

BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED

Message 17

Scripture: Genesis 4:1-9

INTRO: In our last message we introduced the subject of persecution. I said that persecution is a huge subject. What we have in this beatitude is found in Genesis 4:1-9 (read). Here we have the first two boys born to Adam and Eve, and one persecuted the other to the death. And the reason was the precise one given in our passage, Matthew 5:10. It was because Abel's righteousness' inflamed his brother.

I have read that today there are some 200 million Christians that live under persecution. I expect that includes nominal Christianity. One hundred and sixty five thousand or likely more by now, die for their faith every year. Some eighty percent of those who are called Christians live under persecution. Those numbers probably refer to such as live under life threatening situations, the actual number could be higher.

The organization called "Voice of The Martyrs" was started by Richard Wurmbrandt and they work especially with persecuted people around the world. I am saddened to say that they have become quite liberal in their views. They fail to distinguish between Catholics and Evangelicals, and in a recent magazine showing a map of the world, they shamelessly left out Israel, and put in Palestine as a country. One wonders what Richard Wurmbrandt would have to say to that. He was a Jew. Nevertheless, the organization is committed to reaching out to the persecuted and it is and always has been a needy ministry.

In our text of the beatitudes we have come to the last beatitude, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We have said that those who follow through the previous seven beatitudes will come to this one. I mentioned last message that John MacArthur has said, "Those who have been persecuted are the citizens of the kingdom, those who live out the previous seven beatitudes. To the degree that they fulfill the first seven they may experience the eighth."

IX. BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED

A. The Results of Being Peacemakers

1. What happens in essence

Our first point this morning will be the results of peacemaking. The results of becoming peacemakers is persecution. That is what happens in essence. For the

first six beatitudes point A. always spoke of a particular characteristic of the one described in that beatitude. There was the characteristic of being poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, being merciful, and being pure in heart etc... Then in beatitude seven we had this change. For six beatitudes something was happening inside the blessed person. But in the seventh, we suddenly had a change. Rather than describing something happening inside the blessed person, we found the blessed man reaching out to others.

Now, peacemaking might still be viewed as a characteristic, but I saw it more that in the first six something was happening inside the blessed person. And when those six had happened within the believer, it then led to the blessed person reaching out to help others. The blessed person, into whom the six characteristics had been worked, now found himself reaching out to others. He became a peacemaker.

We said that peacemaking has to do with dealing with sin. It is the most dangerous work there is and most naturally leads to persecution. So the first six beatitudes dealt with God's work in the heart of the Christian, where He conforms the Christian to the image of Christ. These things happen in the Christian. They then cause the Christian to become a peacemaker. Now the blessed man is reaching out and leading others to become poor in spirit who then are to follow through the same process.

But, it is in this peacemaking process that the believer meets opposition; opposition of the fiercest kind. Here he meets the Satanic hosts. The blessed man has become a threat to the kingdom of darkness. The conclusion then is that the first seven beatitudes will lead to persecution.

Now, let me ask you, what makes me sure that the interpretation is correct that the peacemaking will lead to persecution? When I learned the principles of subtraction in math, I learned a method of double-

checking to make sure I was right. I had a lot of trouble when one of the numbers I was subtracting was bigger than the one I was subtracting from. And then I learned that if I added the number of my answer to the number I was subtracting, and the last digit was the same as the top number, I was correct.

How do I know that the interpretation that peacemakers will suffer persecution is correct? I double checked the answer. I said that peacemaking would lead to meeting the devil face to face. It would cause great trouble to the peacemaker. It would bring both non-Christians and professing nominal Christians down on him. That was beatitude number seven. Now look at beatitude number eight, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." Here is the evidence that peacemakers will suffer persecution. Beatitude eight follows right after beatitude seven. So the Apostle Paul says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

2. What persecution is

But there is something we have left out for quite some time and which we must now deal with. It is defining persecution. It is interesting that both the Greek and Hebrew words translated 'to persecute' come from a word meaning 'to pursue'. The English word for persecution, which comes from a Latin word, also means *to pursue*, and that is the basic thought behind persecution. The basic idea behind the word to persecute is that of pursuing after. You could look at persecution like this: It is *pursue cution*. In its extreme, it leads to execution. Interestingly, one of the Hebrew words has the idea of setting on fire or kindling or burning. So it is heated or angry pursuit. To persecute has the idea of chasing, driving away, or pursuing. The effort of persecution is to get rid of a certain kind or certain kinds of people.

A basic dictionary definition would go something like this: "Persecution is the systematic mistreatment of an individual or group based on race, religion, gender,

sexuality or political beliefs." Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, in his book "The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church: Faith That Endures," a book which was recommended by Paul Estebrooks who works with Open Doors, says this: "Christian persecution is any hostility, experienced from the world, as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile feelings, attitudes, words, and actions" (pg. 114).

Now one might add to the idea of hostility from the world, hostility from religious people and even professing Christians; and maybe even Christians. When you look at persecution in both the old and new Testaments, persecution for the faith came most often from professing believers. Twice the NT uses this phrase, 'from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zacharias.' It is not sure who this Zacharias was but it may well refer to the first and last OT martyrs before John the Baptist. And who killed the prophets of Israel? It was professing believers who did not like the truth shared by the prophets. You see, when professing believers don't like the message of truth, they do away with the messenger. That is the way of mankind.

When we come to the NT, who killed John the Baptist? The world or professing believers? Well, it was Herod, who was also part Jew. Who persecuted Christ, the world or professing believers? Who instigated the death of Christ, the world or professing believers? Professing believers. Who persecuted the early Christians. Well, it was both the world and professing believers. Who persecuted Paul after he stopped persecuting Christians? Well, most of the times it was professing believers. For a large part of the history of Christianity, it was the Catholic Church that persecuted true believers. They claimed to be the true Church, but they were guilty of persecuting true Christians. Today, the majority of persecution for Christians comes from Muslims, who are also religious.

John Leoffler speaks of two types of persecution. The first is formal persecution. It is when the government decides something is legal or illegal and it is contrary to true godliness. He says this provides a moral and legal cover for persecution. Let me give an example. Let us say the government decided that Christian pastors must marry same gender couples. And when they refuse, they must pay a fine or go to jail. That is formal persecution.

Then there is informal persecution. He described that as when society in general dislikes some sub groups, for example, Christians in Islamic countries. But informal persecution becomes much slipperier than that.

Then he says there are two ways of enforcing persecution. The formal way is coercion, pressure. Here such things as economic pressure, legal pressure, force, weapons, societal; for example they won't let you use their schools, hospitals etc...

The second way he gave was informal which he said operates by co-opting. This, he said, is going on right now in many churches in the West. You are convinced of going along with the new world view, while thinking you are sticking with the old view world. This is seriously dangerous because you usually don't see it coming. That is where much of North American evangelicalism is today.

Leoffler also said this, "I have seen pastors who are faced with an ethical situation all of a sudden buckle. It was either do what was right or lose their job or this or that, and they buckled" end quote. We have seen that as well. And this is what he said that I think is most crucial: "You must know ahead of time what you are going to do."

Let me mention one other thing here that we need to note. It is argued sometimes to what extent one must suffer before it can be classed as persecution. For example, some say that for something to qualify as

persecution, one must at least lose some blood. The question is, how bad do things have to be before it can be classed as persecution?

The way I see it, persecution comes in all sizes. A look of scorn can be a form of persecution. If you enter a room, and everything gets quiet because of what you stand for, and after you leave it causes talk, that is a form of persecution; though it is very mild. When I was going to school we were looked down on and called names, at times, because of what religion our parents were. That is a mild form of persecution. But, this is not the kind of persecution Jesus is talking about here. So let us look at that under the next point, "What persecution Jesus is talking about."

3. What brings on this persecution

So, we have seen what happens to the peacemakers. They will be persecuted. Then we have defined what persecution is in general. It is, "The systematic mistreatment of an individual or group based on race, religion, gender, sexuality or political beliefs." But now we want to see what brings on the kind of persecution Jesus is talking about here. So we have come to a very important part of our text. You see, our text said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted..." That is as far as we have come at this point. But what follows is most crucial. It is, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

That last phrase is very important. Let me point out the importance of that last phrase by telling you what our text does not say. It does not say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted." Nor yet does it say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for being Christians..." What it does say is, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake."

I told you that when I went to school we were sometimes mistreated because of what our parents believed. It was not for righteousness sake. It was not even for our

parents' righteousness. Sometimes we were called derogatory names. We were made to feel like junk. And sometimes we beat up on those who called us names. One time one of my brothers put such a name-caller on the ground, while the other brother took off his belt and gave him a licking. We were not persecuted for righteousness sake. We persecuted our persecutors.

You see, our text very clearly describes what qualifies for being persecuted in the way that Jesus meant. It is when one is persecuted for righteousness sake. I gave you a quote by Ronald Boyd-McMillan before. He said, "Christian persecution is any hostility, experienced from the world, as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile feelings, attitudes, words, and actions" (pg. 114).

But that is not what Jesus was talking about here. One, can experience hostility as a result of one's identification with Christ, but that is not what Jesus is talking about here. You see, the Magazine, "Voice Of The Martyrs", gives many people as persecuted for their identification with Christ who are Catholics. But they are not necessarily persecuted for 'righteousness' sake.

Now what Jesus recognized in our text is that righteousness would bring about opposition. It brings opposition from non-Christians and from nominal Christians, and sometimes, I think, from truly born again believers; and that for various reasons.

Do right in the world, or do right in the church, both will bring about persecution, unless it is a godly church! As a matter of fact, given the present condition of the church in general, in North America there is more hope of escaping persecution from the world than from professing Christians when one obeys the commands of Scripture!

But let me go a little further. We may be persecuted for what seems like righteousness' sake, but it is not yet what our text is talking about. We are not blessed

if we are abrasive with our Christianity, or lacking in wisdom or tact, or when we are truly fanatical. D. Martyn Lloyd Jones says, "I once remember a poor man who not only brought suffering upon himself, but also upon his wife on account of his zeal. He was over zealous, and he was not facing some injunctions given by the Lord Himself, because he was so anxious to be testifying" (1904). That is not the persecution Jesus is talking about here.

We may also find ourselves in trouble for compromise which we do not want to admit or for doing something for our own selfish reasons, and we were doing this as appearing for the sake of the Lord. And then when we find ourselves in some trouble, we may act the victim. We may act like we are being persecuted or suffering for righteousness' sake. That also is not what Jesus is talking about here. First Peter 2:20 says, "For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God." Then in 3:17 he says, "For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."

Jones further offers this, in showing what Jesus is not talking about. He says, "Let us look at one final negative; this Beatitude does not even say, Blessed are they that are persecuted for being good, or noble, or self sacrificing. There again, of course, is another vital and, it seems to some people, subtle distinction", end quote.

The persecution Jesus is talking about is for 'righteousness' sake'. Now, let me ask you, why does righteousness draw persecution? Let me tell you what it is. Lucifer, a very high ranking angel fell into the sin of pride. He wanted glory for himself. He wanted to be glorified by man. Glory is for many the most highly prized possession there is. Go to the chapter before our text, Matthew 4 (read 8-9). How many does Satan get glory from? From by far the majority of people in the world. And one must understand what glory is to get the import of what Satan promised Jesus here. Now, how does

Satan get glory from man? How does man glorify Satan? It is through sin. Every kind of wrong glorifies Satan. And it is entirely opposed to God, and what glorifies Him. What glorifies God is every kind of righteousness. What glorifies Satan is every kind of sin. When we steal, we glorify Satan. When we lie, we glorify Satan. When we do things in underhanded ways we glorify Satan. Name any sin, and doing it glorifies Satan. You see, sin is doing wrong; whether it be in thought, word or action.

But doing right, glorifies God. And when we do right, we are doing things precisely contrary to Satan's ways. And by doing so, we arouse the attention of Satan. He hates righteousness to such an extent that he will do what he can to shut us down. And he has ways that may even appear to be right, but they are not, and he will trap us into that if he can.

Now, when we defined persecution we said the basic idea is to pursue. The idea is that of chasing, driving away, or pursuing. And let me ask this: when persecution is for righteousness' sake, who is pursuing whom? Here is the answer: Satan is pursuing Christ. He hates Him. He wants to destroy Him. He hates righteousness. He hates truth. He hates Christians who do righteousness. And when Christians do right, Satan pursues Christ through them.

Let me quote MacMillan for an interesting insight, "Persecution is the pursuit of Christ through us, carried on by the flesh, the world, and the devil" (115). When we live right and we are persecuted for it, Jesus is suffering in us! When you suffer for Christ, He is suffering. Furthermore, those who persecute have some areas in their lives where Satan has a foothold, and he is using those people for that.

Somewhere in the future I must do one more message on demonism. There is a kind of thinking so rampant among Christians that Satan can use many Christians without their awareness of it. That is so because of this kind of thinking. Here is that misleading thinking: "Christians cannot have demons." I must deal with that some time. Furthermore, Satan can use well-meaning Christians who are either not taught well or misinformed. Satan can and he will pursue Christ through

some Christians, I have no doubt about that. And he does that work through demons.

Now let me say this: Righteousness is a powerful thing. Let me assure you of this: Righteousness will draw fire. John MacArthur says, "Righteousness is confrontational, and even when it is not preached in so many words, it confronts wickedness by its very contrast." Here is what he is saying. When you do right, even though you do not tell anyone who does wrong that they are doing wrong, that is the message they will get.

Let me give you an example. You are sitting in a group and somebody tells a colored joke and the group laughs but you don't. You have spoken so loudly that everybody heard. Kindly refuse an alcoholic beverage, and you will have the same response.

MacArthur then goes on to say, "Abel did not preach to Cain, but Abel's righteous life, typified by his proper sacrifice to the Lord, was a constant rebuke to his wicked brother—who in a rage finally slew him. When Moses chose to identify with his own despised Hebrew people rather than compromise himself in the pleasures of pagan Egyptian society, he paid a great price. But he considered 'the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt' ([Heb. 11:26](#))." And as Moses bore the reproaches of Christ, so we are to go with Christ outside the camp.

Last message I quoted to you from Allen Redpath as given in the, "Sunday Digest" dated September 17, 1995. He starts off by saying, "The very fact that a work is of God will always arouse the opposition of the enemy." Let me change that to this and then continue reading: "When one does right in the power of the indwelling Christ it will stir the hatred of men whose sinful lives are a challenge by way of contrast. I would ask you to assess your own experience by that statement. Wherever the temple of the Holy Spirit is being built up in the Christian heart and a work of grace is going on, if the child of God is building upon the foundation which is Christ and seeks to become more like the Lord, you can be sure that such a life is arousing hatred, opposition and bitterness...

Satan is never an opponent to orthodoxy. It is well to remember that. The Pharisees were the most orthodox people you could find. Satan is never the opponent of religion or of mere creed, but he is always antagonistic to every evidence of the Holy Spirit life. Through the Christian's journey and through all the battle, Satan will do all in his power to drag such a man down to prove that his strength is greater than the strength of Jesus Christ Himself. Does your Christian life constitute a challenge? Does it arouse opposition?"

John Gill says this regarding the words, 'for righteousness sake', "...on account of their righteous and godly conversation (life), which brings upon them the hatred and enmity of the men of the world: for saints, by living righteously, separate themselves from them, and profess themselves not to belong to them; their religious life sets a brand upon, and distinguishes other persons; yea, it reproveth and condemns their wicked lives and practices; and this fills them with wrath against them, and puts them on persecuting them..."

Martyn Lloyd Jones says, "All these Beatitudes have been searching, but there are ways in which this is even more searching than the others." Why would he say that? Because we need only ask ourselves, "What have I suffered for righteousness' sake?" (1881).

Then he goes on to say, "But let me hasten to add that perhaps there is no Beatitude where we have to be quite so careful, there is no Beatitude that is so liable to misconstruction and misunderstanding. There is certainly no Beatitude that has been so frequently misunderstood and miss-applied. Therefore we must approach it with great circumspection and care. It is a vital statement, an essential and integral part of the whole teaching of the New Testament. You will find it right through the Gospels and Epistles. Indeed, we can go so far as to say that it is one of the great characteristic messages of the whole Bible, which

carries its inevitable implication with it. I suggest, therefore, that the most important thing to emphasize is this phrase, 'for righteousness' sake'. It does not merely say, 'blessed are they which are persecuted', but 'blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake'."

C. The Promise to The Persecuted

We come then to the promise of this beatitude. It is this, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We will not deal with this promise here, as we have done so in the first beatitude. Then in the third beatitude, we looked at the promise that the meek shall inherit the earth. That, as I see it, begins in the millennium, but it will go on for all eternity when the earth is renewed and God comes down from heaven to dwell with man forever.

So, in three of the eight promises, we have in view the millennium, but in the first beatitude and in this eighth one the promise is present tense, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Lord willing I will take us through the parables of Jesus that relate to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. I will deal there in much greater depth on this kingdom. Anyone familiar with this study knows how big that subject is.

So, the first and last beatitude end with the promise that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the blessed person. If, in all reality, we could grasp this promise we would find it worth all and much more than the flesh, the world and the devil can hurl against us in one life-time.

CONCL: And I want to close by giving us some instructions. I gave these points in a message I did on persecution some years ago. This is a shortened version. Here is instruction on what to do when you are persecuted for righteousness sake.

First, on the negative side of things: Do not be offended in Christ. To be offended in Christ is to say, "If that is what comes from serving Christ, I am done." Scripture says we know that all things work together for good to those who love God. It

does not say, "We suppose..." It says, "We know." When John the Baptist had poured out his life for Christ and was sitting in jail in the prime of his life, he came close being offended in Christ. And when John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Him if He was really the Christ, Jesus said, "You go tell John all the things that I do. And then, tell John, "Blessed is he who is not offended in Me."

Second, do not seek to avenge yourself. In Romans 12:9 we have the clearest instruction on this: "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." Now I want to show you something in this verse. It says that rather than avenging ourselves, we are to, 'give place to wrath.' I understand this to mean to make room for God's wrath. You see, the word vengeance has to do with justice and God will do justice, but that doing is His business. So, on anything you would like to see justice and it is not happening, say, "Lord, here is my situation. Here is this huge injustice that I see. I am really working with my attitude. But now Lord, I surrender it into Your hands. I give it to You. You do not have to fix it in my lifetime. I fully trust You with it." And then, anytime you find yourself thinking negative about this again say, "I'm sorry Lord, I had surrendered this to You."

Third, never allow yourself to become bitter. Oh, this can be a battle. If you struggle here, listen again to the messages on the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart."

But, then on the positive side, first; be honest. It is so difficult to know sometimes what to do. You meet some who have committed great wrongs and when you meet them they are so very friendly, "Oh hi, how are you?" You would think everything has been fixed. That is hypocrisy of the highest kind. Oh, Lord for wisdom. You might have to say something like, "I'm sorry. I cannot pretend as if there is nothing wrong. Before I can act as if nothing is wrong, some things need to be fixed." It is very hard sometimes to be honest.

The second thing I want to encourage anyone who is persecuted to is to patiently endure. Turn with me to Hebrews 12 (read 1-2). Jesus, knowing what lay ahead, that is what would happen after the cross, endured the cross and all that went with it. They

spit on Him. They hit Him. They mocked Him. They dressed Him in purple kings clothes and they made a crown of thorns for Him, and He endured. Some things must be endured.

There may be times when you are persecuted when you will want to cave in. Let me remind us this morning of Richard Wurmbrand who endured such suffering that one night he wrote these words to his son, "Mihai, the end has arrived. I cannot bear it any more. I have saved thirty pills. The torture has become too painful. I am afraid I will crack. I will take the pills... Choose, Mihai, the way of sacrifice. I cannot. I am deserting to another world. Do better than me, Mihai. Bear what I could not bear. Love Jesus and endure to the end. Mihai, make mother happy. Tell her I loved her and that I am sorry I have sometimes been unkind to her. My last word to you Mihai is: 'Love the Lord Jesus.' Do better than I Mahai" (155-156). But the Lord sent the guards at the last minute and they unknowingly removed the mattress where the pills were hidden. And Wurmbrand lived."

Wurmbrandt says, "This erodes the faith of many and they break down. They lose God. Why? It is because their God has been an idol. They believed in God as an errand boy. Many of us believe the same. Every morning we tell Him: 'Dear God, good morning. Please do this and this, and see about my health and the health of my family.' Those who believed in God as an errand boy had an idol. This idol did not remain; it did not fulfill their errands." The word here is this: Endure!

Let me give you one more positive thing to do, rejoice! Here is the hardest of all. We will be looking at that a little more in our last message on these beatitudes.