

“TRIUMPH IN TROUBLE”

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Mt.5:10-12

Of all the beatitudes, none is quite so difficult to swallow as this one. We can see how humility, purity, or even tranquility could produce happiness, but this idea that happiness comes through persecution is so incredible that, according to one commentator, Jesus had to repeat it twice.

Everything about our text cuts across the grain of our human emotions. We were made to be loved, not hated. We were made to be accepted, not rejected. We were made to be honored, not reviled. We are so put together that we thrive on fellowship. It's "the native air of our spirits." But, in the language of Ralph W. Sockman, in this beatitude our Lord insists we will find happiness "when we live in an atmosphere of suspicion, intrigue, harassment, alienation and persecution."

These are the direct opposites of happiness in our book. For that reason, our text is difficult to believe. It is utterly preposterous to be told persecution and rejection are prerequisites to joy. The whole idea is completely foreign to the general tenor of Jesus' words expressed in such sayings as, "Take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." And yet, our scripture insists,

"Happy are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake, happy are ye when men revile you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake."

When we begin to dig a bit deeper, we discover this is not the only place where Jesus warned his disciples of impending trouble. On several occasions he reminded them that if they decided to follow him it would lead to a cross. He made it quite clear that if they chose to walk in company with him it would result in tribulation, abuse, misunderstanding, and even death.

On one occasion he said, "In this world ye *shall* have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have

overcome the world.” He did not commiserate with them about the impending hostility and rejection awaiting them. He congratulated them! “Rejoice,” he said, “and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven.”

Persecution is Not a Virtue

Jesus was not suggesting persecution itself is a blessing. Nor was he setting up persecution as a proof of virtue. More often than not, the unpopularity we suffer is the result, not of our Christianity, but of our lack of it! Just because the whole world is arrayed against us, does not prove we are suffering for the sake of Jesus. This beatitude applies *only* to those who endure suffering for Christ’s sake.

It does not apply to the resentment we often arouse with our bad dispositions, offensive manners, prudish criticism, or pious mis-judgments of others. Before we place the blame for our lack of popularity upon our Christianity, we would do well to submit ourselves to an examination by the Holy Spirit to find out why we are disliked, if in fact we are!

Before we begin to count ourselves among the martyrs we ought to study ourselves in the light of the preceding beatitudes.

Are we so conscious of our spiritual poverty, our own great need of God, we can be called “poor in spirit?”

Are we so sorry for our own sins we “mourn” them, and are willing to surrender them?

Are we so completely God-tamed and God-trained we can be classified as “meek?”

Are we so driven by the dynamic of a desperate desire we are willing to cast everything else aside so our “hunger and thirst (for) righteousness” can be filled?

Are we “merciful” to those who have offended us, not to obtain mercy, but because of the mercy we have already obtained?

Are we “pure in heart?” Is our yearning for God devoid of any weakening alloy?

Are we “peace-makers?” Do we doggedly pursue peace, not just for our sakes, but for the sake of others?

These are the characteristics of a mature Christian. When we examine ourselves in the light of these questions, we do not have to wonder why people sometimes dislike us. More often than not, we are rejected not because of our Christianity, but because of our lack of it.

Some People Do Suffer

Of course some people have been persecuted for righteousness sake. They have gotten into trouble because of their faith. Our Savior is a prime example. He was the epitome of perfection. He embodied the beatitudes to the “nth” degree. And yet he was hated and hounded to death. In spite of his winsome ways and what Matthew Arnold called, “the sweet reasonableness of Jesus,” he was persecuted with unspeakable cruelty. And Jesus made it perfectly clear to his disciples that if they sought to follow him, they need not expect to find it any different.

He did not instruct them to go looking for trouble. But he said he was sending them forth “as sheep among wolves” and trouble would come soon enough. So he advised them to be as “wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” This was his way of impressing upon them the importance of tact and good manners. But even as he spoke, he knew that if they took him seriously they were bound to arouse cruel opposition.

And they did! All but one of the disciples died a martyr’s death. They were crucified, stoned, and subjected to most humiliating deaths. And, in their wake, have come a long brave line of others who, in every age and time, were unashamed of Jesus. People who discovered the cross of which the Master spoke is not made of shining silver, gleaming gold, or burnished brass, and that still results in the same kind of raw, rough, rude, rejection and persecution which befell Jesus!

The historian, Eusebius, tells how he witnessed some of the early persecutions. Day after day, for many years, there were executions. As many as one hundred at a time. He describes how he saw the executioners casting aside their blunted swords, taking up others, newly sharpened, and then staggering away from heaps of the dead, exhausted from slaughtering the followers of Jesus.

That's just one historian's report of the kinds of persecution which were common at that time and to which Christians were subjected. Lack of time prevents me from telling about the thousands upon thousands of those whom someone has called “God's gentry, God's noble men and women who throughout the centuries, stood firm in the face of hostilities hammerings, and without hesitation laid down their lives in obedience to him who said, ‘Follow me.’”

Jesus did not promise easy passage to those who would enter his Kingdom. He continually urged his hearers to count the cost before they decided to follow him. He did not describe a battlefield strewn with roses, or a pathway laid with carpet, but he talked about crosses. Blood-stained, agony-filled, death-dealing crosses.

Today

It isn't any different today. If you set out to follow Jesus and live a life patterned by his example, you can still expect to be persecuted for righteousness sake. The world still has no use for those who would forge ahead and upset the status quo. It still wants people who stay within a comfortable norm. People who are not too bad, or who are not too good.

If a person is a nice, easy-going guy, the world laughs with him and says, “He's a jolly good fellow.” But, when he plants his moral flag as close to the cross as he can, when he becomes too good, the world criticizes him and says, “He's become a fanatic.”

Indifference

Yes, people are still persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Oh, the techniques are more sophisticated. The enemies of Christ no longer burn Christians at the stake. They no longer feed Christians to the lions. But the effect is just the same, and the pain is just as real.

Studdert-Kennedy describes the technique in a poem which compares the nails of Calvary to the type of treatment Christ would likely meet in a city like our own.

“When Jesus came to Golgotha,
They nailed him to a tree.
They drove great nails through hands and feet
And made a Calvary.
They crowned him with a crown of thorns,
Red were his wounds and deep.
For those were crude and cruel days,
And human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to (Morgan Park),
They simply passed him by.
They never hurt a hair of him,
They only let him die.
For men had grown more tender,
And they would not give him pain.
They only just passed down the street,
And left him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, ‘Forgive them,
For they know not what they do.’
And still it rained the winter rain
That drenched him through and through.
The crowds went home and left the streets
Without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall
And cried for Calvary.”

What Studdert-Kennedy is saying is that if Jesus had to choose, he would prefer the physical torture of a cross to the emotional torture of indifference. For, to one who really cares for his

cause, indifference is the worst form of persecution. “Universal reproach,” wrote John Milton, “is far worse to bear than violence.”

In many homes and shops and schools and offices it takes real courage for men and women and young people to take a stand for Christ today. It often takes real courage to be a Christian. Rejection still awaits the honest politician, the salesperson who refuses to compromise for a profit, the teacher who will not minimize the truth, and the teenager who will not go along with the Godless gang and the Christless click.

The person who decides to take Christ seriously had better be prepared to climb up Calvary with him, for as Jesus explained to his disciples (and to us), “A disciple is not above his Master, nor a servant above his Lord.” As long as sin remains in the world, the Christian who is earnestly committed to the truth will not have an easy time of it.

Our Lack of Trouble

Fortunately, in this country, we are mostly free from active persecution. Unlike many of our progenitors and contemporaries, we do not face imprisonment or physical torture because of our faith. As a matter of fact, if we have any cause for alarm at all, it is that there is practically no opposition to the church.

Apart from the hostility of a few who resent the political view some religionists have taken, we are treated with respectful indifference. We are looked upon as amiable nonentities. The most damaging indictment which might be leveled against some of us is that our religion is so tepid it raises little, if any response from the wicked. They do not persecute us, they simply ignore us!

Dr. Hugh Martin of Great Britain, tells how he once stayed with a missionary friend in an Indian city which contained one of the most famous of all pagan temples. There had been a little Christian church in that town for over one hundred years, but the temple and its festivals seemed as secure as ever.

One day the head of the temple called at his friend's home to inquire about the visiting stranger. He asked many questions and learned Dr. Martin was touring India on behalf of the Student Christian Movement. When he learned this, he insisted with great kindness, that Dr. Martin accept the loan of his carriage and driver on the following day so he could see more of the countryside. When the temple priest had gone, Dr. Martin turned to his friend in surprise and said, “Tell me, why is he so friendly? He knows you and I are here to put him out of business.” To which his friend replied sadly, “Ah, but he knows we are not really dangerous.”

I wonder if that is our trouble today. I wonder if the reason the entrenched forces of evil do not bother us is because we are no longer bothersome. Is it possible we do not endure persecution because we do not live lives that comes into conflict with the vested interests?

I think this is one of the most haunting questions facing us this morning. For, while we certainly should not go around seeking persecution and unpopularity, should not persecution and unpopularity come seeking us? If we never suffer for our faith, is there not something wrong with our witness? We ought to be coming into conflict with public opinion, vested interest, organized crime and entrenched evil.

“A true Christian,” wrote Alexander Maclaren, “ought to be a standing rebuke to the world. There are but two ways to bring that antagonism. Either by bringing the world up to Christian character, or by letting Christian character sink down to the world.”

That the church is almost universally popular in our country may be the most cutting criticism leveled against us. Unpersecuted Christianity may merely be a tepid, luke-warm, milk-and-water faith which is ignored because it is not troublesome.

Charles Allen tells of a minister friend who went to a large church to preach a special Good Friday service. The weather was bad and only a few people came. The pastor of the church apologized for the poor attendance and said, “If it had not been for the bad weather, we would have had a

large crowd to hear you tonight.” At first this angered the visiting minister, but quickly his anger turned to pity and contempt. Looking at his host he said, “Do you realize what you’ve just said? If the weather had not been bad, a larger crowd would have come to this Good Friday service. Jesus died on Good Friday! And his modern day ‘disciples’ did not come to the service because it was raining!”

Regrettably, that’s an indictment many of us must share, for our sense of commitment runs pretty shallow. We have far too much in common with the man who went fishing on a Sunday morning. The fellow he was with got to feeling pretty guilty and said, “I suppose we should have gone to church.” To which the angler replied lazily, “Shucks, I couldn’t have gone to church anyway, my wife is sick in bed!”

We can chuckle at such foolishness. We can smile benignly at the man who does not go to church one Sunday because it is raining, or the next because it is too nice a day to spend indoors. But I wonder if that is not part of our trouble. I wonder if that is the reason racketeering labor bosses, syndicate criminals, crooked politicians, purveyors of pornography and promiscuity are unafraid of the church. They are willing to flaunt their rebellion in the faces of good people, because they know down deep in their heart those good people are not so good after all! Their goodness is all on the surface! They don’t give a tinker’s damn whether or not the world goes to hell, as long as their comfortable little world is not disturbed. May God shame us, and convict us, and shake us out of our lethargy before it’s too late.

Reward

What does Christ promise to those who are persecuted, ridiculed, and rejected for righteousness sake? He promises them happiness. “Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven.”

The word “joy” has all but disappeared from our current Christian vocabulary. One reason is that we’ve thought joy and happiness were found in comfort, ease, and luxury. But James did not say

in his letter to Christians, “Count it all joy when you fall into an easy chair.” He said, “Count it all joy when you fall into diverse trials” (James 1:2).

The persecuted are happy because they are being processed for heaven. As Paul said with such conviction, “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

That’s why Samuel Rutherford was able to say after six months in prison,
“Christ’s cross is such a burden as sails are to a ship, or wings to a bird.”

That’s why another martyr could say, as he kissed the stake at which he was later burned,
“I shall not lose my life, but change it for a better one. Instead of coals I shall have pearls.”

These were people who had experienced first-hand what Jesus declared so long ago. They learned that,

“The very worst the world could do to them could not rob them of the blessedness, the heavenly happiness which was theirs in him.”

During one of the terrible persecutions which plagued the early church, the pagan ruler Nero stood in the Roman coliseum surrounded by a great throng who had come to watch a group of Christians devoured by the lions. The Christians were led into the arena and the lions were released. But, instead of running for safety, or screaming for mercy, the Christians knelt quietly on the floor of the coliseum in prayer.

As Nero watched them being mauled by the lions, he turned to the captain of his guards and said, “They won’t fight! They die like sheep!” To which the captain replied, “Oh, they’re fighting Sir, and they’re winning.”

“Happy are ye, when men revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake; rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven.”

And what is that reward in heaven? Not the streets of gold, or the eternal mansions. Nor the gates of pearl or jasper walls. The reward in heaven is nothing less than God, himself! The glory of his presence. The joy of his smile. The delight of his commendation, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord.”

With the prospect of such a promise before us, can we not all say,

“I would be true, for there are those who trust me.
I would be pure, for there are those who care.
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer.
I would be brave, for there is much to dare.

I would be friend to all, the foe, the friendless.
I would be giving, and forget the gift.
I would be humble, for I know my weakness.
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift.”