

We have come, this morning, to the very end of the Beatitudes.

Listen this one last time to our Lord as He says:

**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.**

He turns his head and looks them full in the face as He finishes...

**Blessed are YOU when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against YOU because of ME. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

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It's fitting that this sermon series ends on Palm Sunday – the Sunday of the Passion.

As we hear these words about OUR persecution, we see HIS persecution begin in earnest. He rides into Jerusalem to die,  
and we are invited to walk beside him and take our share in it.

This is the most PERSONALLY WORDED of all the beatitudes.

No longer is Jesus saying "those who."

Now he uses the word "YOU"!

**BLESSED ARE YOU, WHEN PEOPLE PERSECUTE YOU!**

Blessed ... to be persecuted? What can he mean by this?

PERSECUTION is a dramatic thing.

It means that a person is pursued, pestered, hounded, hurt –  
sometimes for no reason,  
sometimes because the person stands for some worthy cause which can be  
defeated only by obliterating the one who represents it

**"Blessed are those who are PERSECUTED"**

does NOT mean we adopt a "PERSECUTION COMPLEX"!

Jesus is not calling for people who want to persecute themselves --  
who embrace a sick kind of suffering.

There are people like that, often people who have done wrong, who feel they ought to suffer for it... and spend a lifetime making up for it... and often make everyone around them suffer too!

That kind of mournful, morbid stuff is not what Jesus is talking about. It may look religious, but it is the product of the natural man, who wants to make himself acceptable to God...by suffering!

It doesn't work, and it doesn't do anybody any good!

No. The persecution Jesus means is simply a natural result of living out all the beatitudes that went before.

If we are spiritually poor, mournful over sin, meek, and hungering for righteousness...

If we are merciful, pure in heart, and makers of God's peace, then this is what we can expect...this is how the world will respond.

Paul told Timothy:

**“All who want to live a godly life in union w/ JC will be persecuted”**

Luther said it too:

**God's word can never be handled without causing storm tumult, and danger. Therefore give up the hope of advancing Christ's cause on earth in peace and pleasantness, since you can see that Christ has fought with his own blood, and all the martyrs before him!**

It all sounds turned around and upside down to people who have been led to believe that being religious will result in nothing but well-being and prosperity, an image TV preachers like to project, and are eager to promise.

Maybe being “religious” will turn out that way for some folks, but Jesus is not talking about “being religious.”

He is talking about hungering to be right with God.

He is talking about people who will stand up for Him and obey Him, however unpopular it may be.

He are talking about people who are willing to be Christlike in a very un-Christlike world!

For them something great is in store:

misunderstanding, opposition, hatred, and unremitting persecution.  
Follow me, he says, and you will get MY CROSS!

All this is GREAT, He says, because “yours is the Kingdom of heaven”!  
**“Blessed are YOU when men revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you because of ME.”**

Because of ME.

LOOK AT JESUS – He knew persecution. As far as most people were concerned, Jesus was out in left field. They had no use for His kind of life.

Look and listen this Passion Sunday. Hear what happens to Him, who was meek and pure, sinless and devoted to making peace, and see how he was persecuted by an evil world.

LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH and see that it has been a history of persecution.

The New Testament account of the church in Book of Acts begins with persecution. Herod cuts off James’ head, and aims to do the same with Peter. Stephen is stoned to death while Saul holds the coats of the assassins.

The centuries unfold, and the list of martyrs grows.

Foxe’s Book of Martyrs is a whole volume devoted to the stories of those who perished because of their faith.

Valentine, dead in the arena.

William Tyndale tied to a stake and set on fire.

And scores of others.

It has not stopped. The world has not grown to be a kinder, gentler place!

Are you aware that more Christians died for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in all others combined?

In the 20th century, Christians were crucified in the mountains of the Sudan.

In 1956 Jim Elliott and four other missionaries were speared to death in Ecuador.

In 1964 in the Congo, 31 Catholic priests were stripped naked, marched to a riverbank, and hacked to pieces with machetes.

In 1993 seven missionary children in Columbia had to watch as Marxist guerrillas throw their fathers into a truck.

Those men's remains are discovered a year later.

In Kyrgyzstan, where Sue and I served a short-term mission, the government has turned up the pressure on our mission there, and made it nearly impossible for missionary personnel to get visas into the country.

**“All who want to live a godly life in union w/ JC will be persecuted”**

LOOK AT THE UNITED STATES.

Here persecution takes a different form. Instead of being BRUTAL, it is SUBTLE.

Tiny jabs and digs at school and work. Insults. Name-calling.

While I was working a summer job after my HS graduation, some of my co-workers in the warehouse found out I wanted to become a pastor.

For the rest of the summer I became a daily target of taunts, and the recipient of filthy jokes told for my benefit. No one laid a hand on me, but the words delivered a blow to my spirit.

Have such things come to you?

On a wider scale, it is unfair portrayal in the media.

It is letters to the editor and workplace policies that will tolerate everything and everyone except Christians, who are dismissed as fanatics or bigots or insincere fakes.

All of which raises a problem and a question.

The PROBLEM? We don't like to be treated this way!

We want to be treated fairly, not misrepresented.

We don't like to be pushed around by ignorant people!

The QUESTION: Isn't there another way?

A way to be faithful, but avoid the persecution and hurt?

The problem and the question have brought us to the question:  
HOW WILL I RESPOND?

The simplest way for frightened people to avoid persecution is to CLAM UP.

Be quiet, Lay low. Go under cover.

Wait until the storm clouds pass and the sun shines again, and then we will resume our song and our witness – carefully! Selectively!

But if we are DISCIPLES of JESUS and not simply occasional members of His “Fan Club,” the two are always connected: HIS PERSECUTION AND OURS. HIS RESPONSE and OUR RESPONSE.

It is not as if Jesus was unaware of how hard this would be.

In His most dreadful moments, Jesus Himself put that question into a prayer.  
**“Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”**

Yet it did not. And He did not turn back.

He went ahead, the Book of Hebrews says, **“for the joy!”**

For the JOY set before Him, he endured the cross and despised the shame.  
For the JOY He forgives us, and gives us His own righteousness  
and a life that will take us through the door  
where he will meet us.

## HOW WILL I RESPOND?

If I am to follow Him, then I will respond as he did.

Not by seeking persecution, but by being willing to accept it if it comes.  
“Nevertheless, not MY will but THINE.”

The Scriptures point us to a three-fold response to persecution:

FIRST, get dressed! “Put on the Gospel armor” as the hymn says.

Those who would follow Jesus Christ into the arena will put on the weaponry Paul prescribed in Ephesians 6:

**The belt of truth... The breastplate of righteousness**  
**The readiness of the Gospel as boots on our feet**  
**The shield of faith... The helmet of salvation**  
**The sword of Spirit – God’s Word**

Put your armor on! Put it on daily as you pray, as Jesus did in Gethsemane.  
Put in on as you open the Word and find yourself equipped to respond.

**“What you are to say will be given you in that moment”**

SECOND, rejoice!

Rejoice that Christ's promise remains:

**“Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life”**

Rejoice that we are not VICTIMS suffering a loss against our will but VICTORS who have willingly taken a stand with Jesus and will reign with Him,

Rejoice as St. Paul did when he and Silas were beaten and thrown in jail, and they decided to sing hymns while the other prisoners listened.

Rejoice as did Lizzie Atwater, a young American woman caught up in the Boxer Rebellion in China a century ago. Arrested for being a Christian missionary, she was awaiting execution along with more than 100 others. She scratched a note to her sister on August 3, 1900, which read...

“They beheaded thirty-three of us last week...dear ones, I long for the sight of your dear faces, but I fear we shall not meet on earth. I am preparing for the end very quietly and calmly. The Lord is wonderfully near, and he will not fail me. I was very restless...but God has taken away that feeling...Oh, the sweetness of the welcome above!...the Savior's welcome...will compensate for all these days of suspense.”

THIRD, RETALIATE....with a BLESSING!

“Bless those who persecute you” we read in Romans 12.

Return a word of love. Show unexpected patience. Give undeserved care.

**“If your enemy is hungry, feed him...”**

A Christian woman owned a small restaurant. Hard times came, and she had to be both cook and waitress.

One day there came a customer – a well-dressed, middle-aged lady, who entered and sat alone at her table.

She ordered a bowl of vegetable soup. The owner/cook/waitress went to the kitchen and prepared the soup, then served it herself.

A few seconds later, the woman called loudly, complaining sternly that the soup wasn't hot enough. She heated it again and brought it back.

Immediately another complaint: “Where are the vegetables in this soup? Do something about it!”

“I’m sorry,” said the waitress. “I am sure I can give you more vegetables.” She took the bowl into the kitchen, scooped in more, and brought it back.

As soon as the soup was in front of the customer, she abruptly pushed it aside and spilled the hot soup on the table and on her hand.

“Oh, I hope you aren’t burned,” said the waitress, wiping her hand gently with a cloth napkin.

The customer began to cry, and she cried for what seemed a long time.

Amid the sobs, she spoke again: “You have been so nice to me when I have been so rude. I came in here with my mind made up that nothing would please me...

it has been such a bad day!...this morning on his job, my husband was injured and was rushed to the hospital...when I got to the hospital, I got a call that my grandson was also there, being treated for swallowing some lye. It’s been so hard today!”

“Thank you for being kind to me...I feel so much better, and not so angry at God any more...”

It may look like an ordinary thing that Christian restaurant owner did that day.

But it became extraordinary because ordinary insults and hurts taken in good heart for Jesus’ sake have a special stamp on them.

They are inscribed “Blessed”

It is the blessedness of those who know Jesus, and knowing Him, find that in the midst of painful things, His presence makes all the difference.

**BLESSED.**

That’s what “Beatitude” means.

A truth about the blessedness of those who know Jesus.

Eight Beatitudes. Eight calls to discipleship. Eight lovely promises!

May these Beatitudes continue to live in our minds and encourage us to follow Him who loved us and gave Himself for us!

In the name of Jesus. Amen.