



Ministry of the Word

Wednesday 26th September 2020

by Vincent Gannon

Scripture: Matthew 5:10-12

Subject: Part 22 – Persecution and Reward in the Kingdom

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The previous beatitudes, we've already studied in Chapter 5 from verses 3 to 9, King Jesus deals with the character of the citizens of heaven not just simply their conduct. Wiersbe wrote: *"Character always comes before conduct, because what we are determines what we do"* (Wiersbe; *New Testament Outlines*; p.27).

These character traits could never be accomplished without having been truly saved, and being indwelt by the Holy Spirit in the first place. We need to be very clear in our mind with regard to the essential character of the Christian; and in these verses, Jesus invites us to examine our attitude about ourselves, others and the world. We've learned that righteousness and sin have one thing in common, both begin from within and work their way to the outside. The world is in pursuit of happiness but looking for it in the wrong way, producing nothing but misery. Deceived by sin, instead of finding true happiness they find misery. The Sermon on the Mount shows us the way to be truly happy, *can you believe it?*

We are all shown the way to be blessed, to be truly happy, here and now, as well as for eternity; and we are shown how we can attain such. True believers are all meant to conform to the pattern and rise to the standards found here in these beatitudes.

So who are the blessed? Well let's look back briefly at the beatitudes to keep us on track. The blessed are those who sense their sin and recognise their ruin, and run to the arms of God. They become the children of God. We, who are true believers, are the poor in spirit, admitting spiritual bankruptcy. We do not simply admit our need but are willing to do something about it, and depend on God in every area of our lives (v.3). The sinner mourns, expresses true sorrow for sin, grieves over personal sin in both self and others, grieves over the nature of sin and the consequences of sin; then submits to the authority of God in our lives (v.4).

We are meek (v. 5). We are teachable, unwilling to defend ourselves in our sin; we admit our sin and turn from it, willingly to live under the authority of God. We hunger and thirst for righteousness; we long for God; we long for His righteousness and by faith we ask for it, for righteousness builds, grows, and comes from God (v.6). We are the merciful who give undeserved relief in the face of heart-breaking misery and pain; cultivating a forgiving spirit, love and a willingness to offer resources to the undeserving (v.7). We are pure in heart (v.8); willing to keep our lives clean; pure because we see God; unwilling to accept substitutes for holiness, clean on the inside and wish to see God's will come to pass. We are peacemakers, not trouble makers, pointing people to God, since humanity is in rebellion, working hard to reconcile broken people to their God (v.9).

What happens when we deny ourselves; oppose Satan and confront the world and all the lost people in it? We invite persecution. In these verses, Jesus speaks of the reality of persecution (v.10); the reason for persecution (v.11) and the reward for persecution (v.12).

The Reality of Persecution (v10-

This is a very sobering verse, and it is those who are being persecuted who are the citizens of Christ's Kingdom. It is no longer about character traits, but about those who have embraced the articles of the King's Constitution. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12 ; ***"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"***

In verses 10 to 12, you will notice that blessed is mentioned twice but in connection with enduring persecution. The word “persecuted” is mentioned three times yet with only one reward, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It seems that a double blessing is given to those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

What it is not -

Dr Martian Lloyd Jones had a few thoughts about what persecution is not, which I agreed with. Let me just quote a few of those things from his book about Sermon on the Mount:

“It does not say, ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are objectionable.’ It does not say, ‘Blessed are those who are having a hard time in their Christian life because they are being difficult.’ It does not say, ‘Blessed are those who are being persecuted as Christians because they are seriously lacking in wisdom and are really foolish and unwise in what they regard as being their testimony.’ It is not that. There is no need for one to elaborate this, but so often one has known Christian people who are suffering mild persecution entirely because of their own folly, because of something either in themselves or in what they are doing. But the promise does not apply to such people. It is for righteousness' sake. Let us be very clear about that.” (p130-132)

People can be foolish, or act weird and bring endless suffering upon themselves. They think that they are suffering for the gospel, but they are not, they are suffering because they are foolish or they act weird. There are many who create difficulties for themselves out of false notions or even self-righteousness but we need to understand the difference. There are many personalities, but there are also many temptations that lead people to think that they are spiritual while in fact they are just being trouble-makers, very different to peace-makers as we demonstrated last time (1-See footnotes). We need to examine ourselves before God. We need to do this when we bring the truth of the Gospel to the hearer, and we live the Gospel before the ungodly.

The first stage of persecution is opposition. They will ridicule Christ, ridicule His church, ridicule His followers; then they attack Christians in the media, silence Christians in public forums; silence Christians in the schools. Persecution is a reality for those who live in opposition to Satan and this world. When your goal is to become like Christ - to reflect His

love, cultivate His character and walk, this is something you will face. Jesus lived to fulfil God's will, experienced it. The Apostles and early church Fathers who walked with Jesus faced persecution. The writer of Hebrews wrote in chapter 12 verse 3; ***"Consider Jesus who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart"***

Persecution can come from the world, but it can come also from so-called-professing Christians who don't want to conform to Biblical teaching for their lives. Paul, in 2 Timothy 3 mentioned some of the things he himself had suffered at the hands of false brethren while in Antioch, Iconium, and at Lystra (see verse 11). Paul only experienced this persecution when he became a believer and preacher of the Word of God. In Hebrews 11 verses 35 to 40, we see that this was also true for all believers in those days. Interestingly, Paul, in Galatians 4 verses 28 and 29 said: ***"Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. ²⁹ But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now"***.

Being Christlike will produce the same results it did in the apostles, in the early church, and in believers throughout history. When you are a believer, and people see evidence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in you, then your Christlikeness will receive the same reaction from the world, as Christ received. *Why does Christlikeness receive opposition?* Because righteousness is confrontational, because it is Gospel light, and even when it is not preached in so many words, it confronts wickedness by its very contrast. John 3 verse 20 says:

"For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." If you say no to a hating and impure world; they will hate you. What happens if you live a life of purity, integrity, peace? People hate a righteous life. It exposes unrighteousness.

We see examples of this, right from the beginning. Abel did not preach to Cain, but Abel's righteous life, exemplified by his proper sacrifice to the Lord, was a constant rebuke to his wicked brother who in a real rage, killed him. When Moses chose to identify with his own despised Hebrew people rather than compromise himself in the pleasures of pagan Egyptian society, he paid a great price. But he considered ***"the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt"*** (Hebrews 11:26).

The Puritan writer Thomas Watson said of Christians: *“Though they be never so meek, merciful, pure in heart, their piety will not shield them from sufferings. They must hang their harp on the willows and take the cross. The way to heaven is by way of thorns and blood.... Set it down as a maxim, if you will follow Christ you must see the swords and staves”* (The Beatitudes [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971], pp. 259-60).

One of the greatest early reformers in the history of the church was an Italian preacher named Savonarola (Sav-on-a-ro-la)(1448). In his powerful condemnation of personal sin and ecclesiastical corruption, he paved the way for the Protestant Reformation, which began a few years after his death. *“His preaching was a voice of thunder,”* wrote one biographer, *“and his denunciation of sin was so terrible that the people who listened to him went about the streets half-dazed, bewildered and speechless. His congregations were so often in tears that the whole building resounded with their sobs and their weeping.”* But the people and the catholic church could no longer abide such a witness. Because of his uncompromising preaching, Savonarola was convicted of heresy. He was hanged, and his body was burned. It might be of interest to you to know that the inquisition did not end till 1883, but its offices never closed. They are still operational in the Vatican.

Persecution in whatever form (for the right reason) is tangible evidence of salvation. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians by sending them Timothy, in 1 Thessalonian 3:3&4:

“so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know”

We are to expect persecution. Suffering persecution is part of the normal Christian life (Romans 8:16&17). If we never experience ridicule, criticism, or rejection because of our faith, we have reason to examine the genuineness of it. Philippians 1 verse 29 and 30 says: *“For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me”*. If you look at verse 28 of that chapter you will see that persecution for Christ’s sake is a sign of our salvation as it is a sign of damnation for those who do the persecuting.

Whether Christians live in a relatively protected and tolerant society, as we do, or whether they live under a godless, totalitarian regime, the world will find ways to persecute Christ's church. To live a redeemed life to its fullest, is to invite and to expect, resentment and reaction from the world.

The fact that many professed believers are popular and praised by the world does not indicate that the world has raised its standards. In most cases many who call themselves by Christ's name have lowered theirs. As the time for Christ's appearing grows closer we can expect opposition from the world to increase, not decrease. If a Christian is not being persecuted in some way by society when standing for their beliefs, it may be good for them to question it because they are conforming rather than confronting? When we please the world we can be sure that we grieve the Lord (James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17).

Persecution is a badge of identity and destiny, just as much as that it is a badge of identity and destiny of those who persecute you! Tertullian, a Christian leader in the 2nd century was approached by a man who asked him, *"I have come to Christ, but I don't know what to do. I have a job that I don't think is consistent with what Scriptures teach. What can I do? I must live!"* To that Tertullian replied, *"must you?"* Loyalty to Jesus is the only option for the Christian. To be prepared for the Kingdom, you must be prepared to be lonely, misunderstood, rejected and ridiculed, even persecuted.

When we come to verse 11 we see - ***The Reason For Persecution***

What was the reason for persecution in verse 10? Righteousness. What is the reason for persecution in verse 11? ***"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake (Jesus)"***.

The more you identify with Jesus, the more you act like Jesus, the more you will be treated like Jesus. Religious leaders often responded to Jesus with accusation, hate, fear, suspicion. Jesus says, expect insult, expect slander, expect persecution. Here for the first time, Jesus puts Himself in the Sermon.

You will also notice the word "when" which can be translated to mean "whenever". The idea carried in the term is not that believers will be in a constant state of opposition, ridicule, or

persecution, but that, whenever those things occur because of our faith, we should not be surprised or resentful.

Jesus was not constantly opposed and ridiculed, nor were the apostles. They had times of peace and even popularity. Every faithful believer will at times have some resistance and ridicule from the world, while others, for God's own purposes, will endure more extreme suffering. Whenever and however affliction comes to the child of God, his heavenly Father will be there with him to encourage and to bless. Our responsibility is not to seek out persecution, but to willingly endure whatever trouble our faithfulness to Jesus Christ may bring, and to see it as a confirmation of true salvation. History confirms this. Read Fox's Book of Martyrs. The world continues to slander, persecute, jail, and kill Christ's followers.

Our Lord made it clear from His earliest teaching, and His opponents made it clear from their earliest reactions, that following Him is costly. Those who enter His kingdom suffer for Him before they would reign with Him. That is the hard honesty that every preacher, evangelist, and witness of Christ should exemplify. We give the Lord no honour nor do we benefit those whom we witness to, by hiding or minimizing the cost of following Him. As we read through this beatitude we see that Jesus Himself refers to three things, physical persecution, verbal insult, and false accusation.

All of the other beatitudes speak of internal qualities but this speaks of external things that happen to believers. Make no mistake, the believer who has the previous qualities will also have the quality of willingness to face persecution for the sake of righteousness. They will have the attitude of self-sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel and for Christ. Don't think for one moment that the Lord will abandon those who have to face such hardships, such torture, no, He will be with them all the time. This beatitude speaks of a constant attitude of accepting whatever faithfulness to Christ may bring.

From opposition to slander, Jesus speaks about in verse 11 'blessed when men cast insults'. That means to throw abusive words in the face of an opponent, slander, or vicious mocking. God's children have faced this from the very start. We are no different than our Master. The religious leaders accused Jesus and insulted Him a lot. They even accused Him of being a

glutton and a drunkard (wine-bibber; Matt.11:19). As He stood before the Sanhedrin after His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was spat upon, beaten, and taunted with the words *“Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?”* (Matthew 26:67-68). As He was being sentenced to crucifixion by Pilate, Jesus was again beaten, spit upon, and mocked, this time by the Roman soldiers (Mark 15:19-20). Faithfulness to Christ may even cause friends and loved ones to say things that cut and hurt deeply. Paul told the Corinthian church, whose members had such a difficult time separating themselves from the world, in 1 Corinthians 4:9:

“For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.”

Paul drew the expression *“become a spectacle”* from the practice of Roman generals to parade their captives through the street of the city, making a spectacle of them as trophies of war who were doomed to die once the general had used them to serve his proud and arrogant purposes. That is the way the world is inclined to treat those who are faithful to Christ. In a note of strong sarcasm to enforce his point, Paul continues, *“We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honour”* (v. 10). Many in the Corinthian church did not suffer the ridicule and conflict the apostle suffered because they, the Corinthians, prized their standing before the world more than their standing before the Lord. In the world’s eyes they were prudent, strong, and distinguished, because they were still so much like the world.

If you stand for Jesus; in your home, your job, in your community, or wherever, I guarantee that you will be persecuted. Jesus promised it. While the word persecuted means chased, harassed, abused, afflicted with unjust treatment. Revile means insults. The literal meaning is ‘to cast in the teeth’, or as they say in our modern culture: get in someone’s face. It means to throw abusive words in your face, to mock viciously. Do you still want a passport into God’s Kingdom? In over 50 countries Christians are facing sustained abuse. Christians are beheaded and crucified in those areas where ISIS controls territory in the Middle East. North Korea tops the list of persecuting Christians; profound abuse takes place in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. Don’t forget places like China, and even many parts in Africa, particularly Muslim ran countries. Hebrews 13:3 says; *“Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow*

prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Christians are in jails all over the world - Somalia, India, Pakistan, the list goes on, even in the UK there've been cases of people being arrested for preaching the gospel.

In the closing days of His ministry, Jesus repeatedly and plainly warned His disciples of that truth, as we see in John 15 verses 18 to 21, Jesus said: *“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me”.*

When the world is pleased with the Church; we can be sure God is not pleased. When the world is displeased with the Church, we can be sure God is pleased. Instead of experiencing grief and regret, we should rejoice. We did something right. One of the greatest blessings; proof of Christ’s presence in our lives, is that we are cursed for his sake.

This brings us to verse 12 - **The Reward For Persecution (v.12)**

‘Blessed’, Jesus said, ‘are they who are persecuted. They should be exceedingly glad, because great is their reward’. Most of us think of deliverance as a blessing not danger, but here we have Jesus' own words, saying blessed when you are in danger for my sake. The blessing that is promised is that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. Paul the apostle in 2 Thessaloianes 1:4-7 says the following:

⁴so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, ⁵which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; ⁶since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, ⁷and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels,

It reminds me of a preacher who quit the ministry after 20 years and became a funeral director. Now I actually know someone who did this and it's not about him, just in case he

ever listens. Anyway, the story goes, when asked why he changed, he said, “I spent 3 years trying to straighten out John and John’s still a drunk. Then I spent 6 months trying to straighten out Susan’s marriage and she filed for divorce. Then I spent 2 years trying to straighten out Bob’s drug problem, and he’s still an addict. Now at the funeral home when I straighten them out—they stay straight. You see, Our reward is not always here or now.

When we suffer for Jesus’ sake we are in the best company we could ever be. We stand in the company of the prophets of old! Persecution is a mark of faithfulness—a hallmark of genuine joy! When we suffer for Jesus sake we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we belong to Him! Think about what Jesus is saying; when you are persecuted you are receiving the same response that Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosiah, Elisah and Elijah, received. (Hebrews 11:36-38)

I was also thinking of Joseph who was persecuted by his family and as a slave, yet God blessed him and used him to save his people from starvation. Daniel of course lost everything and was a hostage in Babylon; yet, the Lord blessed him there and also his friends, despite the persecution they suffered.

Not every believer is rewarded with the things of this life, in this life, however we do have the comfort, strength, and joy of the Lord, as well as his company every day, in good days and days of great trial. But look at the words of Jesus; “great is your reward in heaven”. We are promised a great reward as we follow in the footsteps of the Old and New Testament Saints. We are also blessed with the assurance that no service or sacrifice for the Lord is in vain.

Jesus says, “*Rejoice, and be glad*” that is not an easy thing to do in the mist of hostility, but it is a very possible thing to do. The King James Version says “*be exceeding glad.*” Having read a book recently about the concentration camps in Poland, it was observed by the cruel guards of the compassion, composure and commitment true believers had to each other as well as to everyone else, including their persecutors. The world without doubt can take away all the material things from us, even our limbs but never our joy and happiness in the Lord. The world can take from us every possession, every freedom, every comfort, every satisfaction of physical life; but it can take nothing from our spiritual life, either now or throughout eternity.

The Beatitudes begin and end with the promise of the kingdom of heaven in verse 3. The reward is eternal, just like Christ's kingdom, and we will be able to enjoy His very presence. The ultimate fruit of kingdom life is eternal life. The major promise of the Beatitudes is that in Christ we become kingdom citizens, now and forever. No matter what the world does to us, it cannot affect our possession of Christ's kingdom.

*But will you forfeit eternal rewards for temporary convenience? How can we ignore Christ's emphasis in these few verses? Jesus speaks of righteousness (v.6); peace (v.9); joy (v.12). Could it be that Paul had this very verse in mind when he wrote Romans 14 verse 17; **"For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"***

We forget a lot of the times that James reminds us about the shortness of this life, (James 4:14). Heaven is forever, and it is no wonder that Jesus instructs us not to lay up treasure on earth but to lay up treasure in Heaven. (Matthew 6:19-20).

Our assurance of salvation does not come from knowing we made a decision somewhere in the past. Rather, our assurance that the decision was a true decision for Jesus Christ is found in the life of righteousness that results in suffering for the sake of Christ.

The world cannot handle the righteous life that characterises kingdom living. It is not understandable and acceptable to them, and they cannot stomach it even in others. Poverty of spirit runs counter to the pride of the unbelieving heart. The repentant, contrite disposition that mourns over sin is never appreciated by the callous, indifferent, unsympathetic world. The meek and quiet spirit that takes wrong and does not strike back is regarded as lacking courage, and it rasps against the militant, vengeful spirit characteristic of the world. Too long after righteousness is repugnant to those whose fleshly cravings are rebuked by it, as is a merciful spirit to those whose hearts are hard and cruel. Purity of heart is a painful light that exposes hypocrisy and corruption, and peace-making is a virtue praised by the contentious, self-seeking world in words only, but Jesus speaks about speaking truth in love, bringing peace not at any price to bring true reconciliation, with people and with God.

The role of the Martyrs has not been closed. We should never forget those in prison as if we are their fellow prisoners. When persecuted Christians are asked what can we do, their first answer is pray. For prisoners who are isolated, cut off from fellowship, they long for that life-line of worship and fellowship. John Bunyon wrote (from jail); “Were it lawful, I could pray for greater trouble for greater comfort sake.”

Wang Mingdao was thrown into a prison at the age of 60 years old. He was a well known Bible teacher, evangelist and Christian worker. He wanted to preach more sermons, write more books, reach more people with the gospel. But he found himself in a lonely dark cell with no pen, no paper, no books, no people. He had nothing to do except to get to know His Lord. And so he did. He later wrote, “and for twenty years that was the greatest relationship I have ever known. But the cell was the means.” His advice to believers; “ I was pushed into a cell, but you will have to push yourself into one. You have no time to know God. You need to build yourself a cell so you can do for yourself what persecution did for me—simplify your life and know God”.

As we look over these beatitudes and consider our immense privilege position as believers in Christ let us not simply be followers in word only but also in deed’s, in action. Let’s be done with the messing about, with the flesh and sin, Let’s give ourselves whole heartily to Jesus. If we are determined to change and follow the Lord, we will know revival in our souls, and the joy that is set before us.

Amen.

Footnotes

- (1) God does not call His people to be sanctified celebrities, using their worldly reputations in a self-styled effort to bring Him glory, using their power to supplement His power and their wisdom to enhance His gospel. We can mark it down as a cardinal principle that to the extent the world embraces a Christian cause or person, or that a Christian cause or person embraces the world, to that extent that cause or person has compromised the gospel and scriptural standards. We have seen it in our day where many a Gospel loving and faithful preacher was courted by the newspaper magnets, made famous, and became ecumenical and wishy washy; to the point they ended up not knowing what they believed.

If Paul had capitalised on his human credentials he could have drawn greater crowds and certainly have received greater welcome wherever he went. His credentials were impressive. He said in Philippians 3 verses 4 and 5:

“If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more, circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee”

He had been “caught up to the third heaven,... into Paradise” (2 Corinthians 12:2, 4) and had spoken in tongues more than anyone else (1 Corinthians 14:18). He had studied under the famous rabbi Gamaliel and was even a free-born Roman citizen (Acts 22:3, 29). But all those things the apostle

“counted as loss for the sake of Christ, but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:7-8).

He refused to use worldly means to try to achieve spiritual purposes, because he knew they would fail.