

Blessed Are Those Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God,
through your only Son you overcame death
and opened to us the light of eternity.
Enlighten our minds and kindle our hearts
with the presence of your Spirit,
that we may hear your words
of comfort and challenge
in the reading of the scriptures,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

We need some background on this eighth and final beatitude. You'll notice this is the longest of all the beatitudes. There's a reason. Jesus was signaling two things:

1. That His teaching of the beatitudes was coming to a close.
2. That the last beatitude is really, really important.

We've come full circle with this beatitude.

The first beatitude is: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

The last beatitude is: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus's main message was about **the kingdom of heaven**.

There are two aspects to the kingdom—the **now**, and the **not yet**.

1. We can enjoy little samples of the kingdom of heaven on earth now.
2. And we'll enjoy the fullness of the kingdom of heaven in heaven, in the future.

There's also another very important word: **righteousness**.

The third beatitude mentions that we're to **hunger and thirst for righteousness**.

This eighth beatitude talks about being persecuted **for righteousness' sake**.

Righteousness is doing what God considers right and good. The gift of Christ's righteousness enables us to do that. This word is also one of the most important themes in Matthew.

Let's hear now the Eighth and final Beatitude from:

Scripture: Matthew 5:10-12 (NRSVue)

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Blessed Are Those Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake

I have question for you:

What did Jesus get in trouble for?

Think back on his life: *What was Jesus persecuted for?*

- Blasphemy
- Speaking against hypocrisy
- Forgiving people
- Healing people
- Breaking the Sabbath

Hanging with the wrong crowd—the unrighteous: namely tax collectors and sinners. Jesus also was a boundary crosser—interacting with those best avoided: women, Samaritans, and lepers. He was accused of being a drunkard and glutton. He got flack for healing those tormented by evil. Crowds laughed at Jesus and mocked him. Religious leaders called him Beelzebub—which is Satan. They conspired for his downfall. His friends denied and betrayed him. And of course, Jesus was executed on a cross by Pilate.

Jesus says in the Gospel according to John,

“If they persecuted me, ***they will also persecute you.***” (John 15:20)

Clarence Jordan, the founder of *Habitat for Humanity*, asked this question of Christians and the church: *What are the things we do that are worth persecuting?*

For Clarence Jordan, identification with Christ and persecution for righteousness involved such things as: **speaking out against and resisting racial prejudice, extreme nationalism, aggressive militarism, and exploitation.**

- Are we willing to suffer for our faith?
- Are we putting ourselves out there...or just playing it safe?

Theologian and martyr Dieterich Bonhoeffer reminded us in his classic *The Cost of Discipleship* the perils of *not* following Jesus to the difficult places of our lives and world, where we:

- Preach forgiveness without requiring repentance.
- Baptism without church discipline.
- Communion without confession.
- Absolution without personal confession.

Bonhoeffer calls this cheap grace:

- grace without discipleship,
- Grace without the cross,
- grace without Jesus Christ.

And so we need to ask ourselves:

- *What would I be persecuted for? What would Immanuel be persecuted for?*

There are many times persecution is cut and dry, a no-brainer:

In the time of Nero, before Christianity became the state religion of Rome, Christians faced incredible persecution. They were thrown to the lions and burned at the stake. Nero did other things like wrapping Christians in pitch and setting them on fire to be used as torches to light his gardens. He sewed Christians in the skins of wild animals and sent his hunting dogs after them.

While America is safe for most people of faith, let's not forget those who experience persecution today: Christians in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Indonesia, and many other places. Let's remember and pray for our brothers and sisters who are literally dying for their faith.

Here's the sorrowful part of the history of Christianity, atrocities and injustices like:

- The Crusades with Muslims
- The Inquisition
- Anti-Semitism
- The Holocaust
- Apartheid in South Africa
- Slavery and Jim Crow in America

... were committed by *Christians*. The persecuted became the persecutors once they had power.

These sobering lessons of history remind us to be very careful about persecution and being persecuted. If I say I'm being persecuted, I'm saying some strong things:

- I'm righteous... and they're evil.
- I'm innocent...they're guilty.
- It's a black and white
- US against THEM mentality.
- And I'm untouchable.

I think some of the church in America struggles with this mentality. We want the power we once had in years past. As the church has steadily lost influence in society over the decades, Some Christians feel threatened by change, feel less in control. We want to rule, rather than serve. We want to call the shots, rather than take up our cross. This loss of power feels like we're being overpowered— Like we're persecuted. But instead of complaining, we need to take up our cross, And do what Christians do—whether we are many or few.

There's another concern I have in the American church, that Bonhoeffer mentioned earlier, Namely the confusion of church discipline with persecution. All of us are human, we're imperfect. We fall short of God's glory— Christians and Christian leaders. All of us. We need healthy guidance and correction.

Our *Book of Order* has a section on *Church Discipline*—how to graciously practice accountability in a way that honors Christ, the individual, and the community. The purpose is to restore

relationships, rather than be punitive. Ordained officers in the church— ministers, elders, and deacons in their ordination vows affirm that they will uphold “the peace, unity, and purity” of the church. and abide by the church’s discipline. Faith’s a dance between purity and peace, identity and unity.

So what do we do if we feel we’re being persecuted?

First, we slow down and look inside ourselves. We get curious and ask some soul-searching questions.

- *Are there any problematic things in me that are causing this resistance?*
- *Is the pushback coming from righteousness (good trouble) or unrighteousness (bad trouble)?*
- *Could I be in the wrong here, at least partially?*
- *Am I going about this in the best way?*
- *What feedback am I getting from others?*

Next, we sift through the feedback we receive and listen. Hold on to the good, push aside the bad, Don’t dismiss or ignore all of it. Own your part. Adjust what’s off. Work for peace and harmony and justice, with humility, repentance, prayerfulness, purity, mercy, and meekness. Then, in a non-violent and Christlike manner, stand up for what you believe. Choose your hills wisely—then, Follow your conscience, under the Lordship of Christ.

Let me prepare you: this can be costly—

- You may lose friends or respect from people.
- People you look up to may be disappointed in you.
- It could impact your employment.
- In very unusual cases, maybe your life.

Jesus is telling us, sometimes you’re going to be treated unfairly in life. We’re entitled to claim and defend our rights. but don’t expect to be treated always as you feel you deserve. Jesus never promised that, but he did promise you’d get heat for following him. And so we take up our cross daily, rather than gripe and complain. We die to ourselves. Like Jesus.

We’re different, Immanuel. We go against the flow. We stand out.
The Scriptures describe us as a “peculiar people.”

Christianity in the West is dramatically decreasing—especially in the last ten years. Christendom is fading in the sunset. We’re in the minority now. You all are the faithful remnant coming to a house of worship with other believers. You’re different from most. Choosing the narrow, hard, and unpopular way of Christ goes against the currents and values of the day.

The world is about:

ruthless power grabs, gaslighting, grudges, self-promotion, looking out for number one, competition, demonizing the other, arrogance, and exclusion. It’s winner take all.

Not so with you, says Jesus. When people speak evil against us falsely, we don't:

- *Retaliate.*
- *Sulk.*
- *Lick our wounds.*
- *Grin and bear it like a good Stoic.*
- *Pretend we enjoy it, like a masochist.*

Instead, Jesus tells us, commands us:

Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven.

The Greek words can be translated literally, "**leap exceedingly**" for joy when people look down on you for your faith. James, the younger brother of Jesus puts it this way,

"Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet various trials."

Why would we ever rejoice?

- Because we know by God's grace, the kingdom of heaven is ours.
- We have a future with hope.
- The best is yet to come.
- There's an eternal reward awaiting us.
- We're invested in something really important—something worth the suffering.
- If it were easy, it wouldn't mean us much.

It's a badge of honor to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness and Jesus Christ—for something really meaningful. We stand in an honored tradition of prophets and saints and believers who have suffered for Christ. When you suffer for your faith, Christ will be nearer to you and more alive to you in ways you never thought possible. But you have to have some skin in the game. All in—not wishy-washy. By doing what's right, you're inspiring others to do the same. You're storing up treasures in heaven. You're living for what matters. Your life will have purpose. You'll be surprised by joy.

To close our series of the Eight Beatitudes, I'd like to quote from British priest and theologian Sam Wells. He says,

- The first part of all the beatitudes is a description of the crucifixion (poor, thirsty, meek, mournful, persecuted).
- The second half of the beatitudes describe the resurrection (kingdom of heaven, comfort, being filled, seeing God, mercy).

Sam Wells says,

- We live in the comma in between—kind of like the dash between our birth and our eventual death.
- We live between crucifixion and resurrection.
- We live in the comma between "blessed are you who weep now" and "for you will laugh."

Life, smack dab between the cross and resurrection, isn't easy. It involves pain and pleasure, just like the beatitudes. It hurts as much as its worth. And it's worth a lot.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Come, ye blessed . . .*" (1980) by Nathaniel Mokgosi (South African)
This linocut is one of ten in a series on the Beatitudes at [Art and Theology.org](https://www.artandtheology.org).

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