

SERMON TITLE- "Blessed Are The Persecuted"

TEXT- Matthew 5:10-12

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

DATE- August 10, 2008

This sermon is out of order- and at some levels doing the Beatitudes in the order that they are given is important. Writers and preachers chose their last words carefully. So when you read them- note the closing comments.

But today we are doing the last one because this is the one that I am going to preach at our sister church in Vernon- and because this is what I was told to preach on. So you get it here today.

The Beatitude that we are looking at is the only one that comes with a bit of commentary following it.

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

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. Matthew 5:10-12

This Beatitude follows exactly the same format as the previous 7 with a statement of blessing- "Blessed are . . ." with a short rationale "for theirs is . . ."

Last week we looked at 2 beatitudes that are relatively obvious to most of us.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Matthew 5:6

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Matthew 5:7

Who should feel "blessed" more than the righteous and the merciful? It makes perfect sense to almost everyone. We did of course discover that when it comes to the teachings of Jesus things may be simple- but they do run deep and that in this case there is far more to these blessings than meets the eye.

Specifically, in the case of righteousness and mercy the big challenge is that they are in a conflict of interest. You cannot at the same time be righteous and merciful and you cannot at the same time be merciful and righteous. In every situation we will have to choose one or the other.

But if it is obvious that a righteous and a merciful person should feel blessed- the closing Beatitude goes back to the shocking beginning. Blessed are the poor doesn't make sense and now Jesus closes off by taking us back to another radical contradiction.

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

Right up front we all know that being persecuted is not a good thing.

I don't know that I have ever experienced any kind of persecution. I know there have been times when I felt picked on and even tormented. The most accessible memories of that come from school. In most classrooms there is a person or 2 who ends up being tormented- sometimes to tragic ends. Most people

have both seen that happen and at least for a moment or 2 been on the receiving end of some level of torment.

What is very clear from any memory or experience of that is- this is a horrible place to be. In fact teenage suicides often have an overtone of this type of tormenting behind them.

This is not a blessed condition.

In some ways we need to understand this gut response to understand the meaning and impact of this Beatitude.

From this place we begin to understand this Kingdom principle.

#1. Being Persecuted Is Terrible

Jesus began the Beatitudes with "**Blessed are the poor . . .**" We are supposed to be shocked by this. Some of the Beatitudes that follow don't shock us but are supposed to and by closing off with this one- Jesus drives His point home so that we can't miss it.

And why is persecution so terrible? Because as human beings we are social creatures. We crave the acceptance of the crowd. At the most basic level rejection by the crowd is the highest form of punishment that can be inflicted. Anti-social behaviour is behaviour that makes a society retreat from us.

As an aside, conversely, the greatest blessing that a human being can receive is being included in a community.

This fact is the foundation for this principle-

#2. The Call Of God Is Above The Highest Human Reward

The first, unmistakable thrust of this Beatitude is part of Jesus' Kingdom teaching that to be His follower is to have a value system that society at large will reject. In spring we went through this in more detail. We are a separated people and that separation is based on a very direct statement by Jesus.

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. John 17:14

Jesus came with a message of reconciliation between humanity and God but that reconciliation does not come without a choice that must be made- a choice to want that reconciliation more than the dysfunctional system that surrounds us here and now.

This is the choice that we see in those who struggle with addictions. They are part of a world that is destroying them- and yet that world feeds a deep need within their beings. As much as they hate what their addiction does to themselves- they cannot bring themselves to choose the road to healing.

This difficult choice is not limited to those fighting addiction- addiction, in this case is a metaphor for what each of us deals with in life.

The choice to do the right thing is always a hard one.

We have to choose the team we want to be part of- and that choice is difficult. Jesus never downplayed the difficulty of that choice. In fact he made it very blunt- shockingly blunt. On one occasion He said this-

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters- yes, even his own life—he

cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:25-27

Do not be confused, is the message of the Kingdom- to be part of this team- you need to let the other team go.

In this case Jesus uses hyperbole to drive home His point. What is more important to us than our families? A family is a truly good thing. We are commanded to honour our families- and yet in the context of following God's call on our lives- we cannot even allow this good thing to distract us from doing right. Jesus command does not take away from the other commands to honour our families- but it reminds us of what a difficult challenge the choice to truly make following Jesus is.

We are called to change teams in the most primary possible fashion.

And so, following from that, when the team that you are leaving turns against you- don't be surprised- in fact, if you have listened to Jesus' call- you will know that this is part of the package.

And here is where Jesus adds the commentary to the Beatitude-

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. Matthew 5:10-12

Shocking enough? I hope so. Even as I am going through this series and have been focusing on how hard the Beatitudes are to understand- this is hard to integrate into how I actually run my life. I like to be liked and jumping for joy when people hate me is not likely going to be my natural response.

On the other hand there is another side to human nature that benefits from understanding the whole Beatitude.

#3. The Call Of God Is To Be Reflected In Righteousness

Here Jesus goes back to the righteousness Beatitude. Why is it that we are persecuted?

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

This goes back to the very character of God- God is righteous- we are to hunger and thirst after righteousness- and hungering and thirsting for righteousness will result in righteousness exuding from our beings.

What does that look like in real life? This is always the question we need to ask ourselves. It is very convenient to idealize things like righteousness around people we think symbolize this. People like Mother Teresa or Billy Graham. In both their cases they have lived public lives that have stood the scrutiny of time and have come out looking amazingly good.

But not many people here will, or should, think of themselves in such lofty terms.

The question we must ask ourselves is, "What does righteousness look like at home and at work?" Let me pose an example- let us suppose you are watching a movie with your friends and one of you says, "I don't think this movie is appropriate for me." If no one else agrees with that person- it is a pretty

uncomfortable situation. Of course because this scenario is about being among friends that person will not likely be "persecuted" other than possibly have people rolling their eyes.

But do that same thing in a work setting and you will probably have a taste of persecution. I remember a situation years ago when Michael Jackson was popular and I offered the opinion that his dance routines were obscene. I was shocked at the intensity of the response.

That does not rate as persecution by any means- but it shows how people respond when something that could possibly look like righteousness comes across the radar.

The work environments are challenging places in which to bring the principles of righteousness.

We have already been reminded that as Kingdom people we are to reflect God's righteousness and now we are told that- if, because of our pursuit of that righteousness, we are persecuted, we are blessed.

This does not minimize the pain of being persecuted- but it does clarify something we need to be reminded of.

We need to be reminded of this because of how our human natures work. And do there are two important clarifications that rise out of this Beatitude and its commentary.

#4. Righteousness Must Actually Be Your Foundation

Why is this an important clarification and why does Jesus make sure that there are 2 reminders within these few sentences?

Because as human beings we quickly attribute the grief and disapproval that comes our way as persecution when it usually is not the case.

There are a lot of reasons why those around us might "persecute" us that have nothing to do with our righteousness.

Let me give you just 2-

1. Jesus says that we are blessed if we are persecuted for "righteousness" and then adds "**and falsely say all kinds of evil against you**". It is very clear that a lot of people feel unjustly criticized when they have done bad things.

I remember a person coming to see me and telling me how a friend was criticizing them and that I should make it stop. It turned out, that even as they were describing the situation that they critiques seemed valid and the friends were speaking directly to each other.

When people critique us for bad behaviour- we don't qualify for the blessing of the Beatitude. It seems so obvious but this reminder is repeated several times in the NT. Just because we are followers of Jesus doesn't mean that we are above reproach and it is a simple fact that we don't have to look very far to find cases where we have been deserving of critique.

2. One of the reasons that people are persecuted is because they dress in peculiar ways. I was a child of the 60s and the badge of our time was long hair. In my world it was a badge of pride and demonstrated how superior I was to mainstream culture. If I went to church with my long hair and dirty jeans people would scowl at me and then I knew I was superior.

That was all fine but then I went up to work in cowboy country and now instead of just scowling at me the cowboys wanted to beat me up. Then I felt truly persecuted and was filled with even greater pride.

But dressing in a fashion that makes people scowl at you is not persecution.

Make no mistake- as God's people we are not to scowl at people for the clothes they wear- but if we wear the wrong clothes for the occasion and people scowl at us- we don't qualify for the Beatitude's blessing.

#5. Judgmentalism Is Not Righteousness.

This should not require clarification but it does. We all easily confuse these 2 traits.

In the paper on Friday told the story of a church in the US that is sending up a delegation to disrupt the funeral of the young man who was killed in the bus last week. They want to make the point that this murder is God's judgment on Canada and think that as Canadians we should get this point.

This group deserves to be shunned by society. As the family of God we too need to make sure that we do not tolerate judgmentalism in our community.

But while this is a wonderfully clear illustration of judgmentalism life is rarely that clear.

What is our standard? God demands that we are righteous and that our righteousness flows out of our Godly character- not how we decide others should behave. When we carry ourselves with an air of superiority and we annoy people because of this- we deserve all the scowling we get. Such an attitude is the very opposite of the attitude that Jesus modeled for His people.

But this is an attitude that sneaks up on us all very easily. We must guard ourselves against thinking that somehow it is only represented by some crazy church group from the US.

The attitude of superiority and judgmentalism that I carried with my in my flowing locks of hair and torn jeans is absolutely part of human nature.

We are to be people who hunger and thirst after righteousness and when in the pursuit of that righteousness we are persecuted- we can indeed rejoice.

There is one more clarification to this Beatitude that I think is important and it could easily be a sermon all on its own.

#6. Suffering For Righteousness Is A Cosmic Problem

Besides Jesus, who suffered most for his righteousness? I think it is fair to say that it would be Job.

Job was caught in a cosmic argument. Without filling in the details today [for that you can go home and read this fascinating book], Job was facing a test of his righteousness- that he knew nothing about.

In a matter of a few short days he went from being the person that everyone knew was blessed and protected by God- to having disaster rain down on him from every side. In the process Job was reduced to sitting on the ground in rags- weeping.

Job didn't know that there was a cosmic test going on but he knew he didn't deserve what he was facing.

There are times when life deals us a very tough hand [though not as tough as Job] and when we cry out to God and say- "This isn't fair!"

There are times when the trouble we face is a consequence of our behaviour but there are other times when bad things just happen.

How is this suffering for righteousness? Job had a choice to make and it was posed at the beginning when the disaster struck-

His wife said to him, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said. Job 2:9-10

We serve a righteous God and when we face trouble we don't deserve- our sense of God's righteousness is violated.

Whenever trouble comes our way- we like Job must be prepared to carefully as the question- "Is this something that my sin has brought upon me?" We even need to be prepared to have others ask us that question- not because they should but because that is the often unspoken question that faces those who face trouble.

But being prepared to have that question asked means that we can also, like Job, come to the conclusion that we are being unjustly subjected to suffering- that we don't deserve this.

And where is the blessing in all this? The answer begins by knowing where the blessing is no-

-it is not in having an easier ride than other people

-it is not in knowing the "why" answer better than others

Instead the answer comes when we like Job know we can say-

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. Job 19:23

We know that life is more than the troubles we face and there will be a time when we will see our redemption. And when we understand that and when we realize what despair is the lot of those who truly curse God and die- then we know why those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness will indeed be able to rejoice and be glad- and as Luke puts it- to jump for joy.