

HATED, BUT HAPPY

"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." Matthew 5:10-12.

In the previous Beatitudes Christ has been describing the character of genuine Christians. After outlining the kind of character which should be found in His followers, Christ spoke this last Beatitude. It was the most strange and paradoxical of them all. Concerning it Matthew Henry remarked that Christ repeated it because it sounded so incredible that He wanted to assure His listeners that it was literally true. He wanted to make it perfectly clear to them as to the kind of reception a true Christian would get at the hands of the world. What Christ said tended to fill them with amazement. It has the same effect upon many as they read it today. Christ was simply emphasizing the fact that godliness provokes opposition.

This fact was clearly and emphatically demonstrated in the life of our Lord. He not only spoke these Beatitudes, but He lived them to the point of perfection. He was meek. He was a peacemaker. His was the tenderest heart that ever beat. No other ever gave himself so freely to the service of others. But in spite of all this, He did not meet with universal acclaim. There were those who loved Him with passionate devotion, but there were those who hated Him with hellish hatred.

History proves that those who truly witnessed for God have been persecuted. Christ looked back over the long and glorious line of Jewish prophets, and He saw that every one of them had been persecuted. He saw Elijah hunted like a partridge upon the mountains; He saw Micaiah flung into prison; He saw Isaiah sawn asunder; He saw Jeremiah cast into a filthy dungeon; He saw Daniel thrown into the den of lions; and He saw the gory head of John the Baptist, the last and greatest of the line, carried on a charger as a present to a wicked and revengeful queen.

Nobody was ever persecuted as was the Saviour. On His first public appearance we are told they "rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong." Luke 4:29. In the temple precincts they "took up stones to cast at him." John 8:59. All through His blessed ministry His steps were dogged by enemies. The religious leaders charged Him with demon possession (John 8:48).

Nothing was too harsh or cruel for them to say about Christ. They called Him a gluttonous man and a winebibber. They said that He was a blasphemer, that He was crazy, and that He was in league with the devil. At His trial they plucked out His beard (Isaiah 50:6), spat in His face, buffeted Him, and smote Him with the palms of their hands (Matthew 26:67). After He was scourged by the soldiers, they crowned Him with thorns and nailed Him to the cross which He had carried as they led Him to Calvary. He was put to death, not for any sin that was in Him, but because of His vital goodness. Even in His dying hours He was persecuted by revilings and scoffings. How unutterably mild in comparison with what He suffered is the persecution we are called on to endure for His sake!

Looking to the future, Christ could see faithful witnesses dying because of their devotion to Him. He could see James, the son of Zebedee, being beheaded with the sword in Jerusalem; He could see John, his brother, in exile in Patmos for the word of the Lord; He could see Peter in prison, and afterwards being crucified; He could see Alphaeus, being flung from the pinnacle of the Temple; and He could see Andrew being put to death in Bithynia. Christ knew that many of those who were listening to Him would, in the days to come, suffer affliction, bonds, imprisonment, and death for His name's sake.

Looking further into the future when the number of Christians would be much larger, Christ could see that many would be stoned, beaten, tortured on the rack, imprisoned and put to death in various horrible ways. He could see many serving as living torches in Nero's gardens, and many others torn to pieces by the wild beasts in Roman amphitheaters.

Paul also exemplified these Beatitudes in an amazingly beautiful fashion. What a peacemaker he was! How compassionate! He felt himself indebted to all men. Because of his godliness he encountered the most strenuous opposition. He was chased from one city to another. He had intimate acquaintance with the whipping post. Again and again he was thrust into prison. There was a day when he was stoned until he could not stand on his feet. At last he died a martyr's death. Across the centuries he shouts to us: "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

This Beatitude was a very vital word for those to whom it was spoken originally. The lives of the disciples were spent in a maelstrom of trouble, brought on themselves by their loyalty to Christ. It is obvious that Christ expected His loyal disciples to get into trouble, and He frequently warned them to be ready for it. He told His followers not to expect to be popular or to find life easy. The three forms of trial which He predicted for them are: reproach or railing, persecution, and slanderous abuse or falsely saying every evil thing imaginable about them.

The world has ever been the enemy of God's people. It is no less true today than it was in the first century that every Christian who bravely bears his testimony to God's truth will suffer for it. The weapons which it uses today are somewhat different from what they were when Christ was here in the flesh. Then, Christians were thrown into prison, hanged upon forests of crosses, burned at the stake, and fed to wild beasts. In those days persecution usually had its culmination in physical violence.

At least two methods of persecution employed nineteen hundred years ago are still in vogue. People controlled by Satan still revile, call others narrow and fanatical, shrug their shoulders and laugh at them as cranks. The other weapon is slander. When our Lord made Himself the dauntless foe of evil, those who were its friends slandered Him. They tried to destroy His good name. They said all manner of evil against Him falsely. While it is never easy to bear slander, and many hearts have been broken by it, it is a form of persecution that every faithful servant of Christ has had to endure.

While the Christian way of life today may not bring the old forms of persecution, who would say that the modern way is any easier? In persecuting those who are faithful to God today, the world employs the brutal jest, the biting sarcasm, and the cruel sneer--instruments of torture which are as effective in their way as the rack of long ago. There are people who would face physical suffering and death on account of their faith more readily than the chill of social ostracism, the sneer of the club or drawingroom, or the scorn which dismisses them as cranks.

Christ made it clear to all who would follow Him that intolerance, hate, persecution, false accusation, sneers, ridicule and reviling are to be expected. It is impossible for the true servant of God to pass through the world without suffering. God and the world are in irreconcilable antagonism. The consequence is that the world visits with hatred and persecution all who are earnest in the service of God. Christ said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation."

What are we to do about it? Suppose as a Christ I look up into the face of my Lord and say, "Master, I am having a hard fight, I am meeting with strenuous opposition, I am face to face with persecution," what answer will He give? He will not say, "I am sorry for you." Rather, He will say, "Let me congratulate you." "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad: for so persecuted, they the prophets which were before you." Persecution for righteousness' sake is not something to whine about. Rather, it is something over which to rejoice.

It is a sad but solemn fact that it is not for sin but for righteousness that men are still most bitterly hated and persecuted. It is quite easy for a professed Christian to get by comfortably, provided he conforms to the world's ways. If he is not careful to live in a godly manner, the world will never bother him. But if you mean to be an out-and-out Christian, then you must make up your mind to be persecuted for righteousness' sake. One cannot live a faithful Christian life and make an assault upon sin without provoking anger, hate and persecution. No one ever provokes the hostility of the world, the flesh and the devil without suffering for it. Only by winking at sin or by the neglect of duty can a Christian escape persecution.

How much persecution for righteousness' sake have you endured? How much suffering has your Christianity brought upon you? Has your religion cost you any suffering? Have you ever had a troubled day, or sleepless night, on account of it? Have you ever endured ridicule and mockery on account of it? Our Lord said, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also." John 15:18-20.

Why does a real Christian provoke opposition? A genuine Christian provokes opposition because he is different, because his godly life is a constant rebuke to the selfishness and sin of others, and because what he is, says and does is a rebuke to the sinful way of living.

It is, of course, very unsafe to assume that if you are unpopular it is because of your Christianity. This Beatitude applies only to people who are accused falsely, and to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. There are Christians who are disliked, not for their Christianity, but for the want of it; not because they are right, but because they are tactless. They ask for trouble by their pugnacious temper, rude manner, or bitter tongue.

It is not every sufferer for religion who is entitled to appropriate this verse. This antagonism is not in return for wrong-doing or in response to what has given just cause for offence. The haughty, selfish, or evil-speaking have no right to seek comfort from this Beatitude when people retaliate against them. This pronouncement signifies, Blessed are the spiritual whom the carnal detest; Blessed are the gentle sheep whom the dogs bark at. However, the believer must see to it that he is buffeted for right doing and not on account of his own misconduct or foolish behavior. To destroy the usefulness of God's ministers, the devil often subjects them to marked disrespect, social ostracism, personal abuse and defamation of character.

These afflictions which faithfulness to Christ brings are to be endured with thanksgiving and joy. This is true because these sufferings are for Christ's sake, because they bring them into fellowship with a noble company of martyrs, and because they shall be richly recompensed hereafter. "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Romans 8:18.

Christ congratulates those Christians who are persecuted for righteousness' sake because persecution is a pathway to spiritual growth. It is not by dodging difficulties that we become strong, but by overcoming them. Opposition, when rightly borne, can make for spiritual growth by bringing the persecuted closer to the Lord. John G. Paton told of the bitter opposition that he encountered in the far-off Hebrides. During a season of persecution he spent one night in a tree. He could hear the savages beating the bushes beneath him, carefully searching for him in an effort to take his life. But he declared that he would gladly pass through another such experience of peril to be privileged to enjoy the assuring and comforting presence of Christ as he did that night. The Lord comes wonderfully near to those who suffer for His sake.

Persecution for righteousness' sake is a roadway to larger usefulness. Once in the city of Jerusalem there was a comparatively handful of saints who by the grace of God were incarnating these Beatitudes. Suddenly persecution swept down upon them. The Jewish hierarchy, backed by the power of Rome, sent them flying from the city. "But they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word." Instead of putting out the little blaze that had been kindled in Jerusalem by their persecution, they only helped the dispersed to set the world on fire for Christ. And that conflagration is burning to this good hour, and will continue as long as time shall last.

Even though persecution is something that no one desires, it crowns man with imperishable fame. It is apparent, however, that the blessing Christ pronounces applies to those only who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. May the Lord enable all of the oppressed servants of God to draw from these precious words of Christ the comfort and strength which they need!