there is a rich deposit of grace and blessing from Christ in this. And also for you to see that when it does strike, when the viper does strike with the false accusations, when the dog does bite your hand with insults, with lies, with misrepresentations, I want you to be able to see what's going on because when we're not thinking in this realm, if you're only thinking about it horizontally, you're tempted to say, "Well, wait a second, why are they saying that, that's not even true? They didn't even talk to me. This is absolutely inconceivable that this person is saying these things that have no basis in fact whatsoever against me." Well, look, here's what I want you to understand: of course it's false. Of course it's untrue. It wouldn't be persecution if they were simply saying true things about you. When they speak falsely about you, that's where you're entering into the realm that Jesus is saying that he describes as persecution; that you are suffering, that injury is being inflicted upon you because false things are being stated about you. It wouldn't be persecution if it was true. So Jesus recognizes, Jesus prepares you for the reality that as you follow Christ, there will be times where people say the most outrageous demonstrably false things about you in order to slander your reputation, in

order to diminish your testimony for Christ and it's all false, and Jesus says when that happens, blessing be upon you.

So persecution may be verbal, it may be unfair treatment. Yes, it may be physical abuse, it may be imprisonment, it may be death. How does persecution come to us? It comes to us in a wide variety of ways but, beloved, for those of you whom I'm about to describe, let this be that which would bring encouragement to your heart. If you hear yourself being described in what I'm about to say, realize that Christ brought you here today in order to speak words of grace and encouragement to your heart and to say that Christ knows, it brings to your mind that Christ is aware of these things, that he anticipated it, and his full intention and promise is to bless you in the midst of them.

So what is persecution? It may be the worker who is passed over for a promotion because of his biblical ethics. It may be the student who is penalized for speaking biblical truth in a college classroom. It may be the woman who loses a friendship for rebuking gossip in the church. It's often the Christian rejected, criticized, badgered by those in their family that they cherish. They say, "Why are you doing this?" And what I want you to see, those and a thousand more that we could illustrate it with, seeing that Jesus graciously deals with his church here today through his word and says, as it were, makes it known that he understands that life is like this for us, that there are these slights that are minor, there are more significant costs, that people pay in the land of Russia, it was common for Christians not to be able to get good work because they were excluded from the jobs because of their fidelity to Christ and all of a sudden livelihood is at stake in addition to the other ways, and what Christ does in his word and, oh beloved, I want you to love him for this, having anticipated it in advance, Christ gives us a permanent record that has endured for 2,000 and will continue to endure forever and ever amen, Christ gives in his word his promise that he will bless us, that he will bestow favor upon us, that he sees that and it's not lost on him that you're suffering for Christ in your family, in your workplace, in school, wherever it may be. And what I want you to see it's the fact of persecution, not the particular form that it takes, that Jesus is blessing. It's the fact. You say, "Well, it's just some family slights, Lord. You know, it's really not that big a deal." Not to Jesus. "No. No, you're suffering those wounds on my behalf," Christ would say. "I intend to honor that."

And what I love about this passage of Scripture here in the Beatitudes where Jesus has set such lofty standards of character, what I love about this is when he talks about persecution, he doesn't talk about imprisonment or martyrdom or those things that probably only a fraction of Christians throughout the ages are actually going to suffer, he goes to the areas of verbal abuse, harassment and insults that to us seem minor by comparison but which are not lost on the books of heaven. And where someone has given you a Judas kiss and betrayed you later on because of your commitment to Christ, our Lord graciously comes and, as it were, wipes that kiss away and replaces it with his blessing upon your life and heart. How gracious, how wonderful, how loving. We say, "Lord, this just seems so mild by comparison," and yet what you see is that Christ values – watch this – Christ values the faithfulness in your life that produces that adverse reaction against you so much to reward and bless you and to make it prominent in his

word that he intends not to forget. Bless his holy name. Those of you that have lost position because of commitment to biblical conviction, the blessing of Christ rests upon you. Those of you that have lost relationships, that suffer estrangement, the blessing of Christ rests upon you, guaranteed not by me but by his own precious word. And as we look to the future, as the Christian people throughout the world and we look to the future and maybe things become more severe, we'll rest on the same promise that he gives to us here.

So, beloved, have you suffered for Christ? Have family members isolated and mocked you in get-togethers? This is Thanksgiving week, there is a lot of this ahead for some of you. Let this be that which would prepare your heart for those family times with unbelieving family members that have mocked you throughout the time and just let it prepare you and equip you to be gracious through that and to accept it with an eye on Christ as it comes. Have you suffered for Christ? Our Lord speaks blessing to you. Have you been kissed by Judas? Beloved, here's what you have to see. That hurt is a blessing from God. You have the privilege of sharing in the suffering of Christ. Judas literally kissed Christ and then handed him over to the Roman soldiers. In a false act of affection, one that had been with Christ and experienced his teaching and blessing for three solid years betrayed him at the drop of a hat for 30 pieces of silver. Christ says, "They did it to me. They'll do it to you. When they do, I'll see it and I won't forget." You see, beloved, what those things are doing is that they are showing that you have true salvation, not the cheap imitation that won't survive the fires of judgment. You have the real deal because it's to you and to you alone belongs the kingdom of heaven. Those that have suffered for the name of Christ are the ones that he'll gladly enter in and receive into his kingdom. Beloved, Christ sees. Beloved, Christ cares. Beloved, Christ will never forget. Beloved, Christ will bless you in the end.

And what do we say in response to that? What do we say in response to the reality that you will pay a price to follow Christ? What do we say in response to that? The true believer says this from the bottom of his heart, with the fullness of all of his affections, with a conviction that says, "Here I stand. I can do no other and I would do no other if I could," the true believer says, "No cost is too great as I follow Christ. I won't be the hypocrite that wants the crown without the cross. I won't hold the nail-pierced hands of Jesus with hands unscarred by persecution of my own." The true believer looks up to heaven, sees, as it were, the wounds of Christ, the persecution that was inflicted on him by which he bore our sins, by which he purchased our eternal redemption, by which he showered us with grace, we look up to heaven, as it were, we see those wounds and we say, "Lord, my heart is filled to overflowing with gratitude for that. Lord, you suffered on earth on my behalf, gratefully, Lord, will I suffer on your behalf in the short time that you give. Your sufferings for me were redemptive. Mine aren't like that. They are simply the meager price I pay for belonging to you."

Is that the resolve of your heart? Do you know something of this kind of persecution? Jesus says great reward awaits you. Jesus says the favor of God is upon you. And whatever, however that reward looks, whatever it looks like if we use the figure of a crown, when we are in heaven and he has rewarded us like this, the believing heart, the

desire of the believing heart is simply going to want to throw that reward back at his feet and say, "Lord, this is all from you to begin with. You take the reward. You take the glory. You take the credit. I just give it all over to you because my suffering was in response to a redemptive love that I never could have earned and that you graciously gave."

"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What will that reward be like? We'll see that next week. Come back and join us.

Let's pray.

Father, we ask you to shape us in the righteous character that will either repel men or draw them to Christ. And when the fruit of righteousness is seen, however imperfectly through our mortal and passing lives, O God, and when that brings suffering to us, when it brings suffering to those under the sound of my voice, O God, comfort them with these precious words from Christ. Let them see the false accusations, let them see the insults, let them see the separations for what they are, and let that recognition drive them back to Christ, back to his blessing, back to his love, back to his care, and may they find rest and peace for their souls in the embrace of the loving arms of the most gracious Lord and Savior. O Jesus, thank you for bearing the wounds. Thank you for carrying the cross. Thank you for hanging there in the torments of eternal judgment being rained down upon you, bearing the full weight of the eternal judgment which should have been on us for our sins; loving us, keeping us, saving us at such great cost of your precious life. We thank you that in the Gospel it is made known that Christ Jesus died for sinners just like you, that God raised him from the dead on the third day and now he freely offers forgiveness of sin and eternal life to everyone who'd come to him in repentance and faith. Sanctify that message, Father, to the hearts of all that are here apart from Christ. And for those of us that know you, Lord, may we find everlasting comfort, joy and security in the perfect salvation that you purchased with your perfect blood. We honor you today and if you would bring suffering to us, Father, we will count it a privilege to suffer for Christ and we'll keep our eyes on him as we go. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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