

## The Persecuted

Message #9 in the series, "Blessed (for Chaos)"

Matthew 5:10

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown  
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<sup>3</sup> *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

<sup>4</sup> *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

<sup>5</sup> *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

<sup>6</sup> *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.*

<sup>7</sup> *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

<sup>8</sup> *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

<sup>9</sup> *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

<sup>10</sup> *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3-10)*

Hello and welcome once again to St. Paul's Church (on paper), it is our joy to be in worship with you today. My name is Matt Skillen. I am one of the pastors here, and today I have the humble joy of sharing God's word with you. Before we begin, let us open with a word of prayer.

Today is our final installment of a sermon conversation we've been having in this season at St. Paul's Church called, "Blessed for Chaos". Throughout this journey together we've examined who Jesus calls to be disciples, how Jesus, the teacher, draws in his students to teach them, and we studied the many different characteristics of a disciple described in Matthew 5. These characteristics are most commonly referred to as the beatitudes. We embarked on this journey because we believe that no matter what is happening around us, no matter how crazy the world seems to get, no matter how chaotic everyone and everything is around us, we are called to be a light for Christ in the middle of all of it. We are called to be disciples and the guidance provided in Matthew 5, in the *Beatitudes*, is meant to shape us and prepare us for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

As we've seen throughout this message series, the guidance that Jesus is sharing with his disciples is meant to **transform** them. Knowing full well, that each would be able to then go forth and lead others through a similar transformation. The very fact that you and I are sitting in this building today is because the 12 disciples continued the ministry of Jesus—sharing with others the great news of his life, death and resurrection here on Earth, embodying the characteristics of the Beatitudes, discipling others in the faith and leading those disciples to disciple others. We are living and worshiping in the greatest movement in history, and we are called to continue the tradition, to go on this discipling journey like so many before us and invite others to come along with us.

In the scripture reading throughout this message series you've heard the characteristics of a disciple listed as they are in Matthew 5. Each has a unique marker.

***3" Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

***4" Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.***

***5" Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.***

***6" Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.***

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***9" Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."***

This final installment, the last characteristic listed in this deeply important lesson Jesus shared with his disciples is found in Matthew 5:10 – 12 it says,

***10" Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

***11" Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***

Blessed are those who are persecuted...

This one is tough because it goes against everything we know and everything that we would ever hope for in life. That is, of course, if you are like me. I want to be liked. I don't want people to persecute or revile me, regardless of the reason. I mean, did anyone in the room today wake up and say to themselves, "Man... Today is the day. Today I am going to be reviled."? If that is you, let's schedule a time to talk this week. I'll buy the coffee. We can talk about why you want to be disliked so badly.

On the rare occasion where I have felt persecution directly, and those moments have been so very few and far between, I didn't feel blessed. And I certainly didn't feel as though I should be rejoicing and feeling glad about it. But here is the word of God, the 'red letters' spoken by Jesus himself in a truly important message to his disciples, and it says that persecution- specifically for righteousness's sake - is a blessing. And did you notice the word in this scripture? It doesn't say ***if*** people revile you and persecute you. It says ***when*** people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

So, what we can gather from this scripture is that on this journey, in this effort, to live in this life for Christ, while sharing his good news with others and choosing to live life according to the characteristics in the Beatitudes, Jesus is telling us that we ***will be*** persecuted, we ***will be*** reviled. People will make false and evil claims about us. Just as it was for the saints of old, so too it will be for us. For our reward will be great in Heaven.

While Christian persecution might not be all too common in the United States, it is certainly present in other parts of the world. Throughout these past couple of weeks, I've read harrowing stories of people in China, Sudan and Iraq who have been mistreated, imprisoned, beaten and killed for their faith in Jesus Christ. Father Douglas Al Bazi, for example, is a priest in Iraq who has continued to lead a congregation of faithful believers in light of tremendous persecution at the hand of the Islamic terror organization known as ISIS. Let me introduce you to his story which he shared in 2018 to the Billy Graham World Summit on Christian Persecution:

In his account to the entire world through the Billy Graham organization, Father Al Bazi explains that during his ministry his church has been blown up, he's been shot and wounded in the leg, and even kidnapped for 9 full days. While in captivity he suffered immeasurably. But to Father Al Bazi, ISIS is only, as he puts it, "one face of the devil." For fourteen centuries Christians in his region of the world have faced persecution time and again and yet they persist.

In hearing Father Al Bazi's story, I have to admit, I don't know how I would respond. I am reminded that we live in a truly remarkable place where you and I can gather at church or share this conversation over the internet or have our sermons mailed without being intercepted – all without fear of legal persecution or threat of terroristic violence.

In any event, I think we can learn a lot from Father Al Bazi, just as we can learn a great deal from Jesus's teaching and the lives of the saints of long ago—those who have been persecuted. While our stories are not their stories and we will likely never encounter what they have encountered, we can learn a lot from the stories—particularly how they responded to persecution. While the message in the Beatitudes is clear, the persecuted, those who are persecuted or falsely accused, because they are representing Christ in our community and world, are blessed. Their reward for their persecution here on Earth will be in Heaven.

Have you ever thought about how you might respond in a situation where you are being persecuted? How might you feel? Who would you call? A pastor, perhaps... How might you react? After reading about the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12 you might start to search the Bible for guidance on how to respond when persecution finds you. In your search, you wouldn't need to look very far. By scanning through the remainder of Matthew 5, you'll see additional guidance that Jesus provides on this idea of being persecuted.

In Matthew 5:44 Jesus says,

*"... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"*

As we have said several times throughout this message series, Jesus came to show us a new way to live. His new way reorders everything that we might expect so that we can be more aligned to the heart of God. In what could be a very confusing piece of guidance, Jesus says, *'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute*

*you'*. When every fiber of our being wants to retaliate on those who have been harmful to us and our families, Jesus says we should pray for them. What would it mean for us if we prayed for our enemies?

**Every entry in the Beatitude message doesn't aim to change the world. Jesus provides this message to transform individual hearts.** There are those in the world who will do things that hurt and confuse us. They will miss our expectations and break our hearts. And yet Jesus died for them too. Instead of telling his disciples everything they wanted to hear about how bad and unkind the world can be, Jesus encourages his disciples to look inward, to transform, and be a guiding light to others. The transformed hearts of Christ followers, as we have seen throughout the ages, has a tremendous and undeniable replicative effect that fuels the movement for Christ here on Earth.

So, how might we be blessed in persecution? How might we bless those who persecute us? Why might we pray for our enemies and those who would do us harm? When people hurt us, it is very likely they are operating and acting from a sense of pain or uncertainty. If you've been with us at St. Paul's for a while now, you've probably heard on several occasions that hurt people hurt people. In the midst of our shock and dismay from being singled out and persecuted by someone else, if we can take a breath before we retaliate, understanding this principle that hurt people hurt people may give us a new perspective to work with.

The guidance to pray for our enemies and bless those who persecute us is a purposeful piece of advice provided by Jesus in Matthew 5. **Praying, instead of retaliating; changes our posture.** When we take the posture of prayer we are literally changing the state of our body and mind to appeal to God instead of taking the next available opportunity to retaliate.

When we pray for those who would harm us, **we resist bitterness.** Try it. It is impossible to hold bitterness against someone if you are praying for them. You might grit your teeth and clench your fists together as you start to pray, but as you lift up the names of your enemies, you will notice a gradual softness that floods your heart. Praying for your enemies is a tough thing to start. When you can convince yourself to begin, however, you will begin to feel hope move in where anger was trying to set up shop.

The Apostle Paul encouraged the Roman church to bless their enemies. He wrote these words to the Roman church while he was in prison. If anyone had a reason not to preach this message it was Paul. And he instructed the young church in Ephesus to put aside all bitterness, wrath and anger. Why? Because we are not called to retaliation, we are called to love and grace.

**Praying for your enemies is unexpected.** If someone is going out of their way to do you wrong, they are preparing for your next move and the move they are likely expecting is something worse than what they did to you. Watch what happens you decide to pray for them instead. As God showers down blessings upon them,

how do you think they might respond? How might others who are observing you and your reaction respond?

In the second part of Al Bazi's story, there is an important lesson for us, the persecuted pastor from Iraq has a message that I think will change our perspective on persecution.

After 9 days in captivity, Father Al Bazi was released by his captors. With several broken bones he walked to his church where another priest was waiting for him and this other priest said, "It's OK. It's OK. All of this is now in the past."

For Al Bazi, he has decided that he must forgive his captors. Even after they tortured him. By forgiving them, he says the gate to grace is opened and we can better understand the grace that Jesus Christ shares with us. And just as importantly, Al Bazi knows that by forgiving the ISIS terrorists who have blown up his church, who on another occasion, shot at him and wounded him, and who on a third occasion captured him, he is setting a timeless and priceless example for the next generation. The hurt and bitterness that has ravaged the region for centuries can only be undone through the transformation of each individual's heart.

Forgive them.

What the ISIS terrorists had planned for evil, God has restored for good. As a result of ongoing persecution, the church is united in the belief they are serving the one true God. By forgiving their pursuers, they have opened the gate of grace that has served as a timeless example of the tremendous grace we have been given through Christ's death and resurrection on the cross.

If today you are wondering what you might do when, not if, but when you encounter persecution, my prayer that you will remember this simple guidance. Forgive. And when you can't forgive, pray. It is the sincerest hope of our Heavenly Father that bitterness and anger not fill your heart. Because when your heart is full of these things, it crowds out compassion, patience, hope, love, joy and peace.

**Matthew 5:10**

***Blessed, indeed, are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.***

In every blessing and persecution. In every broken heart and joyous reunion, God is shaping your heart. He is transforming you in every possible way so that our hearts become more like his.

For some in this worship service today a big transformation is coming. Maybe you've never said yes to Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus? He is the only true son of God who came and lived on Earth. In this way he was God with us. He died a horrible death on a cross, but his death meant so much more. On the cross he carried the sin of the entire world. What is sin? Sins are the things we do that separate us from God. Through Jesus, those sins were atoned. If we believe that

Jesus Christ was the son of God, that he died on the cross for our sins, and that God raised him from the dead, then we will be saved—saved from the sin we've committed, saved from the things we've done that we are not proud of and the things we would never tell someone else about, saved from an eternity in hell.

If you would like to know that kind of salvation today, here in a moment we are going to say a special prayer. I am going to ask everyone to say it with me.

Jesus, I know I am a sinner.  
I know I need to be saved.  
Forgive me of my sins.  
I ask you to be Lord of my Life.  
You know my heart; it is yours.  
Amen!