

PROFILE IN DISCIPLESHIP

VI. "Living with Freedom and Confidence"

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Mtt. 5:10-12

TEXT: *Blessed are the those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* (5:10)

INTRODUCTION

A columnist for the *San Diego Union* described a debate that took place 140 years ago on the floor of the U.S. Senate. The issue was whether the sale of liquor should be legal in certain territories that were seeking statehood. One notoriously anti-alcohol senator— who, according to one description, “was so dry, he was a known fire hazard”— challenged a colleague to stand and state his position. The uncommitted senator rose and replied:

“You’ve asked me how I feel about whiskey. Well, here’s how I stand on the question.

“If when you say whiskey, you mean that devil’s brew, the poison spirit, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home and creates misery and poverty— yes, literally takes bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean the evil drink that topples the Christian man from the pinnacle of righteousness and gracious living and causes him to descend to the pit of degradation, despair, shame and helplessness, then I am certainly against it with all my heart.

“But if when you say whiskey, you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their heart and laughter on their lips, the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean Christmas cheer; if you mean the stimulating drink that puts the spring in an old man’s footsteps on a frosty morning; if you mean the drink whose sale puts untold millions of dollars into our Treasury which are used to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind or deaf or dumb, our pitifully aged and infirm, to build highways and hospitals and schools, then I am certainly in favor of it.

“This is my stand, and I will not compromise!”

How strong is our stand for Christ in the face of opposition? Do we ever try to play both sides, careful not to offend anyone? We tell ourselves we are just being tactful, not wanting others to fill ill-at-ease in our presence. But we are careful to speak words that will bring us acceptance, not rejection. Do you ever retreat into cowardly silence when there is a chance to respond to viewpoints that are being promoted that are clearly against what you believe as a Christian? By your silence, could some conclude you are going along with that thinking? As someone put it, "Sometimes silence is not golden, it is just plain yellow!"

Our final beatitude this morning is here to put some steel in our backbones.

*Blessed are the those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* (5:10)

This is shocking enough, but Jesus continues on, elaborating, making this the longest of any of the beatitudes with:

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 were before you. (Matt 5:11-12)

PERSECUTED!

We can be thankful that we don't face overt, physical persecution in this nation. But we must remember that is not the case for hundreds of millions of Christians. The case of Abdul Rahman, the Christian in Afghanistan who was facing execution for converting from Islam to Christianity, has been a forceful reminder in the last couple of weeks. Under pressure from the Western world, he has been released and has been given asylum in Italy. If he stayed in Afghanistan, his murder was a certainty because of Islamic law saying converts must die. Yet, serious persecution of believers continues in many, many nations. More Christians have been martyred for their faith in the 20th century than in the previous 19 centuries combined. That amounts to 45 million, or two-thirds of all Christian martyrs. An average of 160,000 Christians have been killed every year since 1990 in places like Algeria, Nigeria, Sudan, and Pakistan. In North Korea, there are an estimated 100,000 Christians in concentration camps. We certainly need to pray for all those suffering for their faith.

However, we are not immune from persecution. For most of us, persecution is more subtle, which has its own danger. Peer pressure can be formidable. Intimidation from our society can push us into accommodations we should not make. We can be coerced into not making waves and being only moderately Christian— a Christianity that is culturally acceptable and inoffensive. Persecution may come in the form of being ostracized from a group we want to be a part of, a loss of some friendships, or missing a chance to move up in business because of a stand taken for Christ. I've seen it in unequally yoked families where a spouse who isn't a Christian stands in opposition to the Christian spouse's practice of the faith— doing everything possible to discourage them. And, even within the church, I've known of people who are serious in their following of Christ, but their devotion puts them out-of-step with the lukewarm status quo in that church. That can make others feel threatened— so much so that the on-fire Christian can end up feeling belittled or rejected for their commitment.

A pastor I know was pastor of a large, prosperous congregation in Florida. He'd brought a new class of about twenty prospective members before the session to be received into the church— most of whom were new converts. However there were a few more “down-and-outers” among these converts than the elders were comfortable with. At the next session meeting he was informed, “We appreciate that you're bringing new people into the church, pastor. But, these are not the type of people we need to pay the bills. We'd like you to focus more on the upperclass people, the professional people, the movers and shakers, to be in step with what our church is about.” His immediate response was, “If that's the way you feel, you don't want me as your pastor. I'm informing you right now that I'm resigning. The clerk of session will have my formal letter on Monday.” He had no other church to go to. He was out of a job with a family that included teenagers. But he would not be squeezed into their worldly view of a church. I admire

that courage and conviction. Several months later, he did receive a call to another church— which, incidentally, is the church we left in Ohio to come here.

I'm convinced that one of the great problems we face as Christians is that we are bound by fear and timidity in our living for Christ and giving witness to that life. We fear rejection. We fear being labeled with what Christian Philosopher Peter Kreeft calls our societies two F-words for Christians: fanatic or fundamentalist. He notes that "fundamentalist" is usually spoken with a sneer. And, I'm sure you've noticed that tolerance is practiced and extolled by our society toward everyone and everything except Christians. Those labels, and that rejection certainly can have an intimidating effect. Novelist Flannery O'Connor wrote, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd." And, another writer, T.S. Eliot put it, "In a world of fugitives the person taking the opposite direction will appear to run away."

Do you ever change your practice or mute your beliefs to fit in with others? When you are the host, do you not say grace over the meal because someone there might not "approve?" If you have guests in your home, do you ignore the call to worship because they might not want to attend— in fact you say nothing about church? How often do we let the world and non-Christians set our agendas and priorities? Do you ever end up sitting through filth in a movie when you *really should* walk out— but you're afraid of what others might think? Do you laugh at jokes you shouldn't just because everyone else is laughing?

Of course, in all these situations we are called to use tact and be gracious. This doesn't have to be an "in-you-face" approach— that is generally not Christ's approach. But, on the other hand, we need to be bold enough to take appropriate actions— gently, humbly, and lovingly— when called for. At times, that may be simply walking away. Let the Holy Spirit guide you and give you courage. But, we do not want to shrink-back from doing what is right just because of fear. Paul reminds us in 2 Tim 3:12, *In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted....*

Also, note that this persecution is to be "because of righteousness." Remember, "righteousness," as we noted in the fourth beatitude is to be understood as being like Jesus, who is the Son of Righteousness. This is not self-righteousness. It is being like Jesus in attitude, character, and action. Sometimes, Christians are rejected for being pushy, obnoxious, inconsiderate, condemning others, and a host of other unkind behavior. If you are facing some kind of persecution, be sure it is for the right reasons and that your attitude is like Jesus'.

PALM SUNDAY

When I planned this series of sermons on the beatitudes, I found it a happy coincidence that this one fell on Palm Sunday. While persecution is not one of the themes we think of for Palm Sunday, it really fits quite well. And, on this day, Jesus shows us how to live with freedom and confidence in the shadow of persecution. This is the beginning of that final week which culminates in the ultimate statement on persecution, the cross. But Jesus enters the week knowing full well what awaits him. Just a few days before this Sunday, we read in Luke 18:31-33,

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will

be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again."

In light of this knowledge, Jesus does not flinch. He marches straight forward, doing the will of His Father. He is not focused upon preserving His life— saving himself. He demonstrates a wide-open living to fulfill God's purposes. He has already stared fear in the face and decided to march on, trusting in God. The praise and worship on this day as Jesus enters Jerusalem is part of God's provision to strengthen Jesus and His followers. The open praise and declaration of who Jesus is in the teeth of the sinister plots of the religious leaders is spiritual energizing to Jesus and His followers.

I hope you too know the power of this. There is nothing like vocal, uninhibited praise and declaration of God's glory to give us backbone in light of opposition. After such a time in the presence of the worshiping community, we can walk out into the intimidating, bullying world, (to use David's phrase) "bold and stouthearted" (Ps. 138:3).

Now, let's consider how persecution is part of this particular blessedness, this happiness.

THE PROMISES

First of all, Jesus promises, *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. Now remember, this is not referring to just heaven when we die. "The kingdom of heaven" and "the kingdom of God" are used essentially the same in the Gospels— "the kingdom of heaven" being Matthew's signature phrase where the other Gospels use "the kingdom of God" in the same way. Jesus is referring to a life we enter into right now. Note how these eight beatitudes are bracketed by the promise of the kingdom of heaven. The first one,

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

Now Jesus ends with,

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

In between there are lots of other promises. But "the kingdom of heaven" is an assurance of belonging to Jesus, being under His rule and protection. That begins right now when we receive Jesus into our lives and continues on into eternity. We enter into the life with Jesus in our need, *the poor in spirit*, or as The Message puts it, *when we're at the end of our rope*. We continue in that life with courage, facing persecution.

As Jesus sends out his disciples to proclaim His message, he warns in Matt 10:32-33,

"Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

Luke, out of the same context paints a slightly different but compelling image,

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. (9:26)

Once we make that choice to live fully for God, no matter the consequences, we enter into a wonderful freedom and confidence. Those early Christians met the world with almost a reckless

abandon. They were stoned, imprisoned, hauled before courts, and killed. But their witness was only intensified by the opposition.

Peter Cartwright, a 19th century circuit-riding Methodist preacher knew this kind of freedom. One Sunday morning, when he was to preach, he was told that President Andrew Jackson was in the congregation, and was warned not to say anything out of line. When Cartwright stood to preach, he said, “I understand that Andrew Jackson is here. I have been requested to be guarded in my remarks. Andrew Jackson will go to hell if he doesn’t repent.” You can imagine the shock of the congregation. After the service, President Jackson shook hands with Peter Cartwright and said, “Sir, if I had a regiment of men like you, I could whip the world.”

I’m not sure that Andrew Jackson got the point, but he certainly recognized uncompromising courage when he saw it. And, while Peter Cartwright was rough, colorful and unconventional in his approach, to say the least, don’t you detect a blessed happiness and joy in his freedom–unbending before any human pressure? He had it clear who he was and who God is and the One whom he served.

But, there’s more. Jesus goes on to promise a heavenly reward for all the suffering and persecution we might face.

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 were before you. (Matt 5:11-12)

Ray Stedman tells the story of an old missionary couple who spent their life working in Africa and were now returning to New York City to retire. They had no pension, their health was broken, they were discouraged and fearful of the future. They happened to be booked on the same ship as President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from a big-game hunting expedition. Crowds were there trying to get a glimpse of the President, a band was playing, the mayor and other dignitaries were there along with reporters to welcome the President home. There was no one there to welcome this missionary couple. They slipped off the ship unnoticed.

Well, even the most faithful servants of God can have a bout of self-pity. That night, in a cheap flat they found on the East Side, the man’s spirit broke, and he said to his wife, “This just doesn’t seem fair.” His wife suggested he take it to the Lord in prayer. A short time later, he emerged from a time of prayer in their bedroom with his faith completely changed. His wife asked, “What happened, Dear?”

He said, “The Lord settled it with me. I told Him how bitter I was that the President should receive such a tremendous homecoming and no one met us when we returned home. And when I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put His hand on my shoulder and simply said, ‘But you’re not home yet.’”