

Prophetic Persecution

Jonathan K. Dodson | Spectral Holiness | October 11, 2020

Blessed are the persecuted: the beatitude everyone has been waiting for! Ironically, this final beatitude is actually something we *should* expect. We should expect persecution. Why? Well, not for being *foolish*, not for being *political*, and certainly not for being *bigoted*. Jesus says if you live for *righteousness' sake*, persecution is inevitable. Your character will be **prophetic**; you'll face three **possibilities** of persecution, and because of it you will find **profound** reward. Jesus is saying, *This is what happens to you, if you follow me*. You will be persecuted for prophetic character, in three possible ways, but it will all be worth it. The reward is profound.

Prophetic Character

The challenge with this beatitude is to live in such a way *that we invite persecution*. Persecution for what? Jesus does not say blessed are those who are persecuted for being *bigoted*. Protestors who take the time to make derogatory signs and trolls who coin phrases that name-call, mock, and demean. No, that's not what Jesus is talking about. He blesses those persecuted for *righteousness' sake*. What's that? It's not even for taking up a *cause*, as noble as it might be: abortion to anti-racism. Righteousness is the seven *prior* beatitudes. It's being persecuted not for being outspoken but for being like Christ. Jesus promises reward to those who are persecuted "[on account of me](#)" (11). He rewards those who embody his prophetic character. Now how is it prophetic? It speaks in ways that challenge the way we construct self-worth. The Pharisees continually persecuted Jesus because his message undermined their **religiously constructed self-worth**. The Pharisee and the tax collector. One built his worth on the religious accomplishments: fasting twice a week and tithing on *everything* he had; church involvement and spirituality. The other built his worth on *nothing but the mercy of God*: be merciful to me! Now what would have happened if Jesus adjusted his message to accommodate religious culture? We'd all be condemned. Jesus wouldn't die for our sins. No one would know mercy. His character prophetically challenged cultural modes of self-worth. By staying true to his message—mercy for the repentant—he extended worth impossible to find anywhere else. You see, when we are persecuted for righteousness sake, we extend a light into the darkness. The brightness of our character attracts attention. When Paul was imprisoned for staying true to his message, his captors heard the gospel and were saved. His refusal to adjust or mute the gospel led to persecution that prophetically altered the eternity of Roman soldiers. Prophetic character makes people stop in their tracks because it challenges the way we construct self-worth. This is also true of **secularly constructed worth**. I think of those who have confided in me how burdensome it is to keep up with constantly changing pc terminology, pressure to attend marches, to kill it in their career, have an interesting side hustle: to *build* an identity. When they settle into the eternal worth, the identity, Jesus has built for them in the cross and resurrection, they're set free. *But* if we soften our message, if we don't preach Christ and suffer the consequences, people won't be freed from the dark prison of self-construction. Persecution for righteousness sake brings light into the dark chambers of the soul, but it also repels. Why? Because prophetic character challenges the beliefs of the establishment, threatens self-constructed worth. An seasoned fireman once asked me to meet him for coffee to talk about faith. As soon as I sat down, he laid into me with questions about the

resurrection, Scripture. He didn't weigh my answers but dismissed them out of hand, mocked my job and the church, and told me he wasn't going to submit to anyone but himself. *Prophetic character invites persecution because it challenges self-constructed worth. The reality of the kingdom threatens the alternate reality of this world.* Jesus doesn't say blessed are the proud, the self-made, the hustler, the morally flexible, the outraged. He says blessed are the meek, the merciful, the righteous, the persecuted *on account Me*. A light that burns brightly attracts some and repels others. Christ saves and Christ divides.

Persecution Possibilities

What is Jesus talking about, nuts and bolts, when he says we will be persecuted. What are the possibilities? Verse 11 describes three forms of persecution. First, **physical**. The word *persecute* means to pursue, chase, hunt down. In Acts it's used of hunting Christians, binding them, imprisoning, beating, and murdering. This is happening right now in many countries. Over [245 million Christians](#) live in the 50 countries ranked worst for Christians. Between November 2017 and October 2018, 4,136 Christians were killed for their faith in these countries, and 2,625 believers were detained, arrested, sentenced, or imprisoned—many without trial. Three worst: North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia. Pray for the physically persecuted. Second, **emotional** persecution. The word *revile* means to insult, shame or demean. This persecution can come from outside the church. It's used of Roman soldiers who mocked Jesus (Mk 15:32). Can you imagine the hurt? The people he was suffering for mocking him as a king. The alienation, the hurt. Jesus was willing not only to suffer physically *but to be misunderstood, maligned, disliked*. How about us? What are you willing to be reviled for? Some of you are willing to be reviled for your causes but not for Christ. You'll walk out on a social media limb for your politics but not your Savior. That's not prophetic character; it's carefully constructed self-worth. Yet, hanging from bloody spikes, Jesus says: Father forgive them for they know not what they do. Emotional persecution can also come from inside the church. Priests and scribes reviled Jesus (Mk 15:31). I've spoken with many pastors wives over the years who have stories of emotional persecution from their churches. Years ago, after a very difficult season of personal attacks, my wife felt like throwing in the towel. So she sought counsel from an older, wiser pastor. After describing what she'd suffered from church members, the pastor responded by empathizing and asking, What would Christ have you do? To which he answered: 70x7 forgive. Numbers of perfection, multiplied. **Extend to others the perfect forgiveness Christ has extended to you.** Prophetic character is merciful and forgiving. Six years ago Dylan Roof walked into Emmanuel AME church and shot to death 33 black, worshipping Christians. Among them was Nadine Collier's mother, Ethel Lance. After grieving her loss, Nadine said to Roof: "*You took something really precious from me. I will never talk to her ever again, I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you and have mercy on your soul...If God forgives you, I forgive you.*" Prophetic persecution. Jesus: [Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you](#) (Mt 5:44). The third possibility is **verbal**: [utter all kinds of evil against you falsely](#) (11). If you've been slandered, you know what this feels like. The accusations can get stuck in your head, and haunt you heart on a loop of condemnation. Are we willing to be verbally insulted for righteousness' sake, for Christ's sake? Idiot, prude, not inclusive? Jesus says, if you're following me don't be surprised if people say things against you falsely. In fact, confront those accusations with this beatitude, BLESSED are the persecuted. It's a sign you're in the kingdom, that you're bringing light into the darkness, that the reality of the

gospel is exposing the alternate reality of the world establishment. Which brings us to profound reward.

Profound Reward

Why should we embrace persecution? Because tucked away in the hurt, the sorrow, and the pain is *profound joy*. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, Jesus says. This is a command. We have to choose to rejoice. We can't wait for the feeling to seize us. We find this difficult because we're joy starved and happiness bloated. We look to temporal comforts instead of eternal comforts for joy. But when we follow Jesus no matter the cost, we can rejoice in persecution. Why? Because of some kind of delusional faith? No, **for your reward is great in heaven**. Because there is *great* reward in heaven. What is in heaven that would make suffering on earth worthwhile? The ascended and reigning Christ, scars on his hands and his feet. When we suffer for righteousness' sake we close the gap between heaven and earth. We align ourselves with the Savior of our souls. We get in touch with the very heart of Christ—a Sufferer for the world—who beckons us away from self-constructed worth into the eternal worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. And he throws in a suffering-free, shalom-saturated world in to boot. We can rejoice and be exceedingly glad when persecuted because something greater than our persecutors governs our persecution. A messiah who heals every wound, comforts every sorrow, and makes all things new. The Light of the world.