**Living For Jesus – in Persecution**

**Matthew 5:10-12**

(**Play Open Door Video**)

Persecution is defined as a program or campaign to exterminate, drive away, or subjugate people based on their religion, ethnicity, social or racial status. It involves any form of hostility or ill-treatment and is some kind of unfair or cruel treatment. In the Greek it means to put to flight, drive away, or pursue.

Open Doors monitors the world for persecution. From its sources, it estimates that one in seven Christians is persecuted worldwide.

One in five Christians are persecuted in Africa.

Two in five Christians are persecuted in Asia.

Over fifty-five hundred Christians are murdered.

Over twenty-one hundred churches are attacked.

Over forty-five hundred Christians are imprisoned.

That is on an annual basis.

Our passage today brings us to the final Beatitude from **Matthew 5:10-12**. The natural outcome of practicing each of the preceding Beatitudes will be persecution. Your character will be much different than that of the world. It will be antithetical and opposing what the world stands for and the world won’t like it because as a follower of Christ, you will reveal their darkness. Their response is to oppress. Now understand that Jesus is not referring to persecution that is general in nature. People are persecuted for a variety of reasons but five stand out. Religion, race, political affiliation, social status, or nationality. But Jesus isn’t talking about being persecuted for any of those reasons. He says that persecution comes on account of Him.

As we consider this passage today and along with-it **Matthew 5:43-48**, let’s look at three things about persecution:

The pain in persecution

The path through persecution

The promise for persecution

It is quite evident that we live in a tough and wicked world. Pastor Chuck Swindoll describes it as a world abounding with “aggression, rebellion, violence, cutthroat competition, and retaliation.” In a world that seeks to devour the weak, the aggressor appears to have the upper hand. For those who live by being poor in spirit, mournful, gentle, merciful, and peacemaking, they seem to be the ones who suffer the most at the hands of oppressors. Yet our passage tells us how to respond in the middle of the pain of oppression, to look forward to the promise that awaits the persecuted. We will look next week at how a person who lives by these principles can influence a world that is hostile toward those who follow Jesus. Look with me first at the pain in persecution that Jesus says awaits the believer.

1. **THE PAIN IN PERSECUTION FOR THE BELIEVER**

From the video we just watched it is evident that

Christians are a singled out and persecuted people. Hardship is universal for the person who would stand up and be counted with Christ. I don’t know about you, but I don’t like pain. Pain is something I try to avoid, yet Jesus told the disciples that if the world hated Him, it would also hate them. Notice His words in two separate passages:

**Matthew 10:16-18**

**John 15:18-21**

I see three ways Christians are persecuted.

First, we see persecution from insults.

1. **Persecution From Insults**

An insult is defined as any rude or contemptuous speech, any offensive, mocking, abusive, shaming and degrading remark that shows scorn. Such words are intended to hurt feelings. They are often said in anger or with malice. Other times they are sarcastic and said in a way that is cutting, corrosive and scathing. They make no attempt to hide their disdain. They are meant to make fun of and to inflict deep wounds. In the Greek the word sarcasm means to tear flesh like dogs, to speak bitterly. That’s how we feel when someone cuts us down with their words because of our faith.

It’s meant to ease the pain of hurtful words, but I never liked the old saying “sticks and stones may

break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Words can cut deeper than any knife. Derogatory words sting as they linger in the soul long after they have grown silent from the tongue of the abuser.

Insults are spoken directly to the face. They are intended to be hurtful. We have all probably been the recipient of an insult of one kind or another for our faith.

Notice from **verse 10** that this type of persecution is the result of righteousness. In **verse 11** we see that

it’s because of your association with Jesus. The world doesn’t like what we stand for so they attack with their words.

Jesus had insults flung at Him during the crucifixion.

**Matthew 27:38-44**

The very ones He came to seek and save were the ones who hurled their cutting barbs at Him. But in spite of their tone, Isaiah says He didn’t open His mouth in defense or retaliation. Too often I want to respond with my own verbal assault. I want to believe that my own defense somehow eases the pain of their corrosive speech. I want to be just as cutting in my retort. My fleshly heart wants to be just as insulting. But Jesus says it’s not for my insults that I am insulted but rather because of righteousness and for the sake of identifying with Christ.

Have you ever been persecuted for righteousness by the words of others?

Why is it that Christians are attacked so mercilessly by the media or by the entertainment industry?

I did not watch the Super Bowl, nor did I see any of the commercials. But as I have heard, there were attacks by political figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortes who described the commercial that “Jesus gets us” as making fascism seem benign. An article by MSNBC, quoted the owner of Hobby Lobby who helped to fund that ad, seemed to make him out to be a whiner because of the assault on Christian values by policies bent on making Christianity difficult to practice in America. Many make us out to be haters and bigots. MSNBC does not believe that Christians are “the victims of an overbearing, all-powerful government” bent on the suppression of freedom of religion for Christians. It’s apparent that there is an unwillingness to admit verbal insults exist in our country against Christians. If you want to test it out for yourself, all you need to do is put out a statement on Facebook or Twitter on what the Bible says about marriage and you will instantly be vilified by those who oppose your view.

Those are all verbal attacks to your face. Jesus says there is another form of persecution that is verbal and it has to do with attacks behind your back. Jesus describes them for us as false accusations. People who don’t like your righteousness will lie about you to others. That’s what happened to Joseph. When Potiphar’s wife couldn’t get her way because of Joseph’s godly character, she lied about him and it got him thrown in prison.

Jesus says that persecution can be verbal attacks to your face or behind your back. Jesus then talks about persecution that is physical from injury.

1. **Persecution From Injury**

When we think of persecution, most likely this is what comes to mind. Pick up a copy of Foxe’s Book of Martyrs and read how people since the beginning of the church have been treated for their faith. In the opening chapter the author makes this observation from **Matthew 16:18** where Jesus says: **“I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”** The author then makes three statements.

1. **Christ will have a Church in this world**
2. **His Church will be mightily attacked**
3. **None of the devil’s attacks will destroy it**

Church history is replete with examples of physical

persecution in which individuals, communities, and countries have attempted to snuff out Christianity. In every century secular and even religious leaders have “publicly and forcefully, with every cunning and deceitful means at their disposal, denounced and persecuted that true Church.” Malicious attacks seek to scare Christians to submit or recant their faith. In spite of those attacks, it shines brighter.

Jesus suffered persecution. John’s account of His crucifixion tells us that He was flogged before He was crucified. Pieces of metal or bone were attached to the ends of leather straps. The soldier assigned to inflict the lashing on the victim given over for execution showed no mercy as the whip came down hard time after time. It’s my opinion that the movie *The Passion*, doesn’t fully convey the horror of what it must have been like to be beaten the way Jesus must have experienced. The Romans had honed the skill of torture.

Paul talks about the many times he had been beaten, whipped, and jailed for his faith.

Stephen was stoned to death.

James was beheaded.

Peter was crucified upside down.

John survived being boiled in oil, and then condemned to the penal colony on Patmos Island. We get an overview of the physical persecution believers endured from **Hebrews 11:35b-37a** and that was just in the first century. Every generation Christians have endured persecution.

While today in the U.S. we may not experience physical persecution in the way that Christians in other countries have or that has been seen in history, there is a form of persecution that exists even in our country who stand for Christ.

Jack Phillips has been sued twice for his Biblical view of marriage.

19-year-old Jacob Kersey resigned his position as a police officer to avoid termination when he refused to remove a posting on Facebook about his Biblical view on marriage.

Lake Ingle was kicked out of a class on Christianity at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania for claiming there are only two genders following a lecture by a transgender pastor.

Jennifer Keeton was threatened with dismal from her Augusta State University Master’s program in counseling if she didn’t alter her “central religious

beliefs on human nature and conduct” which opposed her faith.

We could go on and on with examples of how people in America who have been persecuted for the sake of Christ.

Christians suffer insults and injury even death on account of their faith in Christ. But there is a third type of persecution. It’s persecution from injustice.

1. **Persecution From Injustice**

This has to do with policies and laws to Condemn those who hold to Biblical views.

A law in Daniels day was created to try and keep Him from worshipping God through prayer.

Colleges have been threatened with losing federal aid for holding to a Biblical view of marriage or gender.

Campus groups are denied recognition and funding for not including those with opposing beliefs to hold offices within the organization.

Some communities refuse to allow businesses like Hobby Lobby and Chick-Filet to open up a franchise for their Biblical positions.

Christian adoption agencies are threatened with losing federal aid if they don’t comply with new regulations around same-sex couples.

Why is it that certain groups are protected for speaking out against Christians, but Christians are punished for holding to a biblical view?

Why is it you can put some quote on your cubicle wall by Freud or Nietzsche or Sagan, but you can’t put a Bible verse there?

There is injustice because of policies and laws that are intended as either a subtle or overt threat to Christians. But remember that even Jesus said if we identify with Him, we will be persecuted.

Yes, there is real emotional and physical pain felt in persecution, persecution that comes on account of our identifying with Jesus. So how do we deal with

it? Jesus gives us the path through persecution.

1. **THE PATH THROUGH PERSECUTION**
2. **FOR THE BELIEVER**

Let’s look at our passage again and include **vs. 43-48** to see what Jesus has to say about how we are to respond during the persecution that we experience.

The first thing He says is to be joyful.

1. **Be Joyful – “Rejoice”**

Did we read that right?

Did Jesus say we are to rejoice?

Are we to express joy when others treat us harshly?

The word **“rejoice”** conveys the idea of being glad, delighted, or to be very happy about something. Paul used it repeatedly in his writings and especially in Philippians where he finds himself imprisoned for his faith but still finds the opportunity not only to express his own joy in the middle of his trials, but to exhort Christians to express joy in their own difficult circumstances.

**Philippians 4:4 “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.”**

Joy is an important factor in the spiritual stability of the believer. Joy isn’t the result of having everything go my way. True joy is only produced through the Holy Spirit’s work in us and occurs even in spite of hardships. We could never rejoice in persecution if it weren’t for the Holy Spirit in us. Without His joy in us, we would find persecution to be miserable at best and excruciatingly intolerable at its worst. And we would probably tell God it isn’t fair, that we don’t deserve it. Instead of rejoicing we would resign ourselves to retaliation or revenge, which Paul tells us to leave to the Lord.

**Romans 12:17-19**

Rejoicing as used by both Jesus and Paul isn’t just a feeling but a deep-down confidence that God is in control of everything for our good and His glory, so that even in the persecution all is well.

This exhortation to rejoice is in the present imperative meaning it’s something we are to do continually and habitually in every situation.

When we experience persecution it can be pretty hard to find reason to rejoice. That’s why Paul adds the all important way in which we rejoice – it must be done **“in the Lord.”** Our ability to rejoice is directly related to what we think about God.

Our knowledge of God is key to rejoicing.

John MacArthur writes “It is from that knowledge of God and repeated recitation and singing of His nature and attributes that believers’ joy flows. So deep was the apostles’ knowledge of God’s character and purposes that even suffering for Jesus Christ was a cause for joy.”

**Acts 5:41 “So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.”**

We can rejoice in persecution knowing that God has promised to meet our needs.

**Philippians 4:19 “God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”**

When we consider that even in persecution nothing can separate us from God’s love, we can find reason to rejoice. (**Romans 8:38-39**)

Jesus tells us we are to be joyful when persecuted.

He emphasizes or reinforces our rejoicing by adding that we are also to be glad.

1. **Be Glad**

I prefer the KJV here where it reads to be **“exceedingly glad.”** The Phillips translation reads **“tremendously glad.”** It means to be filled with delight or great joy. Bubble over with gladness.

This word is only found one other time in the Bible and Peter uses it in his sermon on the day of Pentecost as he preached to the masses gathered in the Temple. In his sermon he quotes **Psa. 16:8-11**.

**Acts 2:25-28**

You may say that’s all well and good and it sounds great on paper, but in reality rejoicing and being glad is hard in the moment in the middle of persecution. Again, let me emphasize that this can’t and won’t be done in our own effort, but only as we let the Holy Spirit work in us and through us to grow his fruit of joy in us and as we follow the example of Christ.

**Hebrews 12:2-3**

The author is telling us that we can find joy knowing that what we are experiencing is only temporary because we have a greater reward waiting for us so keep our outlook focused on Christ who endured incredible persecution and death, but who found joy knowing that His destiny wasn’t just the cross, but the exaltation of being seated at the right hand of the Father after His ascension. For us, it is a present gladness in this life, even in persecution, as we look forward with confidence to our future promise and reward. When we are tempted to look with despair at our present circumstances and persecution, when we think that our faith can’t hold out much longer or think that God must not care or notice what we are going through, pull this verse out and **“Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.”** (**Hebrews 12:3**)

Be joyful.

Be glad.

Be loving.

1. **Be Loving – Matthew 5:43-48**

Jesus began by saying “**you have heard it said**”. This is in reference to a tradition that they had adopted based on **Leviticus 19:18 – “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.”**

The Pharisees took that verse to mean that it was okay to hate their enemy. They based their faulty thinking on what God told the Israelites to do when they went in to conquer the land, to wipe out all the inhabitants. They were to do that because the people in the land were wicked, practicing idolatry and the sacrifice of children and so on. They were to rid the land of all the debauchery so that they wouldn’t be drawn into the same wicked sin. The Pharisees believed that anyone who wasn’t a Jew was an enemy and so were to treat them the same way as an enemy.

Jesus went on to correct their faulty thinking and confirm the law of love even with their enemies. Loving their enemies was a way to reflect God’s character. Elsewhere He would tell them that if they saw their enemy thirsty or hungry, they were to give them water and food. That principle is seen in **Proverbs 22:21-22** and quoted in **Romans 12:20**. Treat them just the opposite of how they treat you.

If they slander you, speak words of kindness.

If they mistreat you, show them love.

Give them water and food when thirsty and hungry.

From the wisdom of Solomon we see it stated this way: **“Do not say, ‘I’ll do to him as he has done to me; I’ll pay that man back for what he did.’” (Proverbs 24:29)**

In correcting them, Jesus pointed out something very vital that the Pharisees in their tradition had omitted. They taught the importance of loving one’s neighbor, but if you compare what Jesus says about what they taught and what the law stated in **Leviticus 19:18** you will notice that they left out the all-important phrase **“as yourself”** which also insinuates loving one’s enemies.

Can we love even those who persecute us? It is a command and not a suggestion. The Romans had a law that said they could order anyone to carry their gear one mile out of town. At the one mile marker there was a post and that’s as far as the person had to go. It’s no secret that there was great animosity between the Jews and the Romans. Jesus taught in **Matthew 5:41** that if you were forced to carry something for a mile, continue on for another mile. Show your enemy love.

Jesus said we are to be joyful, be glad, be loving and then said we should be prayerful.

1. **Be Prayerful**

Praying for our enemies is probably almost as hard as showing them love. We’d rather pray like David who on occasion asked God to destroy them. But Jesus says we should pray for them. Pray for God’s mercy. Pray for God’s salvation. Pray for God’s Spirit to open their heart.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer who suffered and was killed by the Nazis said “This is the supreme demand.

Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy,

stand by his side, and plead for him to God.”

Coupling the need to pray for them with the need to show them love Jesus told us in **John 13:34-35** **“A new commandment I give to you: love one another, as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By THIS (love for others) all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.”**

If we want to show others we are true Christians love our enemies, pray for our enemies.

Early church father John Chrysostom said “Prayer is the very highest summit of self-control and that we have most brought our lives into conformity to God’s standards when we can pray for our persecutors.”

In other words, when the world and the old sin nature want to retaliate and hurl back the same verbal or physical assault we are being afflicted with, Chrysostom is saying that praying for our enemies demonstrates self-control and a conformity to God’s character.

Can we honestly and genuinely pray for our enemies?

Jesus gives one more path through persecution in this passage.

1. **Be Perfect**

Before you say that’s impossible, keep in mind that while we are called to be perfect as God is perfect, we won’t ever attain that in this life. That doesn’t mean we should just resign ourselves to our current state and call it good and wait for being perfect in heaven. We are called to strive to be like God in character, which we can only do with the help of God’s Spirit. We should do our best to respond like Christ when He was persecuted. We read in **II Peter 1:3-4** that God **“has given us everything we need for life and godliness through knowledge of Him who called us.”** There are precious promises in His Word that assure us of our participation in the divine nature so that we can avoid the corruption that is in the world. Those promises help us respond as Christ did during our persecution. In other words, we’re not on our own to try and be perfect. God is there to help us through His Spirit and His Word to live a godly life. The word **“perfect”** means to reach an intended end, to be mature. Take heart and be encouraged by what Paul tells us in **Philippians 1:6 “Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ.”**

There are times we fail. There are times we won’t always love our enemy or pray for our enemy the way we should, but keep working with the Holy Spirit’s help to be like Christ in character. But expect that the more you live like Christ, the more likely it is you will be persecuted. After all, Jesus said the ones who are persecuted are those who are righteous. Practicing righteousness is living like the Lord and your response to persecution validates the genuine nature of your faith.

Let me close with one final thought from our passage and that is the promise for persecution.

1. **THE PROMISE FOR PERSECUTION FOR THE BELIEVER**

The promise has to do with our prize and our pattern.

1. **Our Prize**

Like the other beatitudes, those who are persecuted for righteousness on account of Jesus, are blessed. It’s more than experiencing happiness. It speaks of finding satisfaction in God’s favor in spite of finding yourself in the midst of persecution.

Additionally, we find our reward in God’s kingdom.

That is a guaranteed promise, not just heaven itself, but just as Jesus was exalted to the presence of God the Father for bringing Him glory through the things He suffered in His obedience, we will also be exalted to His presence because we have glorified Him in this life through our suffering.

Jesus says that our reward will be great in heaven. I take that to mean we can’t even begin to

comprehend what we will receive for faithfully

following Him, even through persecution.

There is one other prize that I think is also noteworthy. It’s in our pattern.

1. **Our Pattern**

Jesus says we will be just like the prophets who were also persecuted for standing up and being counted as followers of God. Just think of it. You may not suffer in the same way the prophets did, but you will be counted among them as suffering for the sake of Christ.

Some companies have names on plaques of people who have served their company well. It’s an honor to have your name among the greats. It’s like getting named to the Baseball Hall of Fame. When I ran the Detroit Marathon I sat on the infield of the old Tiger Stadium stretching out before the race began. As I looked around the stadium, I thought about all the Tiger greats that played there, names like Ty Cobb, Al Kaline, Alan Trammel, Charlie Gehringer, Hal Newhouser, and Mickey Lolich, just to name a few. I thought of other baseball greats who also played there like Mickey Mantle, Babe Ruth, Ted Williams and Lou Brock and there I was among them. At the end of the race we ran through the right field fence right past where Al Kaline stood shagging fly balls, then on between first and second base which made me think of Norm Cash and Dick McAuliffe. We finished at home plate right past where Bill Freehan squatted to receive pitches from Mickey Lolich and Denny McLain.

When you suffer persecution, you are alongside the

likes of Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Paul, John, Stephen, the Apostles, Martin Luther, Zwingli, Hus and many others. **Hebrews 11:38** says that **“the world was not worthy of them”** but heaven is. That is the promise from Jesus that we have for suffering persecution for Christ’s sake.

I am resolved to enter the Kingdom,

Leaving the paths of sin.

Friends may oppose me, foes may beset me;

Still I will enter in.

Tony Evans writes that “Jesus expects the behavior

of His disciples to stand out in a sinful world.”

We are reminded in **II Timothy 2:12** that **“if we suffer for Him, we will reign with Him.”**

In the next chapter, Paul writes that if we want to live a godly life, we will suffer persecution (**3:12**), but that’s okay because a great reward awaits us.

Commentator R.C.H. Lenski gives us the end goal of our of persecution when he writes: “Love indeed, sees all the hatefulness and the wickedness of the enemy, feels his stabs and his blows, may even have something to do toward warding them off; but all this simply fills the loving heart with the one desire and aim, to free its enemy from his hate, to rescue him from his sin, and thus to save his soul.”

If we can express love to and prayer for those who persecute us and they see Christlikeness in our response, we move them one step closer to their own salvation. That should be the goal of the Christ follower in persecution – to be a light to the world, which is what we will look at next week.

How are you handling times of persecution? And remember this, when you are persecuted, make sure it’s for righteousness sake. Let them see Christ in you, the hope of glory.