



Foundations: The Eighth Blessing

Matthew 5:10-12 (AFBC 10/28/18)

“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.”

As we turn our attention to the last Beatitude, I want to begin with a few general observations. Several of you have expressed your appreciation for this series. Some of you have also confessed that you find these teachings of Jesus to be challenging.

Well... me, too! And this final beatitude doesn't make any of this easier! None of us likes the thought of "persecution."

We've heard of Christians being persecuted in other times and even today in other places. Some of our brothers and sisters have died horrible deaths as martyrs for the cause of Christ. It's okay to acknowledge that this is a blessing we would rather avoid.

Jesus knew we'd feel this way. The other seven are expressed with only one brief sentence, but Jesus requires two additional verses to explain this beatitude. Actually, Jesus talks and warns about persecution throughout His ministry; and then He embodies it through His own suffering and death on the cross.

Something else about beatitude number eight: it's hard for us to even have a frame of reference for Jesus' teaching about persecution. This is something, thankfully, we have not likely had to face. Hopefully, we never will! So the other beatitudes may seem a bit more relevant to our lives.

We began this journey seven weeks ago as part of our Foundation Series. The beatitudes certainly qualify as foundational since in many ways these eight teachings of Jesus introduce us to everything else our Lord said.

Earlier, we talked about “the essential question” that teachers build into their lesson plans. Teachers want to make sure that they are actually communicating to their students whatever it is they want them to learn.

A plan is in place to help the students “get it.” Now, it doesn’t always work; but good teachers identify an “essential question” that then becomes the focus of their teaching.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus raises what we might call THE essential question: “How can my students, those who choose to follow me, live truly happy, contented, and blessed lives?” His answers are found in these eight teachings that, as we’ve noted before, turn the answers our world tries to give us upside down.

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness’—these teachings focus primarily on our relationship with God. Jesus knows that a good relationship with God is essential to a happy life.

Then Jesus says ‘blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and finally, those who are persecuted because of righteousness’—these last four aim to improve our relationships with one another—also essential to a blessed, contented life. Jesus sticks to His plan!

Let me say this one more time: the Beatitudes require “lifelong learning.” We haven’t begun to master them in these eight Sundays together.

We won’t master them over the course of a lifetime, in fact. But the One who challenges us with these teachings does expect us to keep on learning and growing as long as we live.

In June of 1924, an Englishman named George Mallory attempted to climb to the summit of Mt. Everest. It was his third try.

He put together a strong team. He planned the expedition carefully. He took every safety precaution. But during the climb, there was an avalanche; and Mallory and most of his team were killed.

Back in England, a banquet was held to honor the memory of those who died. As the survivors were recognized and the people applauded, one of them stood to speak. He looked around the

banquet hall at the framed pictures of Mallory and the others who had died, and then he spoke as if addressing the mountain itself.

He said, "I speak to you, Mt. Everest, in the name of all brave men living and those yet unborn. Mt. Everest, you defeated us once, you defeated us twice, you defeated us three times; but Mt. Everest, we shall someday defeat you--because you can't grow any bigger, but we can."

This is the spirit in which we should allow these teachings of Jesus to speak to us. So often, we will fail in our attempts to apply the Beatitudes to our lives and relationships, but by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we can get bigger. We can confess our failures and follow the teachings of Jesus more closely.

Surely it pleases our Lord when we do. All good teachers are satisfied when their students give their best. Our goal, then, is to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior—each day, to love Him more and follow Him closer.

So with that, let's look at the last of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." So... why in the world would Jesus end with "persecution?"

Could the reason be that Jesus, knowing the realities of this sinful world, understood that everyone who commits their lives to Him, and seeks to live according to His teachings, will inevitably face some persecution along the way? He certainly knew this would be true for those to whom He was speaking.

The accounts of what happened to the original disciples of Jesus are both troubling and inspiring. They "took up their crosses" to follow the Lord, many of them... literally.

Peter is said to have died by being crucified upside down—because he told his executioners that he was not worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.

Tradition has it that Phillip, Andrew, Thaddeus, Simon, and Bartholomew were also crucified. James was beheaded, Matthew was killed with a sword, James the Lesser was stoned to death, and Thomas was executed with a spear.

We believe that John died as a prisoner exiled on the Isle of Patmos. They all discovered first hand: "Blessed are the persecuted. The kingdom of heaven is theirs."

Most of us have heard the stories of Christians being torn apart by lions in the Roman arenas or covered with pitch and set on fire. We are not as aware as we should be, however, of those who are dying in other parts of the world even today because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

The numbers will shock and sadden you—and, at the same time, fill you with gratitude for the freedoms we enjoy here. Which begs the question: "What do you and I know about persecution?"

I realize that some think they are being persecuted if asked to teach a Sunday School class or, more painful still, to tithe—but, sorry, these don't qualify as persecution, I don't care how over-committed you are already with your time or money.

Having to read letters to the editor from people who don't see things like us, who may even question or mock our faith, makes us feel uncomfortable; but that's really not persecution either, is it? If that's as bad as it gets, aren't we "off the hook" when it comes to the eighth beatitude—at least for the time being?

I've had to wrestle with these questions, and it was tempting to think this way: that this beatitude applies only to those who face real persecution—the kinds we've already mentioned.

Then I ran across this verse from II Timothy 3:12: "...everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..."

What are we to make of that? Some have suggested that what Jesus is saying in the eighth beatitude is that if anyone is truly living by the other seven beatitudes, they will be persecuted.

Live your life fully and faithfully for Christ, be obedient to His teachings, and persecution is unavoidable. What do you think?

Jesus did at least open the door to forms of persecution other than physical abuse. He said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." That could happen around here—in fact, it does sometimes.

Warren Buffet, who's often called the Oracle of Omaha, is one of the richest men in the world. Remember when he reported that he did a survey around his office and discovered that he, as a billionaire, had a lower tax rate than anyone else in his office, including the receptionists.

Then he dared to ask the question if this was fair? He didn't turn it into a religious question—though he certainly could have—rather he simply appealed to fairness and a sense of the common good.

And many people howled at that—not with laughter, but with derision! Many Christians were among them, seemingly choosing politics over faith. Now, if being insulted counts as persecution, Warren Buffett suffered a bit for what he said—not that this fazed him. Thankfully, he hasn't stopped talking about this.

Now, I don't know if he said this because of a commitment to Jesus Christ or if he just happens to be moral enough to ask the obvious question. Either way, he dared to raise the issue, and many directed insults toward him for doing so.

Jesus warned His followers that this kind of thing will happen to us if we seek to live our lives by His teachings. Perhaps the reason we encounter so little persecution today is because we live by Jesus' teachings so seldom.

Listen: if we never experience anything even resembling persecution, maybe we need to be asking, "Why not?" Is there no cross for us to bear? Is there no higher good to pursue that might require us to sacrifice something?

A real estate agent said to his client: "This house has both its good points and bad. To show you I'm honest, I'm going to tell you about both. The disadvantages are that there is a chemical plant one block south, and there is a trash dump a block north."

"So what are the advantages?" the client wanted to know. "The advantage is you can always tell which way the wind's blowing."

Are we guilty of never taking a stand on anything until we see which way the wind is blowing? I guess we can avoid a lot of persecution if we never ask what Jesus would have us do.

Henry David Thoreau, the "back to nature" writer of the nineteenth century, was a man of strong convictions. He opposed slavery. Because of this, he refused to pay taxes to a government that would not end this human bondage.

For this, he was arrested and put in prison. His friend and fellow writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, visited him while he was in jail.

Emerson said to Thoreau, "Henry, I am so surprised to see you in jail. What are you doing here?" Thoreau replied: "No, Ralph, the question is, what are you doing out there?" (Joe E. Trull, Preaching, July-September, 1988, p.33)

As we discussed last Sunday, Jesus wants us to be peacemakers. But sometimes we have to take a stand, regardless of the consequences--if we are true to our calling as followers of the Prince of Peace.

In Umpire School, they teach that 'just because people are yelling at you, it doesn't mean you're wrong!' Jesus had to remember this all the way to the cross.

How blessed we are, friends, if all we have to endure is a little noisy criticism! **"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 5:12)**

Next Sunday, we will have some guests present with us who've recently lost members of their family to death. I guess it's a bit of a reach to think of death and grief as "persecution," but the Bible does clearly call death "our enemy." Death was not in God's original plan. It's not what He wants for our lives.

Have you noticed that Jesus BEGINS the Beatitudes with the promise of heaven, and He ENDS them with the same promise? We will never fully grasp the meaning of these teachings until we realize that some of the blessings Jesus promises will be ours only when He comes to take us home.

Whatever persecutions we have to endure, whatever troubles and sadnesses come into our lives, we have the assurance that one day we will **"be more than conquerors through Him that loved us." (Romans 8:37)**

It was to followers of Jesus Christ who knew persecution as a present and dangerous reality in their lives that John wrote the words of assurance that I'm about to share with you. They're for all of us who have placed our faith in the crucified but risen Lord.

Revelation 21:4-5a:

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

There's the blessing, friends! So many times I have shared these verses as part of someone's memorial service. They take on new meaning then—when we've lost someone we love; or when, for whatever reason—serious illness, advancing years, or even persecution--we know that our lives here are almost over.

How blessed to know that, when the time comes, the Kingdom of Heaven is ours! Be so blessed, friends.

Know that your life is in the Savior's hands. And know that His plans for your life are eternal.

Follow Our Lord's teachings—the teachings found in the Beatitudes, in the rest of His Sermon on the Mount and throughout the Gospels.

But above all, FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST—fully, faithfully, and when necessary, courageously.

If and when we are persecuted because of our relationship with our Lord, then we are blessed, and the Kingdom of Heaven is ours! Thanks be to God! Amen.