

Blessed are the Persecuted

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We've been examining Jesus' introduction to Christianity, The Beatitudes, in order to cultivate character and get a sense of the greatness of God. Many of you have been challenged, moved to repentance, and gained a greater admiration for Christ. It's been a wonderful study for me, and we're just getting started. In two weeks, we'll move into the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. But this morning, Jesus brings to conclusion the seven, short, searching Beatitudes, by saying *persecution is the inevitable result of true Christianity*. He's *not* restricting persecution to an elite class, but addressing disciples and the crowds all at once, saying we should expect it, and not only that; we should rejoice when it happens. A challenging ending. Let's look at: *What* does he mean by persecution? *How* are we supposed to rejoice? And *why* choose Christianity at all?

What Persecution?

Near the end of his sermon, Jesus says something that is absolutely penetrating, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven* (it's not enough to believe Jesus is who he claimed to be, Lord, King, God). *Instead, it's the one who does the will of my Father who enters the kingdom of heaven (7:21). Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. This Beatitude gets down to the brass tacks of Christianity. If you're doing the will of the Father, there's going to be sacrifice and persecution. What kind of persecution? Jesus spells it out in verse 11 saying we'll be reviled, slandered, and persecuted (verbal, emotional, physical forms of suffering). Not that you'll encounter all three but St. Paul, "*all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*" (2 Tim 3:12). In fact every generation of Christians has faced unique persecutions. The Early Church faced Caesar's lions and burnings at the stake. Later, even after the freedom under Constantine, they faced the terror of the Barbarians. Then there was the plague of the Middle Ages, followed by Reformation faith and religious wars. Communist oppression of the Chinese church, beheadings and church burnings by radical Islam. Persecution is promised to Christians, but not all who suffer persecution are true Christians. Some don't pass the test. And some are persecuted for their hatred and bigotry. Hot coffee was thrown on hateful "Christian" group picketing Beau Biden's funeral as they held up signs, "Thank God for dead soldiers. God hates Fag enablers." Jesus didn't promise blessing for bigoted suffering. Or for foolish suffering that results from things like angry conflict or poor financial decisions. Instead, Jesus is talking about *suffering for righteousness sake*, or vs. 11, persecution "*on my account*." **Persecution is suffering that stems from humble allegiance to Jesus and his teaching.** But this kind of allegiance is rare. Why? Over the last 100 years our workload has increased by 50%, but the amount of time spent in leisure has tripled. Popular Western culture is obsessed with leisure at unprecedented levels. *We work to play*, pushing movies, sports, music, hobbies into the nooks and crannies of our week and into hard won weekend. But for most of history, leisure was a daytime affair, evening a time for rest and contemplation. But we've uniquely turned it into an all night activity of escape and distraction. This is why biblical allegiance to Jesus is rare: **We live in a culture of diversion.** Diversion from what? From the kingdom of Heaven. This culture of diversion is so strong, that cultural critic Ken Myers says, *may be as serious as*

persecution and plagues were for the earlier saints. That hegemony of fluffy, superficial, escapist consumer culture is a kind of persecution in the 21st century. It runs directly against 1st C Christianity. How could you compare that to the burnings of saints? Myers says because: [“enemies that come loudly and visibly are usually much easier to fight than those that are undetectable.”](#) **Physical persecution is a clear summons to faith, but invisible persecution a subtle subversion of faith.** And we fall pray to easy believism, costless discipleship, choosing the Father’s will only when its comfortable, while spending our lives on distraction. I took a fascinating class in college called *Anthropology of Terrorism*, and I was struck by this particular insight regarding the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor—they waited until we were *most distracted*. Not just early in the morning, or before a declaration of war, but when American culture was consumed with entertainment. We are under threat—living in a culture of diversion. A new mission has emerged—a mission of comfort, financial security, family idolatry, technological fascination and expressive individualism. Will we do the Father’s will, no matter the cost, or abandon his mission: allegiance to Jesus and his teaching? How do we respond to this subtle persecution?

How to Rejoice

Jesus says, *rejoice: “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”* Rejoice how? By finding a leisure underneath the leisure, a rest that runs deeper than play. To uncover the source of joy that animates all true happiness. **David Brainerd** was a missionary to Native American Indians in the 18th century in threatening open country and small settlements. He planted a church among them amidst persecution and suffering. He struggled with severe bouts of depression, consumption (coughing up blood quite often), and died before he reached 30. His diary has been in publication ever since, read devotedly by many disciples theologians, missionaries, and pastors. Do you know what enabled him to endure persecution? It was regular attention to “divine subjects,” reading, journaling, writing and reflecting on God. He wrote, [“My mind was so engaged in these meditations, I could scarcely turn it to anything else; and indeed, I could not be willing to part with so sweet an entertainment.”](#) Brainerd found a sweeter entertainment, something so compelling to the heart and mind that he couldn’t pull away to lesser leisure. He found what Alfred North Whitehead called a **habitual vision of greatness**. The glory of God. How do you cultivate taste for a sweeter entertainment? Uncover the leisure underneath the leisure? *Tolkien did it with stories, David with Psalms, Handel with composing, Lewis with his writing, Wilberforce with politics, and Rembrandt with his brush.* A habitual vision of greatness captured their imagination. It imparted so sweet an entertainment that they were not suffocated by diversion. This vision compelled St. Paul through shipwrecks and Jesus through the cross. A joy not for the strong but for the weak, the desperate, the humble. Commenting on Brainerd, one author writes, [“his life is a vivid, powerful testimony to the truth that God can and does use the weak, sick, discouraged, beat-down, lonely, struggling saints who cry to him day and night to accomplish amazing things for his glory.”](#) This is the sweeter entertainment, a devotee of the divine subjects, the joy beneath all joys, uncovering the glory of God in Scripture and culture. Are you seeking the leisure underneath the leisure? Uncovering so sweet an entertainment in the divine subjects? You see, culture isn’t the enemy but *diversion from the kingdom of heaven is*. Are you trapped in a cycle of work to play, or are you cultivating a habitual vision of greatness? **Are you delighting in the will of the**

Father, savoring the glory of God? You see we can rejoice and be glad, in a culture of diversion, when our reward is in heaven. When we do, we become salt and light, a stark contrast in the darkness and mundane, then visible persecution is only a matter of time. Scorned for “needing religion,” mocked for choosing to not go out but stay home and pursue a “sweeter entertainment,” or surrender a promotion because it means courting a big client by going to “a gentleman’s club.” Or when friends tear you down because of your commitment to the exclusive claims of Christ and a life of holiness. **Invisible persecution is here, and visible persecution is coming.** Will you rejoice and be exceedingly glad for great is your reward in heaven? Not if you haven’t lingered over the divine subjects, insisted on the sweeter entertainment. You will surrender your belief, God’s will, and fade into the crowds, hearing from Jesus, these terrifying words, on judgment day: *“I never knew you; depart from me...” (7:23).* Will you rejoice?

Why Christianity?

What persecution (visible and invisible), how to rejoice (in the divine subjects of Scripture and culture), now Why Christianity? Because Christianity has a reason for your suffering and the source of your joy. If there is no God, then there is no reason to be upset about our suffering. It is a consequence of natural processes, life to death, survival of the fittest, the strong rule the weak. David Brooks comments that: *“For most people, there is nothing intrinsically noble about their suffering. Just as failure is sometimes just failure (and not your path to becoming the next Steve Jobs), suffering is sometimes just destructive or to be exited as quickly as possible.”* Suffering in a culture of diversion is an interruption of happiness. *But in the kingdom of God, our suffering and persecution lead to deeper happiness.* Rejoice. If we allow it, persecution will take us deeper into the grace of God, where we become aware of his exceeding beauty next to our own ugliness, the towering love of God overshadowing our insidious self-love, and your heart begins to melt for joy. And superficial happiness, work to play, just doesn’t cut it. You find a sweeter entertainment. This is true Christianity. It is the sweeter entertainment, the habitual vision of greatness, seen by the martyr Carpus who said in the face of burning at the stake, *“I venerate Christ the Son of God. I will never sacrifice to idols. I am a Christian.”* Will you be a Christian? Will you do the Father’s will no matter the cost? Will you rejoice and be exceedingly glad with your eyes on the Great Reward? Do it and you’ll join good company, the persecuted prophets who went before us, and rejoice forever in the kingdom of God.