



Series: The Upside Down Kingdom

Date: May 12, 2024

Speaker: Spence Shelton, Lead Pastor

Text: Matthew 5:10¹

Title: Blessed are the Persecuted

Intro

HAPPY MOTHERS DAY!!! Moms - the rest of us DON'T know how hard you have it. It's the hardest job on planet earth. Adrian Rogers once said, and I recite it often here - there's no reason you shouldn't spend time in bible reading and prayer EVERY SINGLE MORNING...unless you are the mother of a

young child. In which case God loves you, we love you, and it will get better we promise! I know this day is AWESOME for some and somber for others. Some of you this is your first Mother's Day as a mom! Some of you this is your first Mother's Day without your mom. Some of you are moms who have lost children. So, this day is mixed right? But I do want to honor our mothers in a moment. Both the ones in the home and the ones in the church and here's why.

I see a story in church history in the past 2-3 generations of a lot of moms who faithfully kept their children engaged in the church & faithfully read scripture over them & faithfully prayed for them. And I imagine if we could peek into God's account of the past 100 years in American churches - we'd see that mothers have been pillars, the keepers of the faith, in so many homes, and we owe a great deal to them.

The latest research from a recent Barna study revealed that only 19% of mothers feel they are making a "meaningful contribution to the world on a regular basis." BUT another study found that when GenZ is asked about their mothers, MOMS are the primary activity and conversation partners for teens, MOMs are the main spiritual coaches, and teens go to MOMS for tough conversations and personal support. So

¹ WORKS CONSULTED:

Iain M. Duguid, *Hero of Heroes: Seeing Christ in the Beatitudes* (P&R Publishing, 2001)
Chris Castaldo, *The Upside Down Kingdom: Wisdom for Life from the Beatitudes* (Crossway, 2023)
Dr. Todd M Johnson, "Christian Martyrdom: Who, Why, How?" Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary Blog, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/christian-martyrdom-who-why-how/> (accessed May 7, 2024).
John MacArthur, *The Only Way To Happiness: The Beatitudes* (Moody Publishers, 1998)

A.W. Pink, *The Beatitudes* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014)
Thomas Watson, "Beatitudes: An Exposition of Matthew 5:1-12." Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://ccel.org/ccel/watson/beatitudes/beatitudes>.



7200 Providence Road, Charlotte, NC 28226
704-665-7028 | mercycharlotte.com



when I read that, as your pastor, I need moms today - whether you work in the home, outside the home, or parent kids who now have their own kids - to hear that you are doing a GREAT job, and you are making the most meaningful contribution to the world on a regular basis - by showing up for and discipling your kids.²

I want to give a second here by show of applause. Who here is thankful for a mom, or a grandmother, or a spiritual mother that has blessed you and loved you and been patient with you and God has used to form you into who you are today? Can we honor them?

Ok now if that is true - Here's what I want you to do - write a letter. That's your homework today. Whatever mother was so impactful that you just cheered for them - Write them a note or letter thanking them. Consider using pen & paper & envelopes and stamps. Stamps are these little stickers that you have to put on your mail so it will go where you want it to go. You can buy them at this little boutique store called the Post Office.

Moms, we love you! Amen?

² <https://www.barna.com/research/moms-christians-households/>

Well, Today is the LAST sermon in our series called the upside down kingdom where we've been looking at the passage of scripture commonly called "The Beatitudes." Next week we are going to jump straight into a new series of sermons in the gospel of John where we are going to look at 7 miracles Jesus performed. John writes them down in his gospel so that you may believe Jesus is who he says he is. So, our series is going to be called "So that you may believe." (show title slide) And my hope is that we build on these teachings of Jesus in the Beatitudes by experiencing the POWER of Jesus in the gospel of John. Our God is the God of truth AND of POWER. I think this is going to be a great series to invite your friends to because it's basically a series of stories that will spark faith and revive faith in the power of God available to us.

Series starts next Sunday and I'm praying we see a summertime harvest through it. Invite and let's believe together.

—

Ok back to today where, I believe, we are covering the MOST upside-down thing Jesus says in the whole passage we've been studying in Matthew 5. Now that we have arrived at the last beatitude let's read the whole thing. STAND.

Then he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

2 Then he began to teach them, saying:



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

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

5 Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth.

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

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. 11 “You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. 12 Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you. -- Matthew 5:10-12

YOU MAY BE SEATED

Today, here on Mother’s Day, our passage we’ve come to is about persecution. Which as I studied this week I was like MAN REALLY?. But SOMETIMES parenting feels like persecution. Well, this is where we are guys. I will say every week to some degree or another I’m up here trying to show you why you should follow Jesus. This week feels like the one where I’m telling you why you shouldn’t. Here’s why NOT to follow Jesus.

This is the final beatitude. Jesus has been building to this. And I will say today I believe I’m preaching a message that I think is especially important for those of you under 30. I mean it’s of course for all of us because God’s word is for all of us, but I think it’s going to have a special application to what we would call the next generation. FOREVER I was the next generation. But when your children are old enough to beat you in basketball...you are no longer NEXT.

But this word from Jesus to his followers...it’s a word about the days ahead. It’s a word about the cost. And it’s not popular. This is not a comfortable sermon with 5 points to be a better you.

This passage and this sermon present a reality about the Christian life that is VERY uncomfortable. And here’s what you gotta remember: **There’s a difference between being comfortable and being comforted.** Jesus offers great COMFORT for those who choose him. A comfort FAR greater than the COMFORTABLE life this world offers. Understand the



difference? You will not find comfortable Christianity in the scriptures. The cross was not comfortable. But the promise of the cross brings great comfort to you and me.

See, this is the longest beatitude by far. Most of them are one sentence, two short phrases. This is 3 verses. And in this last beatitude Jesus gathers his followers and gives a speech much like a platoon leader would to a group about to go into battle.

And I say this is a sermon to the next generation because if you choose to follow Jesus you will be persecuted more than my generation is. Again, this is for all of us because we all are promised persecution. Now, none of us know persecution the way some parts of the global church know it and we'll talk about that in a moment.

BUT the heat is turning up and it seems likely to continue. And what we are going to see today is that should that happen - it is a BLESSING to you, not a curse. Something that will strengthen you, not destroy or weaken you.

So, let's see what scripture has to say about you and I being persecuted for following Jesus. Here's our outline to work through this final beatitude:

1. EXPECT PERSECUTION, DON'T BE SURPRISED BY IT
2. TAKE UP YOUR CROSS, DON'T RUN FROM IT

3. REJOICE IN THE PROMISE OF PERSECUTION, DON'T FEAR IT

Expect persecution, don't be surprised by it.

This is so important. If we don't live with an expectation that we will be persecuted for our faith we will get surprised & angry when the first whiff of it comes. And by persecution I mean what Jesus says:

11 "You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me.

Persecution is when you are mistreated for following Jesus.

When you are LIED about. When your reputation is drug through the mud because you follow Jesus...When you are ostracized. When you are betrayed, beaten, or killed for following Jesus. BTW - in our society the mainstream is not going to do this when you just identify as a Christian. Not right now. Mainstream culture is good with you identifying as whatever right? **It's not when you identify as a Christian that they will persecute you, it's when you live like one.**

Persecution is when you are mistreated for following Jesus.

Listen, Jesus says **expect** it. If your Christianity has fit so easily into your pre-Christian life... If that's the case, it's likely that way because you may be a Christian in name but in practice you yield the way of Jesus to the way of the world. Listen when you FOLLOW Jesus, scripture says you should EXPECT



persecution. It's a promise in the bible from Jesus to his followers.

if they persecuted me, they will persecute you - John 15.20

12 In fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. -- 2 Timothy 3.12

12 Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you, as if something unusual were happening to you. - 1 Peter 4.12

The ordeal he is talking about is persecution. And he's saying when you are being persecuted for PROFESSING AND PRACTICING allegiance to Jesus...don't be surprised! Like wait...I thought when I took steps of faith I would be celebrated! I grew up getting participation trophies...so where is my JESUS participation trophy?

We don't follow a guy who was celebrated by his community. We follow a guy who was BEATEN & MURDERED by his community.

So, what should we expect? FIERY ORDEALS. Being avoided, losing friends, losing family, and being pushed out to the margins.

One evidence you are following Jesus is that you experience some level of persecution for doing so. Remember, these beatitudes call us to a life of peacemaking & meekness & humility...the kind of life that you think would not bring about persecution. AND...Jesus was the MOST humble, the best peacemaker, the MOST MEEK...and yet - he was persecuted, hunted, and killed by his enemies. Which is why in this beatitude he doesn't say IF they insult you or persecute you but WHEN they do so. **You cannot think that your quiet life of obedience will guarantee that you avoid persecution in some fashion. At some point you will face a moment of choosing the world or choosing Christ. And choosing Christ will come at a cost.** And sometimes that cost will be the world persecuting you.

Thomas Watson, the Puritan writer, says, "Though they be ever so meek, merciful, pure in heart, their piety will never shield them from suffering. They must hang their harp on the willows and take up the cross. The way to heaven is by the way of thorns and blood. Set it down as a maxim, if you will follow Christ, you will see the swords and staves. Put the cross in your creed,"³

And listen, persecution has been happening to Christians since the church began. And before that it was happening to God's

³ Watson, Thomas. "Beatitudes: An Exposition of Matthew 5:1-12." Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/watson/beatitudes.xxiii.html>. (Accessed May 7, 2024).



people in the Old Testament. Most of the disciples were either killed or imprisoned or both for preaching the gospel. Stephen was named the first deacon in Acts 6 and then in Acts 7 preached the gospel & was stoned to death. Rome used to make sport out of torturing the early Christians. But it didn't stop with the early church. Throughout the past 2000 years Christians have been persecuted and ultimately killed for following Jesus. According to Todd Johnson, Professor of global Christianity and mission at Gordon Conwell Seminary

*"We estimate that more than 70 million Christians have been martyred over the last two millennia, more than half of which died in the 20th century under fascist and communist regimes. We also estimate that 1 million Christians were killed between 2001 and 2010 and about 900,000 were killed from 2011 to 2020."*⁴

This is our reality. To follow Christ is to follow him into persecution. We should expect it. We should not be surprised by it. When you follow Jesus...not just when you identify as a Christian but when you LIVE like one...the world will stand against you at some point. And it will cost you. That's what is happening around the world.

⁴ Dr. Todd M Johnson, "Christian Martyrdom: Who, Why, How?" Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary Blog, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/christian-martyrdom-who-why-how/> (accessed May 7, 2024).

Dr. Gregory Cochran who did his PhD on the persecuted church said:

Some international humanitarian agencies have estimated that 80% of all religious persecution in the world today is aimed at Christians.

Christians today are, by some order of magnitude, the most persecuted religious body on the planet, suffering not just martyrdom but all the forms of intimidation and oppression mentioned above in record numbers. That's not a hunch, or a theory, or an anecdotal impression, but an undisputed empirical fact of life. Confirmation comes from multiple sources, all respected observers of either the human rights scene or the global religious landscape

What I'm trying to tell you is that what Jesus said would be true of his followers IS TRUE OF HIS FOLLOWERS! The church is persecuted all over the world. And there is an increasing hostility to it now here in our culture.

Listen, some of you are going to lose friendships for following Jesus. I did. I didn't lose them when I professed faith and was baptized. They actually congratulated me and said things like "I'm happy for you." But eventually as I chose to *follow* him, I chose his ways over the world's ways but my friends chose the



world's ways over his ways. Now HEAR an important caveat - I believe where possible, we should seek friendship with non christians. We are not to bubble ourselves away from those Jesus loves. BUT there's a difference between being a friend of sinners and being friendly with sin. When you choose Jesus, your friend group will change. For some of you that's a great thing. Because you know some of your friends pull you down. But for others man maybe they will shift...but they will be different. I'm just here to tell you it's likely...AND its worth it.

Some of you are going to have your jobs threatened because you refuse to follow the way of this world. Some of you already have. Some of you are going to have family and friends push you away. As you follow Jesus they will push you away. They may lie about you and say all kinds of things about you. JESUS IS SAYING HERE - EXPECT THAT kind of thing. Don't be surprised. Don't waste your breath wondering...WHERE ARE ALL THE HEADLINES ABOUT CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION? There's a Christian genocide happening in Nigeria right now - 2024 - where Muslim extremists have already murdered 5k Christians. Where are the news agencies? Guys listen - it's not news that Christians are persecuted! It's our legacy promised to us and modeled for us by our savior.

And if you are like - I don't know pastor - it seems easy to be a Christian in this country. I want to suggest maybe we've lowered our standards of obedience to Jesus to the point

where you can't distinguish us from the world. Which leads me to the second point:

Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 16

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it. -- Matthew 16:24-25

The call to the Christian life is a call of FULL surrender to Jesus. Which includes...look at that...take up your cross and follow him. A cross is a torture device! That's what he's calling you to. Death. Just as he sacrificed his life to save you from your life, so you surrender your life to him & his ways. Sometimes all the way to the point of death.

Take up your cross, don't run from it.

Listen I told you today I feel a little like I'm telling you why NOT to follow Jesus. Here's why - maybe today is the day you say YES to following Jesus. There is a false gospel out there I'll call it the HALF gospel. That allows you to claim Jesus as your savior but not as your Lord. That allows you to sing songs to Jesus and get your "I'm going to heaven" magic band but doesn't call you to surrendering to his way of life. That celebrates you wearing the merch without carrying the cross. Know what I'm saying?



There are some great artists out there who've taken up Christianity and so there's some good-looking' merch. And if you aren't careful listen Charlotte is FILLED with a half-gospel Christianity so listen - you can get that Jesus Hat & Shirt, the hobby lobby poster about Jesus hanging in your kitchenette, & post that fav bible verse to your Facebook, insta, tik tok, etc....you can LOOK THE PART...All you need is a little coffee and a little Jesus and you are livin my best life....

A LITTLE BIT OF JESUS!?!? SPRINKLE SOME JESUS ON MY UPWARDLY MOBILE LIFE? COME ON GUYS! Jesus didn't have a bachelor's degree, an apartment in south end, 200 breweries & an easy life with a promotion every couple of years. I'm not saying those things are wrong. I'm just saying HIS WHOLE LIFE is demotion to the point of death. And he says follow him DOWN, not up.

Read a story this week about a pastor in South Asia. In a hostile Hindu culture. Who was arrested for trying to convert people to Christianity. He JOYFULLY went to prison because he was getting to suffer like his savior. 2 months later they arrested his son who said to his mother with joy "It is my turn to suffer for the gospel!" IS THAT YOU!?

Here's evidence of a half-gospel faith - we do premarital counseling with you and your girlfriend, and you are shocked when we say "hey God has reserved sex for a husband and wife. We want to call you to that holiness. And you are

offended. If you've settled for a little Jesus seasoning half gospel INSTEAD of taking up your cross, well, you are going to have a hard time. You may discover you aren't actually a Christian at all.

This is a call to live the Jesus Life. To choose his way over your way. And the great news is - you are not going anywhere Jesus hasn't already been.

Some of you need to loosen your grip on this world and tighten your grip on Jesus. If you tell me you are Christian, but you are still living by the hook-up, shack-up, break-up culture of this world - You may be living the half-gospel. If you say you are a Christian but cheat on your taxes, lie on your resume, and manipulate your friends - you may be living a half-gospel. Turn this around the other way - If you say you are a Christian, but YOU exhibit none of the traits in the beatitudes - you instead are a keyboard warrior who slings bible verses with venom. You are living a half-gospel of self-righteousness. And when you get in arguments, you probably aren't being persecuted for being a Christian, you probably are being persecuted for being a Jerk. And being a jerk online - well that's the world's way of doing things.

And it may be the reason your Christianity is comfortable is because its indistinguishable from the world. And maybe today is the wakeup call God has for you to lay down your life...doing things the world's way...and take up your cross.



Because if you do things the world's way you get the world's results. You don't get the blessings of the beatitudes. You don't get the kingdom of heaven. You don't get comfort. You don't get mercy; you don't get to see God. That comes with the kingdom of Jesus. With taking up your cross. Stop talking the talk and start walking the walk. And just you wait - persecution will come. And with that persecution comes a great promise. That's the last part of our sermon. Look again at verse 12...

12 Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Notice in all 3 verses he says you are blessed when you are persecuted? He even goes so far as to say in verse 12 be glad and REJOICE. Rejoice? I can handle you saying something like "endure." Something that says this is going to be hard BUT worth it. Like resetting a bone or something. Painful but healing. NAH. he says REJOICE. Why? Because your reward in heaven is great.

Rejoice in the promise of persecution. Don't fear it.

Now at this point in the sermon...You might be wondering why in the world would I want to be a Christian?

Why? Rejoice? Two reasons that are both pretty awesome. FIRST - the kingdom of heaven is yours! This is the same

promise that was given in the first beatitude. That the poor in spirit would receive the kingdom of heaven. This is a great reminder that the beatitudes are about ONE people, not 8 different types of people. One group - God's people. Jesus is describing them, and he says when you are persecuted for his name...REJOICE...because it is verifying WHAT KINGDOM YOU BELONG TO. There are two kingdoms - the kingdom of this world & the kingdom of heaven. You belong to heaven! And ya'll the thing about heaven is that it is how long? FOREVER. RIGHT.

How long is this life? SHORT. James 4 says your life is like a vapor. Appears for a moment and then vanishes. But heaven is for how long? FOREVER.

8 The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever." -- Isaiah 40:8

Dot v Line illustration. Live for the line, not the dot.

And there is great reward in heaven! Crowns & riches and you are like - wait isn't that a little prosperity gospel? NO. Because it's not using God to get our evil heart's desire here. It's receiving from God in a place where there is no greed. So, my heart will not worship heaven's riches. I imagine we'll use them to celebrate God's glory in some awesome way. So instead of trying to build MY kingdom here, I'm living for HIS kingdom.



Jesus then likens we who endure persecution to the prophets. Which is his way of saying...persecution is like a certification of authenticity. The prophets were persecuted...and God got glory. And if that's your route...to God be the glory. And it may be that God uses your persecution, your willingness to take up your cross FOR HIM...to bring others into his kingdom.

I want to close by telling you a story of God using persecution to expand his kingdom. This whole sermon could be stories of God using persecution. After all, in the areas of the world where the church is persecuted...the church is booming. God's church always thrives in persecution because only God can get the glory for it.

China ranks number 19 on the world watch list for highest rates of persecution. There are an estimated 100 million believers in China. Iran is ranked 9th in terms of persecution intensity - there are 1 million believers, and the church is booming. And North Korea is the highest ranked country in the world in terms of persecution and there are over 400,000 estimated believers sharing the gospel at great threat of death every single day. No money, no seminaries, just God's word, God's people, and God's holy spirit. And that is all you need to turn the world upside down.

Now to the story. This is from right in our network of churches IN 2023. It was told to our staff just recently and its incredible and I hope it encourages you to live your faith in such a way that others hear about Jesus.

A college student at NC State heard the gospel and chose to put his faith in Jesus. He ended up going to London to share the gospel with people, while in London he was sharing the gospel with someone at a coffee shop, and someone overheard them and walked over. This person said, "sorry to interrupt I am overhearing your conversation and was wondering if you could help me?" The two guys said sure, we can try! The man went on to tell them how he kept having dreams of a man dressed in white taking him to the river telling him to get baptized and then a voice from heaven saying, "I'm going to give you a new heart". He looked at the two guys and said could you help me understand what my dream means? They shared the gospel with this man, and he ended up putting his faith in Jesus at the coffee shop. Now here's where it starts to get wild - this man was about to go back to his home country. Which is a country closed to Christianity and considered by all missions agencies to be an unreached people group in the middle east. While back home, where it is illegal to be a Christian, his Muslim brother saw him reading the Bible and beat him up. The Muslim brother went to bed and had a dream of a man dressed in white asking, "why are you persecuting me?" Immediately he woke up and told his bible reading brother about this dream, the Christian brother shared the gospel with the Muslim brother, and he put his faith in Jesus. Now there are 2 Christians where the IMB identified as an unreached people group.



Now here's where it gets crazy - these 2 men have shared the gospel and seen over 1,000 people put their faith in Jesus where it's illegal to be a Christian. These men have shared the gospel with people while an AK47 has been held at their head. The people holding the gun saw the peace and lack of fear the people proclaiming the gospel and it compelled them and convicted them to put their faith in Jesus.

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

Close - we are going to take communion. A reminder of the persecution of Christ.

****CLOSE THE SERIES****

PRAY