

Happy are the Harassed, Part 2

Scripture: Matthew 5:10–12

Code: 2206

INTRODUCTION

As we have learned, the Greek word translated "blessed" in the Beatitudes means "happy." In Christ's first recorded sermon the first thing He said was that He wanted people to be happy. He didn't come into the world to make people miserable.

A. The World's Definition of Happiness

In February 1978 Cosmopolitan magazine presented a quiz to determine how happy people are (Robert Harrington, "How Happy Are You?": 124-26). The author concluded that happy people enjoy other people but are not self-sacrificing, they refuse to participate in negative feelings or emotions, and they have a sense of accomplishment based on their own self-sufficiency. But that sounds like the perfect description of a Pharisee!

B. The Lord's Definition of Happiness

1. It's opposed to the world

That definition of happiness does not accord with Jesus' definition. He said that a truly happy person is not self-sufficient but a spiritually cowering beggar who realizes he has no resources in himself. A happy person is meek rather than proud. He's not positive about himself—he mourns over sin and his isolation from a holy God. Contrary to what the world says, our Lord affirmed that a happy person is self-sacrificing. He's merciful, and willing to endure persecution to make peace between God and man.

Today people are pursuing happiness on their own terms so when they run into Christians, conflict inevitably results. They experience conviction for sin and that causes resentment and persecution.

2. It's opposed by the world

Matthew 5:10-12 says, "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad; for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you." Those who desire true happiness must seek it on Jesus' terms as presented in the Sermon on the Mount: they must go through a narrow gate onto a narrow way (Matt. 7:13-14), build their house on a rock (Matt. 7:24-27), and desire to be known by the Lord on Judgment Day (Matt. 7:21-23). Such people confront a hostile and godless world with the righteousness of Christ, receiving the world's hostility in return.

Savonarola: Burning Beacon of the Reformation

During the fifteenth century a man named Savonarola lived in the city of Florence. He was one of the greatest reformers and preachers the world has ever known. His denunciation of sin and the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church of His time helped prepare the way for the Reformation. It

was said that the people who listened to him went about the streets half-dazed, bewildered, and speechless. His congregations were so often in tears that the whole building resounded with their sobs. Many people didn't like the way Savonarola preached and he was eventually burned at the stake. I believe that if Christians today were more confrontive with the truth and really lived the Beatitudes to their utmost, they would find the world much more hostile to them.

REVIEW

I. THE PERSECUTION FROM THE WORLD

A. Who Will Be Persecuted?

Godliness generates antagonism. That doesn't mean we should strive to make enemies, but we shouldn't be surprised when we do. Philippians 1:29 says, "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him but also to suffer for his sake." Paul said to the Thessalonians, "No man should be moved by these afflictions; for ye yourselves know that we are appointed to these things" (1 Thess. 3:3). Persecution shouldn't cause shock or doubt in a Christian.

Second Timothy 3:12 says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." We are called to persecution. A godless, angry, sinful world will react when confronted righteousness.

B. How Will They Suffer?

1. The kinds of persecution

a) People will harass them.

I believe America is on the threshold of an era that will be different from what it has experienced in the past. We have been coasting on the aftereffects of great revivals of the past. Those benefits are rapidly coming to an end. Government is acting against religion and religion is self-destructing through the proliferation of cults. The IRS and other agencies are instituting policies that adversely impact Christian ministries. Rights that were once unquestioned are now openly attacked.

b) People will insult them.

c) People will say evil things about them.

Matthew 5:11 says people will "say all manner of evil against you falsely." Believers will be slandered, both behind their backs and openly.

LESSON

2. The extent of persecution

a) Death

Paul painted a vivid picture of the extent persecution can go to when he said, "I think that God hath set forth us, the apostles, last, as it were appointed to death; for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men" (1 Cor. 4:9). God appointed the apostles to death.

When a Roman general won a great victory he was given the privilege of parading his victorious army through the streets of Rome. The soldiers carried with them the spoils of war. That allowed the general to demonstrate to everyone the tremendous triumph he had achieved. At the end of the long procession came a small group of captives. They were tokens of the conquered people, doomed to

die in the arena.

First Corinthians 4:9 in James Moffatt's A New Translation reads, "God means us apostles to come in at the very end, like the doomed gladiators in the arena!" The Greek term translated "appointed to death" was a rare term referring to sentenced criminals paraded as objects of mockery as they were marched to their execution. Thus Paul likened the apostles to a group of captives appointed to death while people watched and mocked.

b) Deprivation

In verse 10 Paul says, "We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honorable, but we are despised." Paul was sarcastically referring to the Corinthians' pride. In contrast to their faulty view of Christian life, Paul said of the apostles, "Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place; and labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure it" (vv. 11-12). Paul knew what Christians are called to. We're not called to ride white chargers into town as sanctified celebrities. Rather we're to endure persecution.

In verse 13 Paul says, "Being defamed, we entreat; we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day." The Greek word translated "filth" refers to any dirt that needs to be eliminated. The Greek word translated "offscouring" refers to refuse that needs to be scrubbed off something else. That's how Paul said the apostles viewed themselves! They had a realistic view of how the world appraised them. They had counted the cost of following Christ and were willing to make the sacrifice.

What Credentials Do You Boast In?

1. Those of the World?

Many in the church do not view Christianity in the same light Paul did. Few in the United States of America would say that Christians are the filth and offscouring of society. Too often we think we are the stars! People who call themselves Christians get the biggest lights in Las Vegas and have their own television shows. Too often those who identify with the name of Christ live in two worlds: they dance in Las Vegas, then change their clothes and give their testimonies in church. Many famous people today say they are Christians--including congressmen, athletes, actors, and singers. I'm thankful for those who are true believers but I sometimes wonder whether many who say they are Christians know what it really means to be a Christian. They waltz with the world instead of confronting it. Christianity has become the religion of the elite, the acceptable, and the rich. But Paul wasn't like that!

I often get letters that asking if I would like to have a particular famous person visit Grace Community Church. The letters state a fee and include long lists of credentials with pictures of the person shaking hands with all kinds of people.

Paul didn't say, "I graduated from the University of Gamaliel magna cum laude. I speak many languages (1 Cor. 14:18) and am a personal friend of several kings and famous men. I died once and ascended into the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:1-4)." He had an incredible testimony and could have kept people listening to him for hours. But that's not the way he was.

2. Those of Christ?

We see Paul's list of credentials in 2 Corinthians 11:23- 27: "Are [others] ministers of Christ?... I am more; in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes, save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in

cold and nakedness."

Then he said, "Of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth. But now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me" (2 Cor. 12:5-6). Paul didn't want people to get the impression that he gloried in himself. He continued, "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me" (vv. 7-8). Paul may have had an eye problem that made ministry difficult for him. Whatever that "thorn" was, it was something undesirable. But instead of taking it away God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in [human] weakness" (v. 9). Paul responded, "Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong" (vv. 9-10).

Those who act in the power of their own credentials are not acting in God's power. When a person tries to do God's work in his own power--with press clippings and good public relations--he is operating on the wrong principles. Paul gloried in things the world considers shameful--persecution, reproach, weakness, and need. He gloried in whatever humbled him because he knew that would make him depend on God, who would then get all the credit. He knew that when he was most aware of his own lack of resources God would then use him to confront the world.

We live in a day when Christianity is uniquely engaged in self-glorification. That's repulsive to God. We manufacture celebrities faster than the world can. That's not the way it's supposed to be. Our Lord said, "Ye shall be witnesses [Gk., marturas, "martyrs"] unto me" (Acts 1:8). There is a price to pay.

C. Why Will They Be Persecuted?

Why does the world persecute Christians? We are actually the nicest people in the world--God Himself lives in us! He gives us His righteousness and takes away our inclination toward evil.

Matthew 5:10 says that those who follow Christ will suffer "for righteousness' sake," and verse 11 says they will suffer for Christ's sake.

1. The world rejects Christ (see pp. xx-xx)
2. The world rejects Christ's standard (see pp. xx-xx)
3. The world loves darkness

When we confront a sinful world that loves darkness rather than light, it is going to react. Our world wants Him dead and buried--that's the way it's always been. Jesus said, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love its own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also" (John 15:18-20). Those who love Christ love Christians; those who hate Him hate those who follow Him.

Jesus then said, "All these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me. If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but now they have no cloak for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no other man did, they had not had sin; but now have they both seen and hated both

me and my Father" (vv. 21-24).

When Jesus came into the world He confronted people with the reality of their sin. If Christ hadn't come they could have continued to gloss over it. The Judaism of Jesus' time allowed people to do a great job of salving their consciences and ignoring the truth. They were blissfully marching toward hell. Christ ripped off their blinders and forced people to see themselves as they truly were. They became aware of their sin and many hated Him for it.

Psalm 35:19 says people would hate Christ without a cause. That same is true of Christians. There's nothing wrong with us--people don't hate us personally but resent the righteousness of Christ in us. By acting like salt in the world wounded by sin (Matt. 5:13) we will get a reaction: salt in a wound stings!

Responding to the Inevitable

It's tempting to think that since society is going to reject us, we ought to build a cloister and study the Scriptures in peace. But that's not the right response. Christ said, "When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me; and ye also shall bear witness" (John 15:26-27). We need to boldly confront the world--not steal away into the night to study the Bible until the rapture.

Christ said to His disciples, "They shall put you out of the synagogues; yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me" (John 16:2-3). The world isn't willing to accept Christ's standard of righteousness so it won't tolerate those who confront sin. But that doesn't allow us to turn our backs on the world. Even though we will be persecuted (Matt. 5:10-12), verses 13-14 make it plain we're to stay and confront society: "Ye are the salt of the earth ... [and] the light of the world." We're to let our light shine before men (vv. 15-16), even though we will pay a price for doing so.

Paul said, "[I] now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh" (Col. 1:24). He knew that every time someone beat him up, that person was really going after Christ. The world is still trying to kill Christ. Because it can't get to Him it goes after whomever stands in His place. Just as the world pounded nails into Christ's hands because they hated His message, it continues to drive nails into the lives of believers who confront it with His message.

I don't believe in starting wars and making enemies everywhere. However I do believe in speaking the truth--whenever, wherever, and to whomever it ought to be said--and not worrying about the consequences. The apostle Paul said it was his great desire to know Christ and the fellowship of His sufferings (Phil. 3:10). Matthew 10:22 and 24:9 affirm that Christians will be hated for Christ's sake.

D. When Will They Be Persecuted?

Matthew 5:11 begins, "Blessed are ye, when." The Greek word translated "when" (*hotan*) means "whenever." Jesus did not mean that Christians are blessed because they were going to be continually persecuted. He meant that whenever Christians are persecuted they are blessed. Believers weren't unceasingly persecuted in either Paul's or Christ's time. There were times when Christ Himself enjoyed the respite of fellowship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; retreated to the Mount of Olives; or relaxed with the twelve in Galilee.

Persecution won't be incessant. But when it does occur God brings His blessedness to the willing soul. He always makes suffering for His sake bearable. We aren't to seek persecution, yet we're also not to run from it. And when in the midst of it we are not to compromise.

II. THE PROMISE TO THE BELIEVER

Matthew 5:10-11 contains a promise for the persecuted: "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Whatever we forfeit in this world for righteousness' sake will be compensated for many times over in God's kingdom (Matt. 19:29). God promises that the physical rewards we give up now will be infinitely compensated by eternal rewards.

"Blessed" appears twice in Matthew 5:10-11. Those who willingly stand up for Jesus Christ now will know the bliss of obedience and the blessedness of being a part of God's eternal kingdom.

A. The Example of Joseph

Joseph was persecuted by his brothers because they couldn't stand his righteous character. He was hated and imprisoned in a dry well in the desert (Gen. 37:24). Through God's providence he eventually became the prime minister of Egypt (Gen. 41:39-44). All it took for Joseph to become that was a little patience.

B. The Example of Jeremiah

Jeremiah was thrown into a filthy cistern because of his righteous life (Jer. 38:6). But God lifted him up and honored him.

If you are willing to pay the price now, you will be rewarded with incomparable glory in the future. Those who are persecuted are doubly blessed--theirs is the kingdom and all that is in it.

When Christ promised the kingdom to believers I think He was talking about all aspects of it: the present dwelling of the King within us, giving us the fullness of kingdom life spiritually; the future millennium in which physical fulfillment of the kingdom will take place on a renewed earth; and eternity itself, when we will be face-to-face with the Son of God in glory forever. Those realities belong to the believer in compensation for the present struggles we endure. It is incredibly shortsighted to protect ourselves now rather than sacrificing the present to God and securing forever an eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17).

The Promise Behind the Beatitudes

The kingdom is the gift of the Beatitudes. The first Beatitude begins with the promise, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The last ends with the same promise. Thus the promise of the Beatitudes is that Christians are kingdom citizens now and forever. The features in between the first and last Beatitudes are elements of kingdom life. No matter what the world does, it can never affect a Christian's possession of Christ's kingdom.

III. THE ATTITUDE OF THE BELIEVER

In Matthew 5:12 our Lord says, "Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad; for great is your reward in heaven." The Greek word translated "rejoice" (*chairō*) means "to be really glad." More than that, we're to "be exceedingly glad." The Greek word translated "exceedingly glad" (*agalliasθαι*) means "to jump, skip, and shout for joy." We are to be happy when faced with persecution.

A. Joy in Receiving Future Rewards

Heaven will last forever, while our present circumstances last only a very short time. James 4:14 says that life itself "is even a vapor that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." Our remaining time on earth becomes increasingly shorter. Does that affect how you spend your time, energy, and money? It should. Jesus said, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal" (Matt. 6:20). Earthly treasures acquired now will all too soon be gone.

The Greek word translated "great" in Matthew 5:12 means "abundant." That's how it's used in Ephesians 2:4. Some people think it's crass to look forward to future rewards. They say we're supposed to serve the Lord out of love, not for rewards. But it's God who promises reward--and "great" reward at that! If we serve God out of love and He chooses to reward us, that's His prerogative and we ought to look forward to the fulfillment of His promises. When we get to heaven we won't accept God's rewards with pride; we'll give them back to Him in humility. There won't be any proud people in heaven. The Lord doesn't give us our rewards now because we wouldn't be able to handle them properly, but in heaven we will be able to.

Paul said, "There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8). Paul longed to see the day of reward and receive his crown.

B. Joy in Sharing the Fate of the Prophets

Jesus said to rejoice when facing persecution because God's prophets were also persecuted (Matt. 5:12). We're not to be happy because the prophets suffered, but because we are in such great company! Receiving the same treatment God's prophets did shows we belong to God.

1. Matthew 21:33-39--Here Christ taught a parable about a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a winepress, built a tower, leased everything to tenant farmers, and went into a far country. When it was time for him to obtain fruit from his vineyard he sent his servants to the tenant farmers. The farmers beat one servant, killed one, and stoned another. That parable illustrates the persecution of God's prophets.
2. Matthew 23:31--Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Ye are witnesses against yourselves, that ye are the sons of them who killed the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" He meant that if they killed Him they would be doing the same thing.
3. Hebrews 11:32-40--This passage lists people who suffered for righteousness' sake in different ways. Verse 38 says the world was not worthy of them.
Christ not only offered salvation in the Beatitudes, but also told people how they could be certain they had received it. Your security in Christ doesn't come from knowing you made a decision to accept Christ some time in the past; it comes from living for righteousness' sake in the midst of an ungodly world. When you are persecuted for living such a life, you know you will be rewarded in heaven and that you stand with God's prophets, who received the same reaction. In Luke 21:12-13 Christ says that unbelievers "shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake. And it shall turn to you for a testimony." When you are persecuted for Christ's sake, it is a testimony that

you belong to God.

Conclusion

Unbelievers can't understand the Beatitudes. Poverty of spirit is the opposite of the pride of an unbelieving heart. A world indifferent to sin can't appreciate the contrite person who mourns over his sin. The proud and resentful spirit of the world regards as contemptible the meek person who accepts wrong and doesn't strike back. A hunger for righteousness is a rebuke to the lust of the flesh, just as a merciful spirit rebukes the hardness of our world. Purity of heart contrasts sharply with hypocrisy and corruption. And our antagonistic society has little room for biblical peacemakers. No wonder persecution is inevitable for the true Christian.

This was the worthy eulogy given to John Knox, sixteenth-century Scottish reformer: "Here lieth a man who never feared the face of man" (Isaac Crook, John Knox: The Reformer [Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1906], p. 150). What about you? What are your priorities? What rings true about you in your mind and heart? Are the Beatitudes a reality in your life?

Focusing on the Facts

1. Compare a worldly definition of happiness with the Lord's definition.
2. What did Paul liken the apostles to in 1 Corinthians? Explain (1 Cor. 4:9).
3. Based on 1 Corinthians 4:10-12, how did the world (and the Corinthians) view Paul and his helpers? Does Paul's description of the suffering of the apostles apply to Christians today? Why or why not?
4. What kind of credentials did Paul think were important for a Christian (2 Cor. 11:23-27)?
5. What did God say when Paul desired to be freed of a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-9)? How did Paul's respond?
6. Those who act in the power of their own _____ are not acting in God's _____.
7. Why do Christians suffer?
8. How did people respond when Christ confronted them with the reality of sin?
9. What did Paul say in Colossians 1:24? Does the world still resent those who stand in Christ's place?
10. Does Matthew 5:11 mean that Christians will be persecuted unceasingly? Explain.

11. What promise is made to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake?
12. List the aspects of Christ's kingdom given to believers.
13. What should be the attitude of the believer in the face of persecution? Why?

Pondering the Principles

1. There are many Christians who say, "I have been persecuted for my faith" without really understanding what it means to be persecuted for Christ. For what reason should a believer be persecuted, according to Matthew 5:10? In 1 Peter 4:14, what does Peter say is a legitimate reason for being persecuted? What does verse 15 say we are not to be persecuted for? Suppose a Christian is arrogant and obnoxious when he witnesses for Christ, and people respond to him negatively. Would such a response be considered persecution? When we receive a negative response from unbelievers, we need to ask ourselves this: Did that response come as a result of righteous living or was I being unnecessarily offensive? Take some time now to examine the cause of any persecution that you have received in the past, and meditate on 1 Peter 3:15-17. Commit yourself to making sure that any future persecution comes as a result of living a Christlike life.

2. J.C. Ryle wrote, "The true Christian studies to please [Christ], by being holy both in body and spirit. Show him anything in his daily practice that Christ hates, and he will give it up. Show him anything Christ delights in, and he will follow after it. He does not murmur at Christ's requirements as being too strict and severe, as the children of the world do. To him Christ's commandments are not grievous, and Christ's burden is light. And why is all this? Simply because he loves Him" (Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots [Welwyn, England: Evangelical Press, 1979], p. 241). Each Beatitude is an aspect of a question Christ asked nearly 2,000 years ago: "Do you love Me?" (John 21:17, NASB). Examine yourself in light of the Beatitudes. Do you love Him?

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