

THE BEATITUDES: JESUS' CALL TO HAPPINESS

Matthew 4:17-5:12

*“Blessed are those who are Persecuted for
Righteousness Sake...”*

Matthew 5:10 (11-12)

Persecution—a strange dimension of happiness! Mark in his gospel records Jesus as saying to his followers, *“As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to religious councils, and you will be beaten...A brother will betray a brother to death; in the same way, a sister will betray a sister...and you will be hated by all because of my name.”* Jesus is basically saying, *“Follow me and expect to be persecuted!”* I really think that Jesus needs a better advertising campaign.

A leading research scientist was once asked, *“What is the primary qualification for a research scientist?”* His response, *“They must not bruise easily.”* It seems, at least based on today's beatitude, that his words are also applicable to a follower of Jesus. Followers of Jesus must not bruise easily! Why? For when one takes seriously the teachings of Jesus, the Beatitudes, the way can be harsh and rigorous, and even lead to persecution.

In the 1948 novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, one of the persecuted people in South Africa declares, *“I have never thought that a Christian would be free of suffering...For our Lord suffered. And I have come to believe that he suffered, not to save us from suffering, but to teach us how to bear suffering.”*

Persecution! Suffering! Most thinking people would know that whenever one embraces a cause, Christianity or otherwise, there is the possibility of persecution or suffering. But note, Jesus does not just warn of the persecution he says, *“Happy are those who are persecuted.”* Is Jesus a masochist? A sadist?

Clarence Jordan in his Cotton Patch Version of the Bible translates this beatitude, *“They who have endured much for what's right are God's people; they are citizens of His new order. You are God's people when others call you names, and harass you and tell all kinds of false tales on you just because you follow me. Be cheerful and good-humored, because your spiritual advantage is great. For that's the way they treated **people of conscience** in the past.”*

There are two important caveats concerning *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake...”* The first is, Jesus is not encouraging a martyr complex, which often leads to self-pity—the whole world is out to get me, or everybody is against me. This leads us to the second caveat—the persecution that Jesus refers to is for *‘the sake of righteousness’*, or as Jordan translates *‘for*

the sake of conscience.'

I spoke with someone this week who quit their job because they were asked to do something that would have been unethical. They quit rather than go against their own conscience. In this beatitude Jesus is referring to those who are willing to face the consequences for maintaining a healthy integral relationship with God. Remember! Righteousness refers to relationship. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of relationship with God."*

William Tuck in his book *The Way for all Seasons: Searching Reflections on the Beatitudes*, titles the chapter on the persecution beatitude, Standing to be Counted. Throughout the beatitudes we have understood that blessed can best be translated happy; and further, that the happiness Jesus calls us to is an inner peace. So now we have *"At peace are those who suffer persecution for doing right, for being a person of conscience, for the sake of maintaining a healthy integral relationship with God."* Happiness certainly is not derived from the persecution itself, happiness comes from knowing you are 'standing to be counted.'

I think of Rosa Parks. I think of the drag queens at Stonewall. I think of Martin Luther King Jr. I think of Beth Stroud, a Methodist minister, whose credentials were revoked last week because she is a "practicing" lesbian. I think of every GLBT person who, in the prevailing face of fundamentalist Christianity, refuses to surrender their faith. I think of the line in the song *Born Free*—willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.

Friends, the Beatitudes are our path to happiness—to inner peace. But so too are they a call to persecution. If we truly embrace and live the Beatitudes we will be going against the grain of traditional society which inevitably means persecution. Yet, if we do not embrace the Beatitudes we are missing an opportunity to experience life at a higher level. We will be missing the path to inner peace. Ignoring the Beatitudes does not mean that we are forsaking our relationship with God, but it does mean that we are not living to our highest spiritual potential.

The Beatitudes call us to recognize that we are first and foremost spiritual beings—we are spiritual beings having a human experience. The Beatitudes call us to be real with our emotions and feelings; thereby, not getting stuck in our grief, loss, and depression. The Beatitudes call us to a disciplined inner strength. The Beatitudes call us to pure motives—to desire spiritual nourishment as much as we desire air. The Beatitudes call us to mercy and compassion. The Beatitudes call us to be forgiving. The Beatitudes call us to suspend judgment. The Beatitudes call us to be a people of integrity—the same inside and outside. The Beatitudes call us to be at peace and to be peacemakers. The kind of happiness—inner peace—that Jesus calls us to in the Beatitudes requires effort, initiative, sacrifice, devotion, commitment, and yes, even persecution.

Perhaps this final Beatitude is not so strange after all. It serves to bring all of the Beatitudes together. This final Beatitude that calls us to find inner peace by standing up and being counted when injustice, discrimination, and marginalizing are occurring is the heart of Jesus life and teachings. Jesus never just stood by when people were suffering.

Jesus once said to a group of followers, *“When I was hungry you fed me. When I was sick you came to me. When I was in prison you visited me.”* Jesus followers were confused for they had never recalled doing any of these things for him. Then Jesus said, *“When you have done it to the least, to the marginalized, to the discriminated against, you have done it unto me.”*

When we began this series on the Beatitudes I said, *“Our challenge for the next few weeks is to hear Jesus’ Beatitudes and then to dare to embrace them as the way to a higher life of happiness.”* And, I asked you to join me on this journey of hearing and embracing. I now challenge us, as a congregation, to be more determined to live as Jesus has called us to live. I challenge us to never be silent in the face of injustice, discrimination and marginalization. I challenge us to be a people of integrity—living what we say we believe. I challenge us, my friends, to stand up and be counted—even in the face of persecution.

Jesus’ first Beatitude, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit”* and this final Beatitude, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake”* end with the same promise, *“for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* This promise becomes the bookends of the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are our guide for practicing what Jesus said is the way to eternal life—loving God with one’s entire being and loving one’s neighbor as oneself—even in the face of persecution!