

WHAT DID JESUS TEACH?

Matthew 5:1-12 Text vs. 11 *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."*

Last week we learned *what Jesus preached*. Today, we're going to learn *what Jesus taught*. And you're going to learn what He taught can sometimes be uncomfortable. We enjoy so much religious freedom in our country. It's easy for Christians to live comfortable, safe lives right here in America, yet forget the persecution in many parts of the world where Christians are suffering threatening words or actions being taken against them. But to end that persecution, you either become like them, or oppose them. Fight back!

A report just released by the Family Research Council in December said attacks on Christian churches in America have nearly tripled in the last four years. Just last year 420 acts of violence were made against churches in the United States. Vandalism, bomb threats, arson, gun-related violence. Attacks against Catholic churches have neared three hundred just since last May. And violence is not only against Christians! There was a shooting last Friday evening near a synagogue in Jerusalem that left seven people dead, and several wounded, including a child. The Bible says if you want the happiness Jesus promised, you must be willing to suffer persecution, for *righteousness' sake*. It promises *"theirs is the kingdom of heaven"*.

Yes, God blesses those who endure persecution in His name. Jesus taught when people insult you, they will persecute you. They will falsely say all kinds of evil things against you - because of Him! And the time's soon coming when people will no longer be satisfied with sound doctrine. They will gather teachers around them who will tell them what they want to hear. What suits their *own* desires. The Bible says it's like having *itching ears*. People turning away from the Truth and turning to false teachings. The Apostle Paul was concerned about that. He was afraid that after his death false teachers would show up in Ephesus and turn believers of the *true faith* toward error and myths. (2 Timothy 4:3-4) He was concerned people would grow tired of the Gospel. They would reject it. They would replace the Good News with falsehoods. And that can be expected. God knows what we're like. It's not that we need to be perfect. It's that we are *imperfect!* We need saving! We need someone to fix our imperfections. So, instead of following God-fearing teachers, people will follow false teachers. Teachers who tell them what they want to hear. Not what is true!

It's happening in our schools today! Parents send children to school fully expecting them to learn literature, math, science, and history. How to write cursive. How to write a paragraph. How to speak proper English. You know, the three R's; Readin', Ritin' and 'Rithmetic! Subjects that helped them achieve their life goals and ambitions. However, school districts across our country today are allowing children to be taught subjects their parents do not agree with. Critical Race Theory. Marxism. Transgenderism. They have sexual orientation in kindergarten and first grade without their parents' knowledge! Courses with historically inaccurate content. All gender restrooms. Transgender sports. And God-fearing parents can't do anything about any of it! Parents today have *no say* in controversial curriculum. Subjects being taught raise concerns among students, parents, and some teachers, but are off-limits to criticism. Even the Bible! When it's taught *as literature* it has upset and offended educators, parents, and lawmakers. The biggest issue in our courts today is education. Its possible schools will soon be receiving more legal direction on what's considered "appropriate" for classrooms than the PTA. My, how times have changed!

But Jesus taught that *"in the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you"*. (Matt. 5:12) Being identified with God's chosen people is going to happen. It's a promise that's both in the present as well as in the future. The persecution that prophets and martyrs of old suffered may soon have you being part of that great succession of martyrs. George Bernard Shaw said, *"the finest compliment the world can pay any author is to burn his books. It shows his books are so dynamic, so explosive, that they are to be considered intolerable."* And the best compliment that can be paid to any Christian who will be persecuted is because of his, or her *righteousness*. The slander Jesus taught about will come from those who *"insult you."* Those who will damage your reputation.

The early church didn't escape slander. The church was accused of *cannibalism* when it gathered to observe the Lord's Supper, because others thought they were eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ. That wasn't it at all! It was symbolical. Just as it is for us today. They were charged with *immoral practices* as they gathered for what were called *love feasts*, or *agape meals*. *Agape* being the Greek word for *love*. Those meals were a meaningful part of fellowship and worship in the early church. A love feast, or *agape* meal, was a fellowship meal eaten by Christians. We have one every Sunday right here in our Fellowship Hall after the morning worship service. The Biblical evidence for the practice of these communal meals is that Christians gathered, not just for the sake of nourishment and socializing, but for the sake of fellowship and the worship of God. (Acts 2:46-47; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34) They even accused those early Christians of being fanatical doomsayers when they spoke of the *end of the world*.

People have always used slander as a tool for persecution. But Jesus reminds us, slander should be avoided. Harassment of any kind annoys and destroys. For instance, a first century crime was that Christians put Jesus Christ before the Roman Caesar. They were harassed for it! Christians were killed by the thousands because of it. Still, Jesus clearly commands us to avoid harassing. You may not understand, or appreciate another person. But to harass someone in any form, is forbidden! The falsehoods of which Jesus spoke were *"those who falsely say all kinds of evil"*. Sometimes, it may have an element of truth in it. But a falsehood has no truth in it whatsoever! Jesus became the object of many false accusations. His enemies tried to destroy His good Name. They downplayed His miracles. His ministry. And persecution will come to any Christian whose life clearly shows that Jesus makes a difference.

It's never easy to endure persecution. But every Christian must be ready for it. Because there's a promise that comes with it. Persecution for Jesus' sake is to be endured. Because verses 10-12 in our lesson today Jesus taught that *all who endure persecution will be rewarded*. It's a promise! A promise made to those who suffer for *righteousness' sake*. Those who are spoken of falsely, for Christ's sake! And here's Jesus' threefold promise. There's a *present promise*; *"For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* Even during persecution you can have His promise. It's for the here and now. It's when believers are suffering because of their faith that they can discover the experience that is the closest possible bond they can have with the Lord. His promise that *"theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* is real! Then, there's a *future promise*. *"Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven."* (v.12) The apostle Paul must have been aware of this promise when he wrote, *"As it is written: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him."* (1 Cor. 2:9) And there's also, a *lasting promise*. Because Jesus taught, *"For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* (Matt. 5:12) It's a promise that you are being identified with God's chosen people. A promise that's being realized both in the present and in the future. Persecution, when you walk that road as did the prophets and the martyrs of old, will make you *feel blessed!*

One day, two friends bumped into one another on the street. One looked despondent and on the verge of tears. His friend asked, "What's this world done to you my old friend?" His sad friend said, "Let me tell you. Three weeks ago, an uncle died. He left me forty thousand dollars." "Whew, that's a lot of money!" "Yes, but two weeks ago a cousin I never even knew died, and left me eighty-five thousand, free and clear." "Sounds like you've been blessed...." "You don't understand! Last week my great-aunt passed away and I inherited a quarter of a million!" That confused his friend who said, "Then, why are you looking so glum?" "Well, this week, I didn't get *anything!*"

Now, after you consider all that Jesus taught, would you consider yourself as having nothing? Or would you consider yourself as being blessed? Are you a blessed person and don't know it, like our friend in the story? Or are you truly blessed? Listen, suffering for what is right is part of your blessing. Standing up in the face of persecution is never easy. But you can do it! It's when you keep your reward in full view that makes suffering easier, because the kingdom of heaven will be yours if you don't give up. Keep your eyes fixed on the prize ahead of you, because there's more coming! Look for the One who is perfect. Look for the One whose sacrifice can save you from God's anger at your brokenness. Remember, the Good News Jesus taught is, God saves broken people! He can make them His perfect children, not by their own effort. But by God's Grace. And the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. *"Blessed are you when people insult you. Persecute you. And falsely say all kinds of evil against you. Because of Me!"*

That's His promise to you! You *are* truly blessed my friend! Enjoy it! AMEN