

Matthew 5:1-12

Preparing for the Inevitable

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake...v. 12

Some might consider it a wonder that those who heard Christ preach this sermon didn't leave after hearing the words of this final beatitude – the way many would later leave when Christ would speak of His body and blood. Persecution? Men reviling and persecuting and saying all manner of evil against you falsely? Is this really the portion of those that are subjects to the kingdom of heaven? This hardly would have fit the picture that was common in the Jewish mind of the Messiah's kingdom militarily and politically.

I believe that this final beatitude shows us a marked contrast to all the other beatitudes. We've noticed a spiritual progression in the order of these beatitudes and if we were to include this beatitude in that progression I think we could say that this beatitude reveals the indestructible faith of those that are subjects to the kingdom of heaven. Having seen their spiritual bankruptcy and mourned over their sins – having submitted meekly to God's terms of salvation and having gained the righteousness that they hungered and thirsted for through the imputed righteousness of Christ – we've seen that the lives of the subjects of the kingdom of heaven are transformed.

They are enabled now to forgive others and be merciful; they reach for their highest ideal as they strive for purity and know the blessing of Christ's presence. They see Him with the eye of faith. And they take on the mission of the kingdom by spreading the news of the gospel of peace – and now we see that having undergone all that I've described they also will endure whatever they must for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Their faith, while knowing different levels of strength under varying circumstances, will prove in the end to be indestructible.

So there is still this spiritual progression and yet there is also a marked contrast between this beatitude from the others. And this contrast is readily seen by the way the Lord Jesus expands this beatitude in the verses that follow and places emphasis on the blessing of it. I take it to be a single beatitude with a double emphasis because of the subject matter and the subject is the inevitability of persecution. It's readily apparent that verses 11 & 12 explain in more detail what the Lord says in v. 10.

I also believe it can and should be understood as being distinct from the other beatitudes because of the way the Lord not only expands it – but He also becomes very direct for the first time when He leaves the style of speaking in which He utilizes the third person and more directly addresses His audience in v. 11 by saying *Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you...*

Up to this point in the first 7 beatitudes the Lord has been giving us general descriptions that show us the true character and actions of every subject of the kingdom of heaven. The poor in spirit – the meek – the merciful – the pure in heart – the peacemakers, these are all character descriptions. Those that mourn – those that hunger and thirst for righteousness –

these describe the actions of the subjects of the kingdom. I believe that when our Lord reaches this 8th and final beatitude His focus shifts in such a way that He's not now giving a description of the subjects or the actions of the subjects of the kingdom of heaven but what He's doing is shifting our attention from the character and actions of His subjects to what the true subjects of the kingdom of heaven can expect.

Notice how in this beatitude there is nothing to describe their character or their actions – the subjects of the kingdom are now viewed in the passive mode as the Lord explains and emphasizes what they will have to endure. This beatitude anticipates what would soon be the portion of Christ's disciples. Notice that He says *blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you.*

It's plain to see from this beatitude that the Lord Jesus is now preparing His followers for what would be their portion from the devil and the world. And that's how this beatitude must be seen – as a precept of preparation. You could say that the Lord Jesus was preparing His disciples for the inevitable. And that's how I want you to see this beatitude today. It serves the same purpose today. The Lord would have you prepare for the inevitable – therefore:

We Must Prepare for the Inevitable

And in the moments that remain I want to draw from this portion of Scripture the lessons that can be drawn from it that will enable you to prepare for the Inevitable. How then do we prepare for what's inevitable? We do so first of all:

I. By Knowing What to Expect -

And the Lord Jesus leaves us no doubt as to what to expect. This is one aspect of the beatitude that receives a strong point of emphasis when our Lord says in v. 10 *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake* and when He says in v. 11 *Blessed are ye, when [men] shall revile you, and persecute [you], and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.*

Such a statement, spoken with the emphasis of being stated twice marks the absolute certainty of our Lord's prophetic prediction. You may recall from the story of Joseph back in the later chapters of Genesis that when Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream he pointed out that Pharaoh's dreams were one and the fact that it had been repeated to him in different images served to mark the certainty of the dream. I think the same thing applies to this beatitude. The Lord Jesus is marking the certainty or as I've said the inevitability of what would await the children of God.

Such a statement might seem discouraging on the surface of it but the Lord Jesus also indicates in His explanation of the beatitude that this is nothing new. *For so persecuted they the prophets which were before you* He says in v. 12. And what the Lord predicts as the portion of His people has been borne out by history – by the history of the Old Testament church and the New Testament church.

It's in reference to the Old Testament church that we read in Heb. 11 of those who walked by faith who brought forth great conquests both in terms of what they accomplished and in the case of others for what they endured (Heb. 11:36ff). We find the same phenomenon in the book of Acts where we read in Ac 8:1 *And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria...*

Here is persecution in the true sense of the term. The word *persecute* carries the literal meaning of *being put to flight* or *being driven away*. The concept, however, is broader than that as our Lord explains in v. 11. Persecution also takes into account being reviled and being slandered. I'm reminded of the testimony of the church in the age following the apostles. It seems that the practice of abandoning babies was as common then as abortion is today. And members of the early church were to known to gather up these abandoned babies in order to save their lives and raise them for the Lord. Such was the slander against them, however, that they were accused of stealing babies in order to sacrifice them to devils.

And so the history of the church vindicates this beatitude spoken by the Lord Jesus. Read the accounts of the early martyrs in Fox's book of martyrs. Read the accounts of the Scottish Covenanters who were chased from their churches and chased from their homes. I'm sure many of you have seen the drawings of a worship service held in some secluded field in Scotland. I can see in my minds eye a picture of a communion service held outdoors. Men and women are seated on the grass while lookouts are posted a little further out to watch for the invading dragoons who would scatter them and arrest them and kill them for the simple act of worshipping Christ outside the established church which was given over to apostasy.

Such things seem foreign to us now in this nation of ours where we've never been driven from our churches or from our homes for the sake of Christ. Some have nearly been driven from their jobs. I can remember a time or two when my job came close to be putting on the line. But we're the exception – not the norm. And even to this day persecution abounds toward Christians in other lands to the point where some have identified this very day as marking the most widespread and intense day of persecution that the church has ever known.

Our brother, Ruben, made the remark to me some time back that it's impossible for modern day missionaries in America to buy life insurance if they're going to serve as missionaries in foreign countries. And don't we know that missionaries today are viewed with contempt even within our nation. They're portrayed as trouble makers in the media. They only contribute to social unrest and to the murder of others when they manage to lure people away from the longstanding religions of their homeland in order to embrace Christianity.

Now the reason for such a heritage and such modern day hostility is not hard to trace. It boils down to the truth that the gospel, by its very nature, confronts sinners with their sin.

Remember the order of the beatitudes that we've been noting all along. They begin with the acknowledgement that we're spiritually impoverished and that we're sinners with plenty to mourn over. This is the beginning of the gospel. It's the same way the apostle Paul begins his exposition of the gospel in his epistle to the Romans. Two and a half chapters are devoted to establishing the universal guilt of all mankind before the positive exposition of the gospel begins in 3:21.

And the sinner in his pride doesn't want to hear it and doesn't want to face it. It provokes his anger to have to face the truth of his sin and eternal destiny in hell on account of his sin. This is why we need the Holy Spirit to attend the preaching of the gospel. Because if the Holy Spirit doesn't attend the preaching of the gospel to subdue the rebellious and proud hearts of men then men will be hostile toward a gospel that begins by confronting them with their sin.

What an indictment our Lord brings by this beatitude to the modern church in America today. What is the philosophy of the church's ministry today? Is it not a philosophy that seeks to avoid the pronouncement of Christ? Is it not a philosophy that says *do all in your power to avoid confrontation and instead be as accommodating as you possibly can to the world*. Such a philosophy we can readily see makes for fast growth and makes for easy growth and makes for comfortable growth in such a culture of affluence and ease.

May the Lord spare us from such compromise. The Lord's blessing in this beatitude is not given to those who don't have the courage to face the hostility of the world. It's not pronounced upon those who find ways to compromise the gospel of the kingdom in order to avoid the inevitable confrontation that the gospel by its very nature conveys. The Lord's blessing, rather, is pronounced upon those who suffer for righteousness sake and for His name's sake.

And if we would prepare, then, for the inevitable hostility of the world then we must be grounded in this gospel of the kingdom. We must know and appreciate its power to save through its power to confront sinners in their sin and then point them to Christ. Have you not discovered that power in your own life? Did you not find your own pride provoked before the Holy Spirit gave you the grace to surrender to Christ?

The first thing we must do, then, in preparing for the inevitable is to know what to expect. On the surface of it this would seem like a discouraging and disheartening thing to have to face. And I should say in leaving this point that while we're aware of what we will face – this is not the primary thing for us to dwell on. And this leads to my next point – for if we would prepare for the inevitable we must not only know what to expect but we must also prepare for the inevitable:

II. By Remembering that We are Indeed Blessed

If the double mention of persecution makes certain the hostility of the world – the double mention of blessing makes certain the favor that we have from Christ. And this is where our Lord becomes most emphatic. *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness*

sake – He says in v. 10. And then it's as if the Lord is able to look directly into the eye of each member of His audience to add force to the statement when He says in v. 11 – *blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my name's sake.*

I believe that the key to preparation rests here especially. There are those, you see, who seem so fond of dwelling on the negative aspect of the world's hostility that they fail to see the matter that the Lord is stressing even more strongly. It's as if they go day by day saying *woe is me. I'm a Christian and that means that terrible things await me. I wonder if the sky is going to fall today? I wonder if I'll lose my job today? I wonder if I'll be apprehended and executed today? It sure is hard being a Christian. I wonder if it's worth it?*

And while I would not want to downplay that the actual challenges and difficulties that Christians face in such a way that I would run the risk of trivializing those difficulties – at the same time I can't help but notice a very different picture of those early Christians that's given to us in the book of Acts.

They were *scattered abroad* Acts 8:4 tells us. And that's all it says regarding their persecution. But stop and think about what all is encompassed by those words *scattered abroad*. It means they were fleeing for their lives. It means they had to leave their homes and leave their jobs and leave their familiar surroundings. And what kind of picture is given to us of those that were *scattered abroad*? Is it a picture of downcast refugees dragging their feet in the sand with sullen expressions of sadness and lamentations?

That's not the picture at all. It says, rather, *that they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.* And in the wake of that scattering we are given in that chapter of Acts the account of Philip going to Samaria and preaching Christ to them and two verses later we're told in Acts 8:8 *and there was great joy in that city.* The scattered church, you could say, left the joy of salvation in their wake.

How could such a thing be possible? – we might well ask. How could those that had lost so much bring so much to those they came into contact with? And the answer is to be found in the fact that they knew they were blessed of God. Those early Christians in the book of Acts provide vivid proof of the consciousness God's people can have that nothing can separate them from the love of Christ.

They knew in their experience what Paul would write in Rom. 8:38,39 *For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angles, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.*

They knew they were blessed. Christ emphasizes the truth that His people are blessed. Indeed – do we not have to acknowledge that this is the thing that comes out again and again throughout the course of the beatitudes? *Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are they that mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart and the peacemakers*

and those that are persecuted for righteousness sake. Blessed are ye! – our Lord emphasizes again at the end. This is the thing that is so clearly being driven home by the Lord Jesus that the subjects of the kingdom of heaven need to have pounded in their heads and hearts – you are blessed!

You are blessed with the possession of the kingdom of heaven – you are blessed with comfort – you are blessed with the inheritance of the earth – you are blessed with being filled – you are blessed with seeing God – you are blessed with being identified as the children of God. You are blessed with the righteousness of Christ – you are blessed with the peace of the gospel.

And when you come to the Lord's explanation of this final beatitude you can add – you are blessed with your association of a godly heritage in the prophets who have gone before you and you are blessed with great reward in heaven which awaits you. There's just no way around it – the subjects of the kingdom of heaven are a blessed people!

It's rather ironic, isn't it, that we actually need to be convinced that we're blessed. We tend to doubt it. We're prone to forget it – or we're lured into the devil's deception of measuring the truth of our blessedness by the passing things of this transient and sin-cursed world.

I remember that during my ordination to be the minister of this church that I testified how I consider it to be one of my primary functions in the ministry of the pulpit to convince the people of God that they're blessed. I don't believe that it takes all that much persuasion to convince the people of God that they're sinful. We know it full well. We feel all too often that we're very much alive to sin and dead to God – the very opposite of what we're called on to reckon in Romans 6.

It takes faith in Christ to realize that we're blessed. It takes the ability to see unseen things and to see through and beyond the veil of this temporal reality in which we live in order to know that we're blessed. And this becomes essential for you if you would prepare for the inevitable hostility of the world. You must be able to view that hostility in the broader context of being blessed by Christ.

How, then, do we prepare for the inevitable? We do so by knowing what to expect. We don't try to skirt the issue – we don't stick our heads in the sand and we don't compromise the gospel in order to try to change the inevitable. We simply recognize that the gospel by its very nature provokes the hostility of the world before it saves sinners from the world. And we prepare for the inevitable by viewing that hostility in the broader context of being blessed of God. It remains for us to consider that we prepare for the inevitable:

III. By Rising Above the World in the Power of our Blessedness

The devil and the flesh would tell you that you ought to look for a place to hide if you identify with Christ. You ought to tremble and fear. You ought to live each day in dread because of the devil's hostility and the world's hostility to you and to the gospel of grace. It's interesting in contrast to this frame of mind and heart to note the very first

commandment that we find given by Christ in the sermon on the mount. The tense of the verbs are important and the tense of the verbs in v. 12 is the imperative tense. The imperative tense signifies a command. Here, then, is Christ's command in the light of what to expect and in the light of how blessed you are – Christ commands you to *rejoice and be exceeding glad*.

You might think the way some Christians behave that the Lord had commanded them to be sullen and exceedingly dismayed. But He calls us on to rejoice and be exceedingly glad. And the way we're able to give heed to such a command is by rising above the world in the power of our blessedness.

There is a very present aspect to the blessing of this beatitude, you see. The beatitudes end as they began with the pronouncement that *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. As subjects of the kingdom of heaven we enjoy our blessings now. We enjoy Christ's presence now. We dwell in the realm of His favor now. It is the Holy Spirit's ministry to enable us in ever increasing measure to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length, and depth, and height of the love of Christ. And we're told in connection with that comprehension that God is able to exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think (Eph. 3:20).

This is how we rise above the world – by having the things that are ours in Christ ministered to our souls in such a way that we know the reality of the blessings we possess. When we know that reality we won't find it challenging to rejoice and be exceedingly glad in the midst of circumstances that would dictate to us otherwise but we'll find rather that this command will represent the natural motion of our hearts.

I believe this is what those early Christians knew when they were scattered abroad. They lived above the world in the power of their blessings and they couldn't be pulled down. There's no doubt that Paul knew the reality of his blessings in Christ and by knowing that reality he could write from experience to the Corinthians when he said to them in 2Cor. 4:17 *For our light affliction which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.*

This is an incredible statement by Paul when you consider all that he underwent. It takes into account his beatings and scourgings and imprisonments and shipwrecks. These things make for *light afflictions* that are but for a fleeting moment when compared to blessedness that Christ bestows.

I have often viewed with awe and amazement a text that we find in the book of Revelation. It's Rev. 12:11 which speaks of the persecuted church when it says *And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death*. Such is their victory over the world the flesh and the devil. How do they do it? – I've asked myself. How do you gain such triumph that you can love not your own life even unto the death?

And then I found a verse in the Psalms that provided for me the key to this text in Revelation. In Psalm 63:3 we read *Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee*. Here's the key. Those persecuted Christians in the book of Revelation found what the psalmist found – something that's better than life – something that's certainly better than the life of the flesh lived in a sin-cursed world where we battle with doubts and fears and all manner of besetting sins.

We find the lovingkindness of Christ – a love that reached down from heaven and brought us up from the pit of hell and set us upon Christ, the solid rock and brought to our souls the sure hope of heaven and everlasting life.

How do we prepare, then, for the inevitable? We make that preparation by knowing what to expect. We make that preparation by remembering that we're blessed and in the power of Christ's blessing we rise above the world. I wonder, today, are you prepared for the inevitable? Do you realize how blessed you are as a child of God and a subject of the kingdom of heaven? If you know your blessings then you will rise above the world. You cannot know your blessings by being focused on this world. If you're focus is on the things of this world then that which is inevitable will frighten you and weaken your resolve to be true to Christ.

But if you'll look away to the One who died in your place – the One who bore your sins – the One who provided you with righteousness and purchased you to Himself then the power of His purchased blessings for you lift you above this world and the worst that this world will bring will seem to you in comparison to your blessedness to be a thing of naught.

May Christ Himself, then, communicate to your heart that you are blessed.