

The Puzzle of the Beatitudes:
Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake
Daniel 3:13-25; Matthew 5:1-2, 10

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Today we make it to the end of those puzzling teaching of Jesus called the Beatitudes. Together the eight Beatitudes form the introduction to the great sermon of Jesus called the Sermon on the Mount. I've been telling you that if you read only three chapters in the Bible (though I hope you read them all) to let them be the three that make up this wonderful sermon, Matthew 5, 6, and 7. They represent the heart of the teachings of Jesus.

Now I realize that verses eleven and twelve of chapter five are a bit confusing. I didn't read them, but they appear to be a ninth beatitude. I agree with those who say that these two verses are not a new beatitude; they are really an expansion of the eighth beatitude. Notice in verse eleven that Jesus shifts from the third person plural, "Blessed are those who..." to second person plural, "Blessed are you who...." He turns his attention directly to those people before him on the mountainside. It's as if he looks into their eyes and says,

*Now blessed are you and you and you when people revile you
and persecute you and say all kinds of evil about you falsely on
my account. You rejoice and be glad when that happens, for
your reward is great in heaven. Just remember that they did
the same things to the prophets long ago.*

It seems that Jesus knew what was coming. He had already called four of his twelve apostles. Likely some or all of the rest were in the crowd on the mountainside that day listening to his sermon. According to legend, each of those apostles faced a martyr's death. Maybe Stephen was there too. He would be among those chosen to serve the needs of the young church in the book of Acts. He would be stoned to death. Paul would be imprisoned, beaten with rods, stoned, constantly in danger, hungry, and exposed to cold. So here at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus leveled with them. It's a warning and a promise.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” Jesus said, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

This last beatitude, like the ones before it, is puzzling. This does not seem like the best strategy for beginning a movement. Surely Jesus would have been more effective had he begun by describing the benefits of apostleship. Join with me, Jesus should have said, and you’ll see great and wonderful things. Miracles will happen before your eyes—people healed, multitudes fed, and even people raised from the dead. You will meet important people, and it’s possible that your names will be remembered forever as St. Peter, St. John, St. Andrew....

Yet Jesus didn’t take that approach. He made it clear right up front that the fortunate ones, the blessed, are the ones who experience and endure persecution because of their loyalty to him. Dallas Willard describes these people this way: “those insulted, persecuted, and lied about because ‘they have gone off their rocker and taken up with Jesus’” (*The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 119). So who are these people? And what does it mean to be persecuted for righteousness’ sake?

The language Jesus uses here is strong. The Greek word for “persecute” means “to zealously follow” or “to run after a person” (TDNT, vol. 2, p. 230). It creates the mental picture of an angry mob chasing after those whom they oppose. That’s what it meant to be persecuted. You were in flight. Somebody or some group was after you. You were in danger, and you were trying to escape.

Now here’s the most important part of this eight beatitude. Notice that the blessed are not simply people who are persecuted. A robber may be chased and subdued by an angry mob. A group may chase and subdue would-be terrorist. A lot of people may be persecuted, but they’re not necessarily the ones Jesus was talking about here. According to Jesus, the blessed are those who are persecuted *for righteousness’ sake*. You’ll recall that Jesus has already mentioned “righteousness” back to the fourth beatitude. There he said that those hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed. In the last beatitude, righteousness means the same thing it did there. Jesus would not have been thinking primarily of a personal, inner piety, which is how we tend to use the word righteousness. Biblical righteousness comes from a word that is translated as “justice.” It means to put things right, to have things the way God wants them, in our own lives

and in the world. We can say then that biblical righteousness is actively being and doing what God wills.

This is what I think Jesus was saying in this last beatitude. It was a warning. He was warning them that the more they associated with him the more they would begin to see that the world is not right. Their lives and the world around them were not the way God wanted them to be. These people then would begin to burn with a desire for things to be made right. They would hunger and thirst for righteousness, and eventually they would be persecuted because of righteousness' sake. Eventually an angry mob would be chasing after them, and their lives might be in danger.

I must confess that this beatitude raises a big concern for me. What some people else think of as righteousness, doing what God wills, may not be my definition or God's definition of righteousness. I think of the members of the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas and their pastor Rev. Fred Phelps. Are you familiar with them? They are persecuted, aren't they? People despise them. They regularly receive death threats, and they believe that they are being persecuted for righteousness' sake. Rev. Phelps believes that hatred is one of God's holy attributes, and that his church is a conduit of God's hatred. So on God's behalf, they hate Jews, homosexuals, Catholics, Lutherans, and many others whom they deem heretical. You may learn more about them at their web site www.godhatesfags.com. They show up at the funerals of fallen soldiers, people who are murdered, or people killed in accidents. They carry protest signs that read, "God Hates America," "Thank God for IEDs" (improvised explosive devices, or roadside bombs, which kill so many of our troops), "God: USA's Terrorist," and others that are too obscene to mention here. They even protested the funerals of Fred Rogers (a.k.a., Mr. Rogers), Jerry Falwell, and Coretta Scott King.

They are persecuted, yes. They've been taken to court. They are almost unanimously despised. And of course they believe they are being persecuted for righteousness' sake. But are they really? Some people are persecuted because they are rude and obnoxious. They may claim to do their work in the name of God, but that does not mean that God approves of what they are doing. In my opinion, the Westboro Baptist Church has a greatly distorted understanding of God and as a result a most unfortunate mission in the world.

So how can we know the difference? How can we know whether someone is just a nut who thinks he is righteous or whether he or she really represents the truth? We can use this standard: do their action reflect the nature and character of Jesus as we see him in the New Testament? Are they motivated by love, grace, and humility? Ask yourself this question: Can you imagine Jesus doing what they're doing?

So when you go off your rocker and take up with Jesus, when you begin to burn with a desire for things to be made right in your life and in the world, watch out. We've been warned. You may find that some are zealously after you, and they're not happy. You will be in good company, of course—the Apostles and others who followed them. But our first model is Jesus himself who lived what God wills. The people zealously chased and subdued him, and nailed him to a cross.

The reward is great, Jesus said. Like the poor in spirit, the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Notice that it's not future tense. *Theirs is* the kingdom of heaven. It is not out in the distant future. It is a present reality. It means that the reign of God is present in their lives. God is front and center in their lives. These people have the satisfaction of knowing that they are being and doing what God wills.

So blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. My translation:

How fortunate are those who are chased by angry mobs because they live my way, for they live with the satisfaction of knowing that they are doing God's will.

Those are the beatitudes—eight beatitudes plus an explanation of the last one. They are puzzling at first. But when we dig deeply we discover great wisdom. The challenge for us now is to build our lives upon these teachings. If we do, Jesus said that we will be like that wise man who built his house upon a rock. When we rains came and the winds blew, that man's house, i.e., his life, stood strong. May we all be so wise!

Closing Prayer

We do wish to be wise, Lord. So write these teachings upon our hearts. May they form our character, even if we are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Amen.