

As with all the previous beatitudes, this one was revolutionary and shocking to the hearers of Jesus. Persecution/suffering was seen as a sign of divine displeasure in the ancient Middle East. The Jews were looking for a Messiah who would bring freedom from oppression, persecution and poverty. In our time too some preach a gospel that we deserve peace, prosperity and freedom from suffering for the here and now. This is not what Jesus taught – ultimately when he returns that will happen, but not yet.

However, persecution is the obvious result of a clash between two irreconcilable value systems. All the apostles except John were killed for their faith, indeed the last century saw more Christians killed for their faith than any other.

**Persecution** takes many forms, not merely physical but also insults, slander, more subtle forms of persecution – snide comments etc, one of the roots of the word means to be treated wrongly.

Because the lifestyle of a follower of Jesus conflicts so vastly, and indeed each beatitude with the proud, self-seeking standards of this world, persecution is inevitable. Peacemaking and showing mercy will bring scorn and not always work.

True persecution that is blessed comes because of righteousness, not from being arrogant, insensitive, obnoxious, unloving, harsh or judgemental but because of righteous behaviour – living out the beatitudes, on account of Jesus. Just as Jesus was persecuted if we live in relationship with him and in obedience to him, we will be persecuted too (John 15:18-21). The root of persecution is that others love something that is evil or untrue and seek to justify that – this brings about 2 possible responses, these are described in John 3:20-21.

*"For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. [That is one possible response: hating the light and not accepting it.] But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God. [That is the other possible response: doing the truth and coming to it and freely admitting that all good in us is accomplished by God.]*

*The two options are persecution or conversion. (See these two options in Matthew 5:10 and 16.) But, we ask, what about those in my life who are neither converted nor persecuting -- who are just civil, or even polite? There are at least two possible explanations.*

*One is that your light is under a bushel. You are keeping the stumbling block of the cross well concealed (Galatians 5:11; 6:12-13). You don't let your distinctive values show.*

*The other is that you are letting them show and the people around you are moving toward one or the other of these two polls: persecution or conversion. Neither of these must happen immediately. There are all kinds of factors that can hinder expressions of persecution. So we should all examine ourselves to see if we are playing a kind of cowardly Christian incognito. And if so we should repent and resolve to be more sincere in the expression of who we really are. But we must not assume that, because there is no persecution right now and no conversion right now, the fault must lie with us. The gestation period for the new birth may be nearing a happy end. Or the storm may be ready to break against you" – Piper*

### **Reasons for persecution**

We have to be careful that we aren't persecuted for the wrong reasons – 1 Peter 2:19-21, 4:14-15). The reason is the righteousness that comes from Christ and the indwelling of his spirit. Often as Christians we bring persecution on ourselves because of our own sinfulness or lacking to display the fruit of the spirit. Augustine – *"not the punishment but the cause that makes the martyr"*

There are many current issues that as Christians we must take a stand on that will lead to persecution – the fact that Christianity is exclusive- Jesus is the only way to know God, the dignity of human life, justice etc. But in all these things we must stand purely for truth and righteousness in love and grace, and also be prepared to offer alternatives. One pastor refused to simply condemn abortion until his church offered an alternative - they now run a pregnancy crisis centre and offer to take in and care for pregnant girls and their babies.

As Christians we will face persecution as we seek to live lives that honour God, filled with his righteousness. That may mean missing out on promotions at work because we won't cheat on expenses forms, tax returns, may mean failing essays at university as we refuse to say what the lecturer wants us to say but instead say what we believe, standing for objective truth and against relativism. It will mean refusing to be involved in gossip, to see people as more important than profits and programs, objecting to taking part in conversations and jokes that are racist, homophobic, demeaning to people created in the image of God. As we seek to be people of integrity, living transparent, God honouring, merciful, pure lives that seek to make peace we will need to remember we are citizens of heaven, not of this earth.

## Blessed..Rejoice..

It seems ridiculous that to be persecuted is to be blessed and that we are to rejoice and be glad! But when we face persecution because of Jesus, we become identified with Him, we are following in the line of the prophets – we have the honour of being identified with them – Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Amos etc. It gives us the perspective of being part of something bigger – the coming of God’s kingdom. Persecution (as with the poor in spirit) gives us assurance that we are citizens of the kingdom – “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (John 15:18-21). James also tells us that persecution and suffering helps us to grow in grace, times of opposition bring refining, we know that ultimately God is working for our good, so we must try to see the big picture perspective (2 Corinthians 4:17). Jesus points to this when he says “rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven”.

Rejoicing is definitely the last thing we would choose. We may be tempted to despair and give up, or on the other extreme become hard and give in to recriminations and stoop to the cruelty of those who persecute us – “and you become a monster, so the monster will not break you” (U2 – Peace on earth) but we are called to rejoice not in the persecution, but because of the reward that is ahead of us.

*“Jesus says to his disciples, most of whom will drink the cup of martyrdom, “Rejoice and be glad” when you are persecuted, when you suffer. How can he say this?*

*He can say it because he knows beyond any shadow of a doubt that the reward of heaven will more than compensate for any suffering we must endure in the service of Christ. “Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven.” There is a mystery here -- the mystery of joy in the midst of agony; the mystery of gladness in the midst of misery and groaning. And this mystery is contained in a miracle, namely, the miracle of faith -- the bedrock assurance that heaven is a hundredfold compensation for every pain. To the degree that you believe what Jesus sees in heaven, to that degree you will be able to rejoice and be glad in suffering.*

*Jesus wills for his disciples to desire the reward of heaven more than we desire the reward of the world. Jesus wills for us to have our treasure in heaven not on earth (6:19-20). Jesus wills for your heart to be so set on heaven that to leave this earth is a cause of rejoicing. Not without tears! -- as Paul said, “As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,” and as Jesus sweat blood in Gethsemane in the face of his own pain, but for the joy set before him endured the cross.*

*Jesus wills for us to have our hearts primarily in heaven, our hopes primarily in heaven, our longings primarily in heaven, our joy primarily in heaven. There is no other way that you can rejoice and be glad at the loss of your earthly joys. How shall we rejoice and be glad when these things are taken from us if we have not loved heaven more?*

*If someone should ask whether having our heart in heaven will make us useless on earth, the answer is given by Jesus in the very next paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount. People who have their hearts so much in heaven that they fear no man but rejoice in persecution -- such radically free and joyful people are the “salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”!!!!” Piper*

John Piper’s sermon on this (much of which I’ve plagiarised) is very helpful – full text can be found at: <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/86/031686.html>

## The Persecuted Church

All over the world our brothers and sisters in Christ face persecution - in Eritrea (beside Ethiopia) Christians have been locked in containers, Christian girls have been beheaded in Indonesia, churches are attacked in India, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Christian students are being banned from campuses in England and Scotland.

It may be an idea to have a prayer focus on the persecuted church. One Christian asked ‘not to pray that the persecution will stop but that we will stand and remain faithful to the Lord’. You can find prayer resources at:

Open Doors [www.opendoorsuk.org.uk](http://www.opendoorsuk.org.uk)

Christian Solidarity Worldwide [www.csw.org.uk](http://www.csw.org.uk)

The Barnabas Fund [www.barnabasfund.org](http://www.barnabasfund.org)

*“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose” – Jim Elliott, Martyr*

*“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”*

Mark 8:34-35