



## Blessed are those Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake

St. Matthew 5:10-12

Fr. William Klock

July 13, 2008 – Trinity 8

As we come to the last of the Beatitudes this week I think it's appropriate that we sum up what Jesus has already described the Christians life is to be like. The beatitudes are interconnected – each one follows the one before – there's a logical progression that begins with a right understand of who we are before God. That knowledge shapes who we become and what we desire in life. Ultimately where we put our priorities and how we esteem ourselves before others and before God, gives direction to how we act. As I've said before, Jesus' point isn't that some of us are poor in spirit, others are merciful, and others are persecuted – the Beatitudes all together give us a portrait of the Christian life.

First Jesus shows us the Christian humbly entering the presence of God, knowing his own poverty of spirit and mourning his own unrighteousness. Knowing that whatever status he has in life is a merciful gift from God, the Christian then treats others with the understanding that he's no better than they are – he puts himself and any of his own perceived rights last and puts others first. Because he knows his own unrighteousness, he hungers for what he lacks – he hungers for the righteousness of Christ that allows him to enter God's holy presence, but he also hungers for the transforming and life renewing work of the Holy Spirit to cleans him from all unrighteousness. His great longing is to grow in grace and goodness – knowing that he can never achieve Christ's perfection, but wanting to get as close as he can.

That describes the Christian inwardly, but Jesus also tells us what the life of the Christian is like as he interacts with others. Jesus makes it clear that he expects us to “go out” – not cloister ourselves away. He calls us later in his Sermon to be salt and light, but salt doesn't do any good if it stays in the saltshaker and light doesn't do any good if

you hide it under a basket. The Christian is called to meet the world head on, with all of its pain and all of its problems. He's called to show mercy to those the world has battered and to those whom sin has beaten down. He lives his life righteously in the power of the Holy Spirit, and because he's upright, he lives transparently and honestly, showing the world what God has done for him. He seeks to show others the peace that God has shown him.

That's the kind of person the world is looking for, right? Well, you'd think that. Like the bumper sticker says, “Mean people...” well, you know. Nobody likes a mean person. Nobody likes a bad guy. Even as you talk to people in the world, most people like the idea of a Christian. Most people agree that Jesus was an all-around great guy. The world thinks it ought to welcome Christians, that is, until the first time they actually meet one, because the true Christian condemns the world with his very presence. And so Jesus says:

**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.**  
(Matthew 5:10-12)

It makes sense that Jesus ends the Beatitudes here, because this is where the rubber meets the road. It's when we experience the reality of this beatitude in our own lives that we have the confirmation that we're actually living out all the others. If there's been any confusion so far, if anyone listening to Jesus has been missing the revolutionary nature of the Beatitudes, this is where it ends. The persecution of the believer *for righteousness' sake* is where we see the division and the difference between the Christian and the world.

Notice that Jesus doesn't just say, “Blessed are you when you are persecuted” – he narrows it down and says specifically, “Blessed are those who are persecuted *for righteousness' sake*.” This is important. You can be “persecuted” for all sorts of things, sometimes even unjustly. Even Christians get this one wrong an awful lot of the time. We can use our faith to justify all sorts of things we shouldn't do

and then scream “Persecution!!!” when other people hassle us for it.

In his book of modern Christian parables, Joseph Bayly tells the story of *The Christian Blimp* and, I think, illustrates very well how Christians can often be persecuted for the wrong things. In the story some people from a church decided to evangelise their town by flying a blimp overhead. The idea was that the blimp could trail gospel messages over the town and periodically drop “bombs”– tracts and leaflets. Well, people in the town didn't complain much and mostly just ignored the blimp. Since their evangelism didn't seem to be working, the people from the church decided to start broadcasting over loudspeakers from the blimp. So it's shouldn't be any surprise when someone sabotaged the ground-based end of the blimp's sound system. And of course when that happened the church people screamed foul – they were being persecuted!

What those people were experiencing might have been persecution, but it wasn't persecution for righteousness' sake! You can't claim persecution when you raise the ire of people by obnoxiously shoving tracts in their face or shouting at them about Jesus on the sidewalk. You can't claim persecution when your neighbour gets upset because you decided to protest Halloween by smashing his jack-o-lantern and destroying his yard decorations. You can't claim persecution when you get arrested for confronting the local gay pride parade with angry, self-righteous shouting or for blocking the door of the abortion clinic and shouting angrily at the girls trying to get inside.

When I was an undergraduate, our campus was visited each year by a guy who went by the name of Brother Jed. He'd show up on the student union mall with a portable sound system and quite literally stand on the modern equivalent of a soapbox and proclaim the Gospel to whomever passed by. He'd usually gather quite a crowd during his stay of two or three days – usually hecklers. There were always people there trying to sabotage what he was doing. He was obviously persecuted, but I don't think he was persecuted for righteousness sake. And I say that because Brother Jed didn't come – at least as far as I could tell from what I heard of his preaching – as one sinner sharing his new life with other sinners or one beggar showing other beggars where to find

bread. He came as if he were one of the Old Testament prophets, to point his finger and declare “Woe to you, sinners!” I always thought he came across as more of a legalistic Pharisee than a disciple of Christ. I always wondered if he actually made any converts, because I didn’t see much of what he was doing as exemplifying the Beatitudes.

But approaching the world in Brother Jed style is often a lot easier than being the living witnesses Jesus calls us to be. It’s easy to stand on the soapbox and shout to everyone who passes by that they’re going to hell. It’s easy to stand on the street corner and shove a tract in the face of a stranger you’ll never see again. It’s easy to hold a protest sign outside the abortion clinic or at the gay pride parade. It’s easy to join a campaign to pass legislation banning homosexual marriage. What’s hard is living the way Jesus tells us and to be living witness of the Gospel. It’s a lot harder to be a witness in the place where God has providentially put you – where you can live rightly and be a friend to those around you and *show* them the Gospel at work. It’s easy to hold a sign outside an abortion clinic and shout “Sinner” to the girls walking inside, but it’s a lot harder to befriend that girl with an unwanted pregnancy and help provide her with the home and family she’ll lose if she has her baby. It’s easy to work for moral legislation and then call it persecution when those around us give us a hard time because of it, calling us bigots or hateful, but it’s a lot harder to actually work to build a Christian nation by truly sharing the Gospel in order to make more Christians.

A few years ago I read a news story about a Christian man who was jailed for “hate speech” because he stood on a Philadelphia street corner quietly reading Scripture at a gay pride parade was passing by. Christians were appalled and cried “persecution!” And as much as I can find all sorts of problems with how that man was arrested and what he was charged with, I have to ask, was he persecuted for righteousness’ sake? What was the point of reading Scripture in the middle of a gay pride parade? What was he planning to accomplish? It’s not like anyone was going to listen to what he had to say in that kind of environment. It’s not like that was even remotely some kind of effective evangelism. Like the blimp, he

was another example of a Christian being persecuted for simply being obnoxious. He was standing in that parade and essentially being a Pharisee – taking a holier than thou attitude. It’s like walking up to someone, giving them a Gospel tract and saying, “Jesus calls me to share the Gospel with you. I’ve done that and wash my hands of it if you choose to reject it.” That’s not evangelism – that’s the Christian trying to fulfil his obligation the easy way – that’s the Christian being legalistic and Pharisaical. If we’re persecuted doing that kind of thing, that’s not the kind of persecution Jesus is talking about here.

But we do see examples of what Jesus is talking about throughout the Bible. Abel was killed by his brother, simply for offering a righteous sacrifice to God. Noah was heckled by the people of his day for following God’s command to build an ark. David was persecuted by Saul for being righteous. In fact, when David had the chance to kill Saul and didn’t, it made Saul’s persecution even worse! The prophets, like Elijah and Jeremiah, were persecuted for standing for righteousness when everyone around them was choosing to reject God. And in the New Testament we see the ultimate example of persecution for righteousness in the person of Jesus. Look at his example. Can you picture the man who said, “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” stand outside an abortion clinic in angry protest shouting “Sinner” or “Murderer” to the women walking by. Can you see him doing the same thing at a gay pride parade? Or can you see him walking up and talking with those people and sharing the good news with them by becoming their friend and finding out their needs? This was the man that ate with tax collectors and sinners so that he could show them the love and mercy of God toward sinners.

The righteous person who seeks to live the Beatitudes – who is poor in spirit, who mourns over sin, and who is meek – doesn’t do evangelism to fulfil some kind of obligation or so he can put a check mark by it and say he’s done it for this month. The meek person who mourns because he truly mourns the fact that without Christ they’re damned just as he once was.

The religious people of his day didn’t persecute Jesus because he brought a purer lamb to the Temple for his sacrifice. They didn’t persecute him because he kept the rules better than they did. They persecuted him because his righteousness was more than an external righteousness. They had turned God’s Law into a mechanical system of “do this, and God will bless you.” They had come up with a measuring stick that made them look pretty good. But Jesus stepped into their world and just by being there showed all their perceived righteousness to be filthy rags. He showed them that righteousness is ultimately about what’s in the heart. What’s *inside* ought to be what motivates the externals, not vice versa. Remember he was the one who explained that it was not what goes into a man, but what comes out of him that defiles. We condemn the world just as Christ did if we truly follow his example. In John 15:20 Jesus says,

**Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.**

Jesus reminds us of something that we tend to forget. I think we forget it because the world *thinks* that it likes Jesus, but that’s because the false picture of Jesus that the world holds to doesn’t convict them of their sins by its mere presence. We tend to think along the same lines, thinking that everyone should like us. We’re nice people after all. And yet in St. Luke’s Gospel Jesus tells us,

**Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. (Luke 6:26)**

When the man of the world comes face to face with a Christian who is truly loyal to Christ he really only has two choices: He can choose to follow Christ too or he can find some way to silence him. The Christian will always face persecution because our integrity, just as Christ’s did, challenges the moral indifference of the world.

And yet Jesus tells us not just to expect persecution, but to rejoice in it. The fact that we can’t just bear with the persecution, but actually rejoice in it serves to underscore even more that the Christian is different from the world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the

Beatitudes saying, “With every Beatitude the gulf is widened between the disciple and the people, and their call to come forth from the people becomes increasingly manifest.” *We are different.* Jesus calls us to new life. And as much as he calls us to be peacemakers, he does so understanding that our calls to peace will create division in this world. The same Jesus that brought peace also reminds us that he brings division, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). The Christian is transformed and his new life is controlled and dominated by Jesus, by a desire to be loyal to our Lord, and out of concern that everything we do, we do ultimately for his sake. Again, we find blessing in our persecution when it is *for Christ's sake*.

One of the comforting things I find here, though, is in Jesus words, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.” I think that knowing we often have ulterior motives for doing things, we're usually concerned that when we do live righteously, that we want to do it out of a desire to please Christ – to be righteous for righteousness' sake. We're concerned when we hear hellfire and brimstone preachers turning the Gospel into something that's little more than fire insurance, telling people that they have a choice between an eternity in hell and eternity in heaven. Our faith needs to be more than something we put on because we're afraid of God's eternal punishment. But here Jesus tells us that we *can* rejoice knowing that we have a heavenly reward waiting for us. It's okay to have that motivation. Ours is the Kingdom of Heaven and our persecution, when it is truly for the sake of righteousness, is the proof of that promise.

But knowing that persecution is inevitable and that we can still rejoice in it, how else are we supposed to react to it? The other beatitudes come into play here. The natural man is always looking out for himself. If someone accuses him or attacks him, he wants at least to justify himself if not make some kind of a return attack. But the Christian never seeks that kind of revenge as he follows Christ's example: St. Peter says of Jesus, “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).

But the Beatitudes push us even further than that: we shouldn't be resentful either. As hard as it is to bite our tongue and not seek to justify ourselves – to get some kind of retaliation, the Beatitudes call us to do more. It's one thing to simply refuse to retaliate. It's another thing not to feel resentment. If you want to see how the Christian should respond to persecution, look at Philippians 1 this week. We don't have time to go through that whole chapter here, but in that chapter St. Paul writes to the Philippian Christians about his being jailed in Rome. He was truly a man who rejoiced in his suffering and there's no hint of bitterness in what he writes – in fact, as you read his words the severity of his hardship is tangible, but you can also see the smile on his face as he talks about the great encouragement he's found in the fact that his imprisonment has furthered the cause of the Gospel in Rome. This is where he writes:

**Yes, and I shall rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.** (Philippians 1:19-21)

We're called not to retaliate. We're called not to be resentful. But going even further, we're also called not to be depressed. And honestly, I can't think of any more depressing situation than being jailed for following Christ. But if we're going to follow Jesus we need to look to his example. The author of Hebrews writes:

**Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.** (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Jesus certainly mourned the sins of those whom he died for, but he didn't mourn his

own persecution – he didn't mourn his own death. And he didn't mourn that death because he knew the results that it would bring – because he knew that his death would bring life to sinful men and women.

Jesus promises us that the Kingdom of Heaven is ours. If we're truly living the Beatitudes we're going to look at everything around us differently than everyone else. Our lives will be influenced by the realisation of who we truly are, by the knowledge of where we're going, and by the knowledge of what waits for us there. This is what St. Paul sums up in 1 Corinthians 4:17-18. I'd like to close with his words:

**For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.**

Please pray with me: Our God, you are the strength of all who put their trust in you. Let us be strong in you, that we may follow your Son's holy example: when he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but trusted your just judgement. Give us the grace to rejoice in our persecutions and remind us of the reward that awaits us in heaven. We ask this in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.