

The Glory of Persecution

The Beatitudes

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I invite you to turn to the book of Matthew 5 for our final message on the Beatitudes. I often say that when we come to an end of a section of Scripture or the end of a series, it's bittersweet, and I certainly feel that tonight, not knowing if I'll ever preach through this passage at least to Truth Community Church again. But what a wonderful, searching, encouraging, challenging, passage we find from the lips of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:3 to 12. I'm going to read the entire Beatitudes, although we're focusing primarily on verse 12 here this evening, and I just want to call to your attention how it opens and where it ends here at the beginning.

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

As you look at this wonderful text, notice where it opens and where it ends, and you get a snapshot of an overview of the entirety of Christian experience, both its beginnings in the origin of our conversion and the outcome in eternity. Jesus opens the Beatitudes by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit and blessed are those who mourn." The Christian experience begins with a conviction and a brokenness of spirit, a brokenness of heart, "A broken and a contrite heart, O Lord," the Bible says, "you will not despise." We start in the ashes, you might say, of a brokenness over sin and a mourning over the way that we have broken the law of God and spurned and despised his love, and despised and turned away from our glorious and blessed Lord Jesus Christ, and you recognize that and it breaks you with sorrow over your sinful condition. That's where it opens up. That's the starting point of the new birth; it's where the new birth finds its first manifestation as in a confession and brokenness over sin. No question about that. There's a narrow gate that

we go through and those who want nothing to do with repentance, nothing to do with sorrow over sin are trying to bypass the only gate that can lead them to heaven, and preachers should take that to heart as they think about what themes they want to emphasize. That said, we've covered all of that ground many, many times, notice where the Beatitudes end, though. We begin in ashes, we end in glory and joy. Jesus says there at verse 12, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." What begins in mourning ends in joy, in eternal joy, in a sharing of the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ and the fellowship of saints throughout the ages. And so it's good for us to see these things, to see the connections, to see the overall picture of it. It's so difficult to sometimes when you're doing verse by verse teaching, it's very easy to miss the big picture of what the Scriptures have to say, and I'm mindful of that. As we go, as we move between details and big themes, you need both in order to see the full picture and here we see the full picture, the beginning of new life and brokenness over sin that continues throughout our remaining days, it's an ongoing repentance that Jesus describes, but the outcome is glory. The outcome is eternal life. And the sweetness and the prospect of that great glorious end is enough to keep us encouraged, to keep us joyful as we go along the sometimes mournful path of walking with Christ in this fallen world.

Now last week we began our study on persecution in verses 10 and 11, and it's good for us to study persecution when we're not directly feeling the effects of it, so that we can develop right convictions that could guide us when the persecution does come. And it was easier to say those words 15 years ago that we're not feeling the effects of persecution. Now, you know, we're starting to hear the faint knock at the door in some of our lives and in some of the things that are going on in the world around us, and so we really urgently need this. Every true Christian will suffer in one degree or another in his or her life, and we will be persecuted to one degree or another. That's part of the package. We cannot resist that. We cannot resent it. We must embrace it as that which our Lord has wisely appointed for us, and in embracing it, rather than saying, "I don't want that, that frightens me, I don't like to think about these things," put the old Joel Osteen tape back on. No, we don't go there. We just say, "All right, what do I do? What would the Lord have for me? How can I honor Christ in the inevitable suffering that is to come?" Because, beloved, if you settle these principles in your mind now, you can respond with joy when it comes. You can respond with courage when it comes, with conviction when it comes. Rather than shrinking back in fear, shrinking back in embarrassment over Christ, you can say with the Apostle Paul with great courage and conviction, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ for it is the power of salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

That is the way that we should want to live the Christian life is with courage and with joy and unafraid of what man can do for us, and so that's what we're looking at and over the course of last week and tonight, we are asking and answering six questions about persecution. We did three last week, we're going to do three tonight. And the first question that we asked last week, and I'm just not even going to refer to the Scriptures, just ask and answer the questions and leave to you to review the message from last time. First question we ask is, will true Christians be persecuted? Will true Christians be

persecuted? And the answer to that question is an unqualified yes, they will. In some manner or form, persecution is inevitable and we addressed that last time, last Tuesday. Now secondly, we asked this question, when will persecution come? When will persecution come? We said the answer to that question based on Jesus' words, particularly in verse 11, is that there's really no way to know. We don't know when it's going to come. The reality that sooner or later it will come, sooner or later it will come. It won't be necessarily the ongoing unbroken pattern of life for decades and decades but there will be episodes, perhaps with increasing intensity and severity, that come to us. It comes in waves like the ocean pounding against the rocks on an ocean beachside. But the persecution may come in waves, but it will come and so we just need to brace ourselves for that, to be prepared for that, and to settle in our minds a conviction that when it comes, by the grace of God, I will not flinch. I will not compromise. I will not back down.

Now, mentioning the word compromise reminds me of something that is worth saying. There is a way to avoid persecution. 1. You cannot be a Christian and you won't be persecuted for the sake of Christ, but you could certainly avoid or mitigate persecution simply by compromise. You know, that when you're challenged for your faith, you back down or fall silent. When you're mocked and ridiculed for living righteously, to go along with the crowd. You can do that, but the very thought of that should be anathema to every true, sincere Christian to say, "Compromise, why would you even suggest such a thing? That's unthinkable to me. How could I compromise? How could I back down for Christ? For so many years he has been faithful to me. He saved me. He's loved me. He's keeping me. And now you raise the specter of compromise just to avoid some temporary light affliction and persecution in this life? No way." There should be an automatic reaction in your heart against the very suggestion of the thought and it's because when a church, and I'm speaking broadly, not an individual local church, but when the church is riddled with compromise as it is today, it's not surprising that there's not a whole lot of persecution coming to it. There's nothing to contest. There's no conflict. There's no confrontation brought by a compromised church to the world that would evoke the world's hatred against Christ to be manifested against his people when they live that way, and we'll see some things in the book of Revelation a little later in tonight's message to reinforce that to us.

When will persecution come? No way to know. It comes in surprising forms from surprising people. That's okay. We just realize that when resistance and opposition come, say, "Oh, okay, no problem, no sweat here. I recognize that this is what Jesus told me to expect." And when that thought gels in your mind, then you can reestablish your feet where they're planted, stand a little straighter, stand a little taller, a little firmer, say, "This is what I was told to expect. My time has come to go through some opposition for Christ. And I'm not going away. I'm not going to compromise." That's the principle that we establish in our hearts.

Thirdly, how does persecution come to us? How does persecution come to us? What we said last time is that it comes in many forms. Some are more painful than others. A church father like Polycarp in Smyrna burned at the stake. Jesus speaks of much lesser

forms that happen to us. People say false things about us, criticize us, resist us, you know, anything from light verbal affliction to rejection by family members, to in other places and other times, even death and suffering and torture for the name of Christ. You see it in the book of Acts, Paul beaten many times, you know, that he and Silas in the Philippian jail, suffering for Christ with bleeding wounds and yet singing with joy. Persecution comes in many forms, that's the point, some of which are more painful than others. So, true Christians will be persecuted, persecution will come, we just don't know when, and persecution comes to us in many forms.

Now, one of the blessed privileges, one of the blessed privileges that you have as believers in an assembly like this and why it is so critical and so important and so good that you are so faithful to come and be together when the doors are open and when we gather together here, one of the privileges of that and one of the reasons that we need each other so much is that when one of us is going through times like that, there are others around you of like spirit who love you and who care about you, who can strengthen you and affirm you and support you, give you counsel, put their arms around you, and give you the strength to find and to carry on and to go through that you don't find anywhere else. There is a unique blessing, a unique fellowship that takes place when like-minded believers gather together and, beloved, we have the privilege of serving one another with that spirit, serving one another as we go through, and I have benefited so much from the kind comments that many of you have made to me over the years. And that's why it's so important for us not to think selfishly about the church, not to think selfishly about, "Well, you know, I've got other things to do. You know, this isn't convenient for me on many nights," or whatever. That is a selfish way to think about the church. We need to be here for each other. You never know when your presence is going to be the opportunity to encourage someone weighed down under persecution, weighed down under sorrow, and it's just so important for us to be here to be able to minister to one another in that way in private conversations that, you know, that others don't know about.

It reminds me of something that I've mentioned before. Back in California, there was a Sunday evening where I did not want to go to the evening service. I grumbled and griped about it all the way down. "I'm too tired. This is too far. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And just the carnal Don animating the conversation all the way down to the great blessing of my wife and children at the time, I'm sure. Ruby Nell. Blessed Ruby Nell. She's still living as far as I know. Blessed Ruby Nell. I got to church, had my bad attitude, just wanted things to get over with, and yet, Ruby Nell was off sitting in the place where she did, off to the far most left section, sitting there by herself. I said, well, you know, she was in our fellowship group. The least I can do is go over and talk to Ruby Nell. And so I did and whatever the conversation was, I don't remember it all now, I just remember how grateful, how thankful she was that I'd come up and talked to her, how encouraged she was, and then she in turn was such an encouragement to me with her perpetually sweet spirit. And that's the way it goes. And in my selfishness, I would have withheld that blessing from Ruby Nell because I didn't think it was convenient to go that night, and yet when I got there, the Lord in his grace used me, worked in me, gave me opportunity to be an encouragement to her, and I'm sure I forfeited whatever eternal reward there was for it

in that by my bad attitude. But the point is, the point is, beloved, we just really need to think beyond ourselves when we evaluate what we're going to be in the life of the body of the church. We need to think beyond ourselves and what we want and think about the broader body of Christ, because there are hundreds of people in our church, many of whom are suffering for the name of Christ, probably sweet enough, humble enough not to complain openly about it, but need your hand on their shoulder, your kind words saying, "I care about you, I'm praying for you, I'm with you, I'm on your side." This is how the church operates together to go collectively through the persecution that comes and to stand apart from the church in that is a dereliction of duty. It's a failure and a selfish approach to life in the church. And so many opportunities can be missed when we view church selfishly as I was doing in that time some years ago and that's just an illustration of the whole issue. Do something for six months. Come when you don't want to and make a point of finding someone to talk to and say, "I'm going to go, even if I get nothing out of it, even if I don't like it, I'm going to go and I'm going to find somebody that I can encourage. Someone new, someone I know, I'm just going to go and I'm going to make it a point for me to be the one who actively encourages rather than demanding that others encourage me." That would radically transform any church.

So with that said, recognizing that all true Christians are going to be persecuted, recognizing that Jesus Christ has appointed the local church and fellow believers to be that which encourages us through, look, many of you know, I realize at this point I'm really piling on to make the point, but many of you know what it's like to be the only Christian in your family, to be suffering in the midst of an outwardly attractive family, but knowing that there are difficulties within, and you come and you suffer in silence, and you know what that's like and you've had somebody come and speak a word of encouragement to you. This room is filled with people like that, people suffering in silence, and when we come, we just need to be mindful that we're here to do more than just laugh and have a good time together. We're here to do more than just get our ears tickled by forceful Bible preaching and then go on our way. The Lord has appointed us to be here for each other. That's part of being a member of a church and being a member of a body is that we're here for each other. We love each other enough to be here for each other. That's just so very, very important. On this night speaking within the room, I'm grateful for every one of you that are so faithful to do that. It is really, really crucial and to be able to be here amongst people like you that love the word, that love each other, that love Christ, that have shown so much love to me and my family, great privilege. And so what we're doing, let's just excel still more, shall we?

Now, with those things said, we need to get on to the actual exposition of the text tonight. Question number 4, as we move into the new material for this evening. Question number 4, why will you be persecuted? Why will you be persecuted? And the answer to that question is this: you will be persecuted for righteous loyalty to Jesus Christ. You will be persecuted for righteous loyalty to Jesus Christ. Look at verses 10 and 11 with me here and notice the parallelism in the structure of what Jesus says. He says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." He goes on to say, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely," here we go, "on my account." On my account. Jesus says, "on

account of me. For the sake of righteousness, on account of me." Faithful loyalty to the person of Jesus Christ is the ground of persecution that we experience at the hands of an unbelieving world and at the hands of a compromised church. The parallelism of "for righteousness' sake" and "on account of me" shows that this is a persecution that is identified with our loyalty and obedience and naming the name of Christ.

Now, beloved, I want to tell you that is a noble reason to suffer, to suffer for the sake of Christ, the eternal Son of God, to suffer for the sake of obedience to his name. You see, the man of the Beatitudes, the woman of the Beatitudes, is a person who belongs to Jesus Christ, belongs to the kingdom of heaven, is living life under the reign of his Lordship. And righteousness here, beloved, righteousness is not simply being good, not simply being some kind of outwardly moral person in a moralistic kind of way that's just identified with general goodness. That's not what Jesus is talking about here. You know, the world and the church is filled with outwardly moral people who provoke nothing of resistance because it's a morality that is divorced from faith and obedience to Jesus Christ. So Jesus is talking about something more narrow than just being a good person. What Jesus is talking about with this kind of righteousness is this, he is talking about someone whose life is oriented toward Christ and his will. There is a centrality to the person of Christ, to the word of God written and incarnate that evokes this opposition, the person of Christ coming forth in our conversation, whether we're conscious of it or not, the person of Christ coming forth in our attitudes and confronting and convicting people of their sinfulness and their isolation from a holy God. And that comes at a personal cost. When you lovingly warn someone of their lost estate, you raise the specter of going into eternal judgment and into a fiery hell if they die without Christ and you lovingly say that, there's going to be a reaction against that. When you uphold biblical principles in your life and in the workplace and you're fired for it, you're mocked and isolated, promotions withheld from you, hey, welcome to what Christians have known for two millennia. And we can't be afraid of that. We have to recognize that obstacle, rise to the occasion, and rest in our overcoming Christ to take care of us. And so, beloved, when people, family members, or even uninformed or disobedient Christians challenge you, mock you, reject you, isolate you, or wrong you in order to spite your faith in Christ, that's when you're suffering for the sake of righteousness, when you are being persecuted for righteous loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Now, we've made this point repeatedly, but the Bible tells us to expect such opposition. Please turn in your Bibles, or on your favorite Bible app on your device, to 1 Peter 4. 1 Peter 4, and there's just a somewhat extended passage that I want to read to you as we're mindful and the reminder of our responsibilities to be a contributing part of the body of Christ is resonating in our minds and the opportunity to help those who suffer for the name of Christ fresh in our thinking. 1 Peter 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Now Peter was writing during the reign of the emperor Nero who literally encased Christians in wax and set them on fire to light his garden and then blamed them for the burning of Rome. Kind of mixed my sequence there, but when he talks about a fiery trial, the recipients of this letter either had just experienced or soon immediately would experience literal flames, a literal flaming trial that would come upon

them to test them and he says, "When that happens, don't be surprised as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." Notice how he lifts their thoughts beyond the persecution into the eternal realm, remember the future as you go through persecution now. Verse 14, in paralleling the the words of Christ and even just looking at the verbal insults that we sometimes endure. Verse 14, "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name." Verse 19, "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good."

Now, beloved, with all of that said, let me balance it out a little bit. Not all opposition that we face is persecution, as Jesus describes it here. I've known Christians, you have too, who were criticized for being obnoxious, proud, or lazy. That kind of suffering, that kind of criticism is not for righteousness' sake. That's not for the sake on account of Christ. And so being criticized for moral failures or laziness or things of that nature is not what Jesus is describing here, and there's no blessing for suffering like that. It's not suffering because of righteousness. As we gather together here as friends, can we talk as friends and be more specific? Christians who neglect their job duties even in order to share the gospel with co-workers, are not being persecuted when the boss puts an end to it. You're being paid to do a job. You need to do the job and fit within what the boss requires and submit to your employer as multiple passages in the New Testament require. If you're breaking and being unfaithful to your job duties and you're corrected or even fired for that, you're not suffering for the sake of righteousness, you're just being unfaithful in your job. And give me ten times out of ten a Christian who knows what it's like to work hard and to have a good work ethic and to be faithful to job duties and then let testimony come where it may, rather than somebody who can't be counted on to do their job, to take their responsibility, and then try to say, "Well, I was sharing Christ and my boss didn't like that." Well, you know, let's be honest and not try to fool each other with claiming a mantle of righteousness when we're just not doing the job that we're paid to do. And so we need to be mindful and think carefully about these things and examine our hearts and have the Holy Spirit help us be faithful in every area and trust him for the outcome of that.

So why will you be persecuted? You'll be persecuted for the sake of righteous loyalty to Christ. Now, when you suffer like that, suffer for righteous loyalty to Christ, what then? Here I am in the midst of this. I'm being misrepresented. I'm being slandered. You know, I've been put in prison. I've lost my job. I'm suffering truly for the sake of loyalty to Christ, and I've done nothing wrong to bring that kind of opposition onto me, but it's simply a reaction against Christ in me, the hope of glory, what then? That brings us to our fifth question this evening, how should you respond to persecution? How should you respond to persecution? And the answer to that is, in the words of Christ, quite challenging. Go back to Matthew 5:12 with me. The answer to that question, how should you respond to persecution, the answer is you respond with joy. You respond with a sense of settled contentment and trust in Christ, confidence in him with hope for the

future. Verse 12, Jesus had just said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account," and you're right in the midst of the flame of the battle. You know, you think of Daniel's friends being cast into the fiery furnace and other like persecution. Jesus says, "When that happens, do this, rejoice and be glad for your reward in heaven is great for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Jesus here is speaking about not a tolerance of just enduring it with gritted teeth and resentment. Not with fear. Not with impatience. But with joy. Jesus is speaking of responding to this kind of opposition with great delight. This is not a grudging acceptance of the inevitable. This is positive joy that overwhelms the soul and brings forth exuberant singing and gratitude to God.

Let's see a couple of examples of it biblically speaking in the book of Acts 5. Acts 5 in verse 40, some of the apostles had been arrested and put into public prison because of their testimony for Christ, you read that earlier in chapter 5, verse 18. And Gamaliel was advising the council about what they should do with these annoying Christians. He reminds them of a past episode in verse 37. He said, "Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered." Now as he turns attention to the apostles in front of them, he says this to his fellow leaders. He says, "So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice," now watch what happens, verse 40, in one sense they took his advice, verse 40, "and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go." They had no grounds for punishment, but they punished them anyway, teach them a lesson, try to intimidate them into silence, instruct them, "Don't do this anymore. There's more of this where that came from." And what did the apostles do? Verse 41, "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus."

The persecution that the authorities inflicted upon them had the exact opposite effect and, beloved, this is where we need to enter into the spirit of responding to persecution. The idea that motivates those who slander us and oppose us is to try to intimidate us into silence, to cause us to back down, to step back from a bold, outspoken witness in life for Jesus Christ. That's the goal of it all the time, is to try to silence us through shame, through physical suffering, through financial reversal come what may. In every instance, what we are to do is to recognize the effort to intimidate us and in response to that, to become all the more bold, all the more outspoken, all the more strong, all the more joyful when it happens. Those authorities told the apostles, "You stop speaking. We're going to beat you and let you go, but don't do this anymore." And their immediate response was joy, in verse 42, I love this, "they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

The persecution had the opposite effect of what they intended. It just made them speak all the more and, beloved, that's the way that you respond every time someone tries to

intimidate you. And in these days, when it's the LGBTQ lobby and mob, I'll say it again, the LGBTQ mob that comes after people with biblical convictions and tries to emotionally blackmail by saying, "Your teaching is what causes transgender people to commit suicide," that's not true but the whole idea is to silence you with threats and intimidation and false accusations from speaking the truth and standing boldly for Christ in the midst of the situation. The response to that is not to say, "I'm sorry, I take it back." That's compromise. That's unthinkable. The answer to that is to say, "No, I'm sorry. What you say is not true, and I will not stop saying the things that God has revealed in his word," so that the effort to intimidate, the way that it should affect us, beloved, the way that an effort to intimidate, slander, hinder us in our testimony and our lives and our proclamation of Christ, far from making us withdraw, far from making us cower in fear, should make us step forward all the more recognizing what's actually happening. This is an effort fueled by powers of darkness to try to silence a testimony for Christ and the true Christian says, "I'm having no part of that. Indeed, I'm going to be even more firm, more outspoken, because the idea of being intimidated into silence is just unthinkable."

And beloved, that mob and others who are opposed to Christ, appeasement is never going to satisfy them. It's never going to produce lasting peace. The ground you surrender, they will take and then demand more and that's why when someone tries to interfere with your walk with Christ, mock you, intimidate you into denying Christ, backing down, "I want your religion to stop," your immediate response, your immediate answer to that is no. You don't even have to think about that. You don't have to stop and pray about that. "Well, let me think about it." Your immediate answer is no. "No. Jesus Christ has changed my life. His word is true. He reigns and I will never stop following him." Now you can say it with all the grace and love that you don't have to say it in all of the dogmatic sense that I'm expressing it here, but that's the spirit and the heart of it. "You have pushed on a wall that cannot be moved," you say to these friends.

Look over at Acts 16. Acts 16. So much more that could be said. Acts 16:22. Paul and Silas were engaged in effective ministry. Paul rebuked a demon-possessed girl that they were using, that her owners were using to make a lot of money in fortune telling. And Paul boldly and greatly annoyed, I like that, verse 18, he's greatly annoyed, "greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour." But that created opposition. Paul was about to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness. In verse 19, "when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, 'These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks." They were being persecuted for the sake of righteousness. And what follows in verse 25? "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them," and then there was an earthquake, the prison was shaken, the doors were opened, everybody's

bonds were unfastened, and on and on it goes. But Paul and Silas responded to their unjust suffering with prayer and joy and singing exuberantly to God.

You see, beloved, the thing that we need to see here when we respond to persecution is that persecution doesn't make us bitter. It strengthens our resolve, yes. It makes us bold, yes. But it does not make us bitter and certainly does not make us resentful toward God that we're suffering for the name of Christ. To the contrary, we recognize the privilege, the privilege of being a child of God. the privilege of belonging to Jesus Christ, the privilege of having our sins forgiven, of having his righteousness clothe us, the privilege of having the indwelling Holy Spirit, the privilege of a hope in heaven that cannot be taken away, reserved in heaven for us, the privilege of all of that, the privilege of joining and suffering for his name, and realizing that this is an occasion for joy, not for resentment. So it doesn't make us bitter, especially toward God, and even toward those who are doing it. When Jesus suffered on the cross, he prayed, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." When Stephen was stoned, he prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," Acts 7:59 and 60. When one of the English martyrs was dying in the flames, he prayed out, he said, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." There's just this sense of, especially when you understand the Scriptures that are engaged here, there's this great sense of realizing that there are profound transcendent realities that are taking place, that eternal matters are at stake in this manifestation of persecution and suffering that comes to us. And as we've been saying all along, it doesn't have to be these radical matters of life and death matters and being martyred, though it could be that, but even in the simpler ways. just breathing out a prayer, "Lord, from everything I can tell, I'm suffering for the sake of righteousness here. Thank you for the privilege. Thank you for letting me share in the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ. That brings me joy. Father, this is a mark of the reality of my true salvation. My spouse has rejected me, walked away for the sake of Christ. My children repudiate my name. I walk in silence. I walk in solitude because I belong to you. Lord, I embrace that with joy. I count it a privilege to be in your family."

Long ago, a woman, Christian woman, was in prison, probably not someone we would hold up as a spiritual example in every considerable way, but she wrote these words when she had been cast into prison in Switzerland many, many years ago, writing it as unto Christ, and she said, "Best Beloved of my soul, I am here alone with you and my prison is a heaven since you share it with me."

So you respond with joy. You realize the privilege of greater fellowship and intimacy with Christ and for the true believer, that's worth a thousand worlds. That's more than diamonds and rubies and houses and mansions in this life. Precious fellowship with Christ, "Lord, that I have a mere fringe of the garment taste of suffering when you suffered so much for me. Thank you for the privilege." Not only do you respond with joy, you remember your heritage. Go back to Matthew 5:12. Matthew 5:12. This is so, so sweet and the more that I remember these things, the more that I think of great godly men that have gone before us and were faithful to the end, and I remember what we're about to read, and I remember the lives of these faithful men, and the opinions of those in the world today are just a matter of a fading wisp of importance to me in comparison to the

heritage that we have of noble, godly, faithful men who suffered and were rejected for the sake of the name. And Jesus calls us to think about such things when he says in verse 12, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so," in like manner, "in like manner they persecuted the prophets who were before you." What is our spiritual history, beloved? What is the heritage that we have received from our righteous spiritual forefathers? What is that heritage? It's a heritage of suffering. Think about it, going all the way back to Genesis 4. Cain killed righteous Abel. Saul persecuted David. Jezebel persecuted the prophets. Jeremiah cast into cisterns and rejected, and no one ever really responded to his ministry favorably. On and on it goes. Job suffering under the hands of his so-called friends and counselors, accused of being sinful when there was no truth to the accusation whatsoever. Isaiah, by church tradition, sawn in half. The Apostle Paul persecuted the church before his conversion. Eleven of the twelve apostles martyred, Peter by testimony of church tradition, crucified upside down at his own request because he didn't feel like he was worthy to be crucified in the same manner as Christ was. The Apostle John exiled to a rocky, isolated island.

You see, beloved, we could go on and on, sometime pick up even an edited version of Fox's Book of Martyrs and read about those who recorded throughout the course of church history nobly suffering, going to the stake, going to the flames for the sake of Christ, and read, read the wondrous testimonies that the Spirit empowered them to give in their time of great suffering. There was one husband and wife that were, as I recall, crucified together and the husband exhorting his wife and the wife encouraging her husband in the midst of their suffering, "Be faithful to Christ. Stand strong in it." Beloved, that's the kind of courage, the kind of valor, the kind of nobility that we inherit as believing Christians and stand in their line. Those who suffer for Christ stand in a noble tradition, the highest, most noble tradition of them all, far greater than kings, far greater than presidents, far, far greater than US presidents. I've read about all of them. I can say that. It's a noble tradition and if with a few insults, a little bit of financial reversal, some rejection at the hands of people that thought loved you, is the price of swimming in the stream of that river, don't count the cost and measure it by the earthly loss that you experience for only a wisp of time, measure it by the privilege of being numbered with great souls like that, all under the banner of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the measure of the glory of persecution, to be identified with his people as they are identified with our wonderful Lord, and count yourself blessed to be there. One older commentator said this, said the witnesses for unwelcome truths have never had anywhere or at any time a light or easy task.

Now, one final aspect of how do we respond. We respond with joy. We remember our heritage. And lastly, we respond with courage. Go to the book of Revelation 2 as we consider the words of Christ to the church of Smyrna. Revelation 2, the words of Christ to the church in Smyrna. This is a revelation which came from God to Christ and that Christ commissioned to John to share with those who would read, and Christ had a message to this blessed church in the city of Smyrna in Western Asia Minor in modern-day Turkey. To the angel, and it says this, verse 8, "to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they

are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." Now one day, Lord willing, we'll get to a full exposition of that text but for now, just notice what Jesus says in his unqualified affirmation of this church. He says, first of all, he says, "I know, I know your tribulation and your poverty." There is nothing that we go through in our suffering for Christ that Jesus Christ is not intimately aware of and personally involved in. He cares. He loves us. He's superintending it all. He knows all about it. We can go to him and breathe out our woe, as the hymn writer said. He knows about it, and look at what his command to us is, to them, and by extension, all Christians who would be faithful in the midst of being persecuted for the name of Christ, he says to them in verse 10, he says, "Do not fear. Don't be afraid. Be strong and courageous," you know, reminiscent of the words that God said to Joshua as they were about to enter the Promised Land. "Do not fear what you're about to suffer," and then he says, "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life." Beloved, one of the things that we do in a time like this as we're hearing the word of God, as we're contemplating an uncertain future in the world around us, say, "I resolve," think about Jonathan Edwards, "I hereby resolve that when persecution comes, I will not be afraid. And when persecution comes," verse 10, "be faithful unto death, God helping me, I am resolved, I'll be faithful. I will not compromise in order to soften the edge of the sword. I will not compromise to get the liars to be quiet. I will not retract. I will not recant. That's unthinkable."

And so you respond with courage. You respond with joy. You remember your heritage. You respond with courage. And you stand like a man. And beloved, part of what we have to remember, what we must think about in the midst of persecution as a church, as individuals, what we must remember is that one way or another, we're leaving a legacy for those who come after us, for children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren yet to be born, both in our biological lineage and in our spiritual lineage. And don't you want the legacy that you leave behind of your private suffering for Christ, don't you want that to be a legacy of faithfulness that inspires those who come after you to be faithful in like manner? Just as we read Fox's Book of Martyrs and are inspired by their courage, as we read about the apostles and are inspired by their courage, as we read about Christ who set his face firm to go to Jerusalem and are overwhelmingly stricken by his courage, don't you want to be part of that line? I do. I may not do a very good job at it, but those people, those are my people. Those are the ones that I belong to. Those are the ones that I support. Those are the ones that I identify with. And the God who reigns over them, he's the one whose favor I curry. He's the one that I desire to please. And every true Christian, when they're thinking rightly about it, says, "Yes, amen, that could only be the case." So that what our opponents say about us, what those who resist Christ say about us in the brief passing window of time during our earthly life is so irrelevant by comparison. I'll say it again, those who suffer for Christ stand in a noble tradition and, beloved, I just ask you, I encourage you, I exhort you to make your choice now which stream you want to stand in. Which pool do you want to swim in? Swimming with those faithful to Christ or swimming in the compromise of the world and backing down just so people won't say

nasty things about you on social media or whatever. Out on the thought. Out on the suggestion. Out, out, out, out on that way of thinking, that way of living. That's not worthy of Christ. And may God just give us wisdom to recognize when these things are at stake so that we could respond appropriately.

So you respond with joy, you remember your heritage, you respond with courage. Final question. Final bit of exposition on the Beatitudes here in 2023. What is the reward for persecution? What is the reward for persecution? Of everything that we've said so far, it's like Christ saved the best for last, the most motivating thing he saved it for the last. What is the reward for persecution? Jesus says the reward is great glory. Great glory! Look there in verse 12 again, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." Your reward is great in heaven. There's a payday coming, so to speak. I don't want us to think about it in terms of a wage that's due to us. This is a reward of grace. But in our faltering efforts to be faithful to Christ when resistance comes to us, and as we stagger under the load, sometimes grumble under our breath and respond so imperfectly to it, and yet by grace cling to Christ with fidelity, Jesus says, as you do that, you are storing up a great reward for yourself in heaven. Rejoice and be glad you don't see it now, but as Christ explains it to us, take his word for it, it won't be lost in the books of heaven and the reward will far exceed anything that we could ask or think. In other words, in other words, you must evaluate temporal opposition from an eternal perspective. Temporal opposition must be viewed from an eternal perspective. It does absolutely no good to say, "This isn't fair, and what's that person thinking, and how unkind that is," and none of that's worthy of occupying your time and I say that to myself as much as I say it to you, okay? It's not worthy of our time to think that way. You must evaluate opposition from an eternal perspective with this central controlling thought: beloved, your heavenly Father who sent his Son to redeem you by his perfect life and atoning death on the cross, that heavenly Father promises you that he will reward your patient endurance under affliction in the name of Christ. He promises it. The eternal reward is more certain than your next breath, because the promises of God can never fail. Our next breath can. Promises of God? Never. Uh-uh. Cannot, does not happen.

So what's Jesus saying here, your reward in heaven is great? Well, beloved, there's a present and a future dimension to it. In one sense, you have part of that great reward already. Notice in verse 10. Things like verb tenses and relative clauses, sometimes they can really get my blood circulating and verb tenses here are significant. Verse 10 Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And so, in one sense, the kingdom of heaven already belongs to you. You're in the kingdom as vindicated by the suffering that you go through for the sake of Christ, and to be in the kingdom of heaven means you know the King. You know Christ. You taste his blessings. You read his word with understanding. You know of his love. You share in blessings with his people. And you have all of this present experience of the spiritual heritage and blessing that Christ gives to those that are his. It's good stuff. But that's like an appetizer at a five-star restaurant. There's so much more to come. The banquet, the full banquet is still ahead, still future to us.

What exactly will that reward be, that future reward? Well, the Bible doesn't tell us the details that we might want to know but somehow, somehow in ways that go beyond all that we ask or think, somehow that far exceeds the abilities of my lisping, stammering tongue to describe, we can say this for certain, what lies ahead for those who are true Christians, every true Christian will somehow suffer for the sake of righteous loyalty for Christ and what will that great reward be that Jesus speaks of? Well, somehow God is going to usher you into his eternal kingdom. That last dying breath under the suffering of physical decline, sudden calamity, as I like to say, you make one your last heaving final exhaling of breath here on earth with groaning even, and then the next moment you're inhaling the atmosphere of heaven in the eternal kingdom, somehow surrounded by angels resoundingly declaring, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty," somehow in the immediate presence of Christ, somehow sin banished, somehow all opposition taken away, and as I've said so many times, that first breath in heaven is going to be the first time where you really are and really feel like, "I finally am home. This is what I was created for. This is what God appointed for me before the foundation of the world by his divine decree. This is what he created me for. This is what he sustained me in his providence for and now it's all come to great fruition and it's so much better than I imagined." We're not going to remember earthly things and this sermon will soon enough be forgotten, but if you could possibly remember a sermon like this, just trying on this side of heaven to describe the glories of it, you'd look back on it and say, "That knucklehead had no clue. This is so much better. He undersold it. He diminished it. What was wrong with him?" Because all opposition will cease as you are surrounded by the glory and love of God, and as we somehow enter into the fellowship with saints throughout the ages, and we mingle with the likes of Abraham and David and Moses and Paul and Bob Moran and Mike Taylor and Charles Spurgeon and others like them. Beloved, you will know unmixed joy, glory, and wonder that's only going to get more expansively great and magnificent as the eons of eternity unfold. There will be no more sorrow, no more tears, no more resistance, no more broken relationships. You will have full acceptance in the presence of God with unhindered access to Christ. Somehow it's going to be like that, only multiplied by infinity. So much better.

Beloved, that's why you can rejoice. This is what Christ has stored up for those who love him. In fact, the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 4:17, listen to this and take it to the bank, "momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison." If you had any clue, any idea of what waits for you in heaven as a believer, you would realize that the most severe affliction and rejection you experience for Christ in this earth is a feather on the scale compared to a mountain of granite of glory on the other side. Not worthy to be compared. God is not stingy. The reward will be disproportionately great. That's what we have to look forward to, beloved.

So, does your family hassle you? Do friends reject you? Remember your heritage and respond with joy. Rest in Christ. That kind of rejection simply proves that you belong to him and one day you will know joy unspeakable and full of glory. Beloved, your Lord is faithful. He will bring it to pass. And a fleeting smile from him sent your direction is better than all the riches on earth, aren't they? One writer said, and I close with this,

"Jesus Christ, the first and the last, who died and lived again, knows our trials, controls our destiny, and will bestow the crown of life at the end of the race."

Let's pray together.

Thank you, Father, for your word, for your promises, for the future fulfillment that still awaits us. May you encourage these dear brothers and sisters in Christ to run with perseverance and endurance the race that is set before them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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