

## **Those Who Are Persecuted Because of Righteousness**

### **Essay 10 in the series “The Beatitudes”**

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Then with this eighth and final beatitude in Matthew 5:10, Jesus expands. He elaborates, as if to make this point most emphatically, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who went before you.”

And this, I believe, unlocks a central dynamic of the cross of Jesus. There are many ways to understand the death of Christ, some more convincing than others, some more compelling than others. The primary understanding is that Jesus in some sense died “for our sins,” and I accept that, though not always in the same way it’s traditionally taught. But I would add to our understandings of Christ’s death this: Jesus died for the Beatitudes or because of the Beatitudes.

He came into the hill country of Galilee launching a revolution, a revolution of the heart, a revolution in the ways people live and think and feel, a revolution in the ways they respond to one another. He came not so much to start a new religion as to launch a revolution of love and forgiveness worldwide. He came not so much to demand a set of doctrines and rituals for the few but to teach a way of being for everyone. The people expect to hear, “Take up arms. Get even. Attack Rome.” Instead Jesus tells them that his kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit. It belongs to those who genuinely grieve. It belongs to those who master their dark impulses through meekness. It belongs to those who find justice not in vengeance but in doing what is right. It belongs to the merciful, those who extend to others the grace they know they need themselves. It belongs to those who seek God with all their heart. It belongs to those who renounce violence and work for peace, and who will do so even in the face of violent resistance.

But now with this eighth and final beatitude Jesus is saying that when you teach and live these principles you will arouse real anger – real push-back. This will enrage a lot of people because this challenges the status quo. This challenges the way things have always been done. This challenges many of those in authority and positions of power. This challenges the way many people are wired. This challenges everyone who supposes that the answer to violence is more violence. This challenges those whose ultimate allegiance is to something other than God. This challenges the evil and the selfish and the complacent. It directly contests the way of the ego and challenges all those who are determined to do whatever they want to do. It is for this reason that Jesus says later in the Gospel of Matthew (10:34), “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.”

This revolution, and revolution is not too strong a word, is all about beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. It’s all about nations not taking up sword

against nation (Isaiah 2:1-4). It's about a new heaven and a new earth. But those who come with the first waves of this teaching will be resisted fiercely. Always. They will be flung to the lions and burnt at the stake. They will be covered in pitch and set alight. They'll be imprisoned. Their property will be confiscated. In more civil times, they will still be mocked and ridiculed. And even threatened. Martin Luther King, Jr. would tell of the nasty telephone calls he'd get every day, some days more than forty, threatening his life, the life of his wife, and the lives of his children.

And so Jesus used to teach, and he would teach this over and over, that we are to be poor in spirit, seasoned in grief, with our passions under control, firmly committed to doing what is right, merciful and quick to forgive, seeking God with all our hearts, and constructively working toward peace, but then he warned that resistance to this is all but inevitable. There will be push-back. He taught this, and he lived it. And on the most basic level his death can be understood as a consequence of this. He himself absorbed the anger of the world. He embodied self-sacrificing love all the way to the cross, so that when we really see this, and are finally touched by it, we will stop our own self-centered way. He came to us in his goodness and kindness, in his purity and vulnerability, and let the men of power and violence kill him. By accepting suffering from everyone, Jews and Romans alike, rather than inflicting suffering on anyone, Jesus revealed the loving heart of God who wants finally forgiveness for everyone and not vengeance. And in so doing, he took what was against us – our own sense that we are deeply wrong – and nailed it the cross.

And he unmasked human violence. He exposed how we scapegoat people, how our violence is so often displaced on those who are innocent. He came as a prophet challenging the religious establishment of his day offering himself as the new Temple, a direct way to God requiring no priesthood or sacrificial system. He himself would be the final "sacrifice for sin." This would be it! The last word on it. And then in a land on the edge of open revolt, he welcomed into his circle Roman centurions. There would be no scapegoats in his kingdom. None. Except for him. And on the third day he arose.

These teachings are the word of God.

These teaching can save the world – with disciples in all nations who really believe this, and not just a person or two, or a group or two, but hundreds, thousands, millions and millions. We are called to be a people who believe what Jesus said and who if necessary will live out what he said even to our last excruciating breath. As he did. And we can do this because we know our glorious story goes on and on. Beyond fear. Beyond death. Forever and ever.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And, yes, great is their reward in heaven. But never forget what Jesus is also saying. How joyful, how radiantly joyful, how radiantly, unshakably joyful such people are. No one will be able to take away their joy (John 16:22). How blissful such people are! In their very poverty of spirit, in their grieving, in their unanticipated meekness, in their passion for just doing what is right regardless of the consequences to themselves, in

their mercy, in their single-mindedness pursuit of God, in their renouncing violence and making peace, in all circumstances, even persecution, it is they who have found unshakable peace. Even in persecution. It is they who sense eternity all around them. It is they who live enchanted lives. Not needing to possess or control anything, all things are theirs. They are open to all that life offers them, trusting that no matter what happens in their lives, it may just be for the highest good. Deep in their souls it is they who are born again. It is they who are free. God's love pours into them; joy and vitality pour out of them. It is they who feel one with God, who sense the divine flow all around them and in them. They are surrounded by grace. For them time becomes eternity. They are filled with previously unimaginable power. They feel they can touch the heavens; that kingdom is theirs. They have found a joy that is nothing short of euphoria. And even when they slip – and they will sometimes slip – they now know life in the Spirit and the way back to it.

At first you try a little, a little poverty of spirit, a little purity of heart. You let go of your narrow, fearful, little ego. Maybe you're hurt, deeply disappointed. You've hit what feels like bottom. And for a moment you just let go and trust. And it is just then that you sense this deeper life, how free you could be, how good life could be. And it's almost something like euphoria, a state you have never quite felt before. In that moment you realize that out there just beyond your grief is unshakable joy. But the moment leaves you. At first such moments do. They come and go. But now just maybe you can see the bliss, the deep soul happiness, that the God who is love intends for you.

– Dale Pauls