

From Peacemaking to Persecution!

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[0 : 0 0] So, for the last time just now, we're going to read through the whole Beatitudes. And I hope that as we do so, you'll kind of quickly, if you've been here, remember one or two of the things that have been said over the last number of weeks.

Matthew 5, seeing the crowds, he went up onto the mountain and when he had sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

[1 : 0 9] Rejoice and be glad. For your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before them. And so tonight we're going to look at the last of these, or we're going to come to the last of these, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

I wondered if you went out onto the streets this evening, or today, and asked people, what does a beautiful life look like for you?

I wonder what kind of answers we would get, maybe particularly challenging today, to go out and ask that question when people are surrounded by filthy streets and the health hazard of all the ugliness of these overflowing bins.

But generally what would the average Joe say if they were asked that question? I mean, you would have as many answers as I have. What would your colleagues and friends say?

You know, what does a beautiful life look like for you? I suspect they would say things like being healthy, being loved, the ability to love and to be loved by others, to be significant, you know, either in the workplace or in the achievements that you are able to do in life, to be wealthy, or at least to have enough money to be comfortable in order to rest, to provide for yourself and those around you, and to do the kind of things you want to do, the bucket list, maybe, to be popular or to be at peace, to live a life that benefits other people.

[2 : 5 5] You would get a lot of different answers to what a beautiful life would look like for most people. And it's a good question to ask, I think, for people, and it's a good question for us to consider.

I imagine very few people would actually involve or mention God in that particular conversation. Most people wouldn't think about including God in what a beautiful life would look like.

And yet interestingly, the kind of things that most people say would make up a beautiful life have the seed of truth in them and reminds us that every one of us have these longings that reflect the fact that we are image bearers of God and that we are looking, and maybe I think we saw this recently in one of the sermons from the morning, that sometimes we are looking for the right things in the wrong places.

And many people will be looking for the beautiful life without going to the source of where the beautiful life comes from, and that is God Himself.

And so I guess from that the question will often, maybe a supplementary question that we could ask is that what do you do when you can't achieve your beautiful life?

[4 : 15] Or what do you do when the beautiful life doesn't happen or is broken into by events and circumstances that break your dreams and break your hopes when reality comes into our lives because life for most of us is not always beautiful, it is a struggle.

Sometimes it can be very ugly, sometimes that can be of our own making, other times it can be out of our control. And maybe even at best in our lives, we only glimpse beauty and it's a fading beauty, it doesn't last.

So what do people do when they are seeking that beautiful life and it doesn't happen? Well I suspect the vast majority of people shrug their shoulders, well that's life.

That's just what happens. I suspect most people don't think terribly deeply about the reality of broken dreams or about the reality of ugliness and just take it for granted that it's part of life.

But I think we recognize that it's important to seek answers when questions and difficulties and when brokenness and ugliness comes into our lives and as Christians, we've sought answers to the recognition that life isn't all that we dreamed it would become and God's word exposes that for us.

[5 : 50] And so we find and know and understand and appreciate to a greater or lesser degree that only in relationship with Jesus Christ do we find lasting beauty.

Do we find a life that has hope and a future and has great beauty connected with it. God, the author of life, reminds us that the ugliness and the temporary nature of our life exposes where the problem lies.

That humanity has chosen to go its own way apart from God, the author of life, leading to brokenness, ugliness and death.

And it's in God, in Christ, in relationship with Christ that we recognize the exclusive hope of eternal life and the exclusive hope of never ending beauty that is the message of the gospel.

And the beatitudes, it's really the meaning of the word, is that the beatitudes express and display the way of true beauty for followers of Jesus.

[7 : 12] It's not the way to beauty, but it is a reflection of having put our trust in Jesus that He comes to begin to transform our hearts and lives and character so that we are characterised by the beauty that comes from looking at Jesus in faith.

It characterises what we should become more and more like. It marks and it expresses the kind of life that is being changed by the love of Jesus.

Remember we've seen over these last number of weeks, it's one unit. It's not that one person mourns and another person is persecuted. It really is like the fruit of the Spirit.

It's a reminder that to a greater or lesser degree, all of these characteristics, all of these aspects of a beautiful life should mark our lives as believers, as Christians, because it's a reflection of having put our trust in Jesus.

And the beatitudes start and finish with a promise of His kingdom. We are kingdom citizens that we belong to King Jesus, and these are the blessings that begin to be reflected in our lives as we follow Jesus.

[8 : 34] So kind of in summary and looking at all of the, or not looking at all of the Beatitudes, but bearing in mind all of the Beatitudes, just a couple of things that I think it's important to say as we summarise this series.

The first is that when we read these Beatitudes, we are reminded that they're absolutely impossible without Jesus Christ.

This is not a formula of how to live. It's not a tick box exercise, see if I can do this, this and this and this, then I'll become a Christian. It's a recognition always that not only the Beatitudes, but for example the wider context of the Sermon and the Mount, are pointing us to our need for Jesus and the importance of Jesus in our lives.

So the Sermon and the Mount doesn't tell us about Jesus being a great teacher, they tell us about Jesus being a great saviour. And that's very important because a lot of people take the Sermon and the Mount as the ethics by which to live without coming to Christ as the saviour.

But we can't live, it's impossible to live the Beatitudes without coming to the one who gifts them to us. It's impossible without Christ.

[9 : 52] I think the second thing that we might notice from the Beatitudes is that they're not really a best seller. They're not really populist, are they?

If this is an advert for Christianity, it's a marketing disaster, isn't it? It's not going to entice people to come to Jesus Christ, really, is it?

I wonder if they characterize the kind of things we would ever say to people when we're talking to them about our faith. It's a market, it's not a best seller.

Don't think you're a great person before God. Don't try and justify yourself before God. Admit your failure to love and serve Him with deep sorrow. Don't pamper yourself by denying the truth and hurting other people.

Be passionate for holiness, hungry to be like Jesus. Be forgiving and filled with a gracious attitude to other people. Can't be a hypocrite and too faced before God and other people.

[10 : 53] But let Him make your heart pure. Work at making peace when there is tension, strife and sin. Don't jump headlong into it gleefully.

Don't stir up trouble and accept that you'll be ridiculed, rejected and opposed. I'm going to come back to that last one because that's the one we're looking at.

But it's really, it's a marketing disaster, isn't it? And yet, it's also a life of infinite love and hope that is spoken of here.

The blessing, the favour, the fatherhood of God in our lives. The happiness that comes from the heart outward and expresses itself in our lives.

The divine smile of God coming from His sacrificial love for us. Great life's battles, difficulties, letdowns and sadness.

[11 : 54] His shalom, His great peace and eternal life. Great blessings, infinite love and hope.

So let's go back to the last one just for a few minutes this evening. How can persecution, how can opposition, how can abuse be part of the world?

The beautiful life, surely not. That can't possibly be. How is it that we can include blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, theirs is the kingdom of heaven?

And if you'll notice, this is the only beatitude that kind of breaks into two and moves from the third person to the first person. So blessed are those, blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

How can persecution be part of this beautiful life in Jesus Christ? One of two things to say. First is it's the price, isn't it? It's the price of loyal love to Jesus Christ.

[13 : 01] When we come to Jesus Christ and recognize His sacrificial death for us in the cross, the curse is taken from us. The judgment of God is taken from us, but not the cross.

And interestingly, the reminder is we're persecuted and He says it's because of me, because of me. And that's tremendously important to remember and recognize that it's in Christ's name, it's because of our relationship with Jesus Christ and it can't be any other way.

Jesus says in Luke 6, 26, beware when all men say good things about you. And everyone says good things about you. Beware of that because that is not the way of the kingdom.

If we are being true to Jesus Christ, if we recognize His Lordship in our lives, then there will always come a point where we are standing up for His truth, for His righteousness, for His sake as part of the kingdom.

And that standing up for His truth may well be the Rubicon over which we begin to recognize and face opposition.

[14 : 21] The temptation will always be at that point to deny Him, to be so afraid that we reject His Lordship and we deny His truth and deny our relationship with Him.

Or we change the truth to make it acceptable to everyone around us so that we might be accepted. But there will always come a point in our relationship with others and in our Christian lives when we will be opposed and persecuted for Jesus' sake, if we remain faithful to Him because it's the price of loyal love.

And He said, as they persecuted me, so they will persecute you. It's just the reality. We'll say a little bit more about what that means in a minute. But can I say, it's not persecution on account of being a fool, okay?

It's not persecution on account of being an idiot. It's not saying that you'll be persecuted because you're an obnoxious, arrogant clown in the way.

A little bit what Cody was talking about this morning about, you know, speaking the truth without love is evil. It's about speaking the truth in love.

[15 : 37] It's that dovetailing of the two together. So it doesn't give any excuse for us being clowns, being abrasive or abusive or aggressive or unhelpfully argumentative or just a belter, which sometimes we are as Christians in the name of Christ, or not in the name of Christ, but just in a proud and arrogant way.

See, the recognition here is that people are accusing us falsely on Jesus' account. It's not that they're looking at your life and saying things that are true and saying that the way you're acting is good.

They're having to accuse you falsely because of the manner and the demeanour and the reality of your Christian life is something that they can't argue against.

It's not about being persecuted on account of being a fool. In other words, we're never... And I think sometimes this passage and other passages have been taken as a reason to look for persecution.

You're kind of going around looking for persecution, looking for people to oppose you, as if somehow that makes your standing greater as a Christian. It's not speaking about that at all.

[17 : 04] It's not about having a martyr mentality in any way. Think of Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Please Lord, take this cup from me. If there is any other way, He wasn't looking for martyrdom at that level in a sense.

I know it's uniquely Christ and He was going to the cross. But there was a... in His humanity, there was a... there was a recoiling from all of that. And we will naturally recoil from persecution.

Of course we will. But sometimes there's simply no other way if we are to be faithful and loving to Jesus Christ. But we're not to seek persecution on account of being foolish or arrogant or unloving.

What we recognize here and elsewhere in Scripture that persecution will happen because it exposes humanity's core, doesn't it?

It exposes the fact that humanity and all of us naturally suppress the knowledge of God because God challenges our hearts and challenges who we are.

[18:16] In Romans 118 it says, you know, that people, everyone suppresses the knowledge of God in unrighteousness. And so there will always be opposition when we present God through Christ by our lives and by saying that we are Christians.

Because Christ claims and challenges our claims to independence. And so when others are confronted by our Christianity and maybe see God or hear about God through us, then they want to put us to flight.

Because that's exactly what the word here, persecution actually means. It means that people are put to flight. We want them to run it. We want to get rid... Run them out of town.

You know, like they try to run Jesus to the edge of the cliff and get rid of Him. And that story when He was in His hometown, they pursue and get rid of Him.

And that is a reality you and I have probably faced in our lives at different times. People will want to just push us out of the conversation, talk about anything else, deal with anything else and expose and revile anyone who stands up for Christ.

[19:39] It exposes humanity's core. And I think it also... Persecution also marks a genuine as opposed to spurious faith.

I think the parable of Saur that we read about speaks about that, doesn't it? In Matthew 14, was it Matthew 14 we read?

I know it wasn't Matthew 14. I've forgotten what chapter it was. But in that passage we see that when the root of the gospel is not deeply embedded in Christ, when it's shallow, when it's not really significant, that when persecution comes, that the faith of that person withers, of course it will, because without true faith we will never cling on to Jesus Christ.

So it's a mark of genuine faith. Now that's a challenging question for each of us. Not only the life we're living and the relationships we have, but also a recognition or a challenge to how we respond when we are opposed and when we are scandalized for our faith.

So it's a price of loyal love. It's not about being persecuted for being a fool. It exposes humanity's core. It marks a genuine, not spurious faith.

[21:10] And it is a given. It's actually a given. You notice when he's speaking he said, blessed are those when you are persecuted, those when others reveal you.

It's not if, it's a when. And it's interesting that Christ, as I said, moves in this stepped beatitude that's kind of split into two. He moves from the third person to the first person.

And at the end of the beatitude, it kind of sums up the whole beatitude to say it's not just a third person characteristic. He's saying it's to every believer.

It's what characterizes you. Blessed are you. Not just blessed are those in some kind of church, somewhere else who are Christians at some time in history.

Is it blessed are those? But blessed are you. You and me as disciples are those who are followers. It's a given. It will happen. It will happen in our lives.

[22 : 13] But interestingly, remember, and go back to that, it's kind of in a sense a last resort because it's put beside blessed are the peacemakers.

I think that's significant and important. We do everything in our power to be peacemakers. We don't look for persecution. It will find us when we're being honest and true to the gospel.

But it will be a given even though we are to be characterized as peacemakers. Those who do everything in our power to avoid opposition. We do nothing that will provoke in a wrong way opposition or persecution.

Foundationally, it will happen. And that is because when we come to Christ, we awaken a spiritual enemy who will do all in his power to destroy our faith, the evil one.

He's been defeated on the cross, and as he thrashes out before complete destruction, he will do all in his power to oppose every single believer who is in Christ, to drift, to turn away from the faith, to avoid persecution and to live lives that deny the truth.

[23 : 26] That is his work. But it's a beatitude. It's a part of everyday life and witness.

We expect opposition while doing all in our power to be peacemakers. Okay, just about done. If persecution wasn't bad enough, let's consider in conclusion the response.

The response to when we're opposed as Christians, when we're persecuted, when we're falsely accused, when we're ridiculed, when we're ostracized.

The response is not retaliation. It's not sulking. It's not the poor me. It's not that self-pity. And it's certainly not masochistic enjoyment.

It's none of these things. But it's a recognition, firstly, that we're blessed. And as in all the beatitudes, we are those who are blessed and who know God's favour through Christ and the happiness that that brings.

[24 : 40] That whatever happens, we're loved. It's the greatest blessing, it's the greatest happiness that the universe offers, because it takes us right through the valley of the shadow of death, into eternity and into what he has for us.

It just reminds us and is a helpful encouragement that there's something greater than not being persecuted. There's something greater than not being liked when we are loved by Christ and by His salvation for us.

So we are blessed, but we're also called to rejoice and be glad. That's crazy, eh?

Rejoice and be glad. For your reward is great in heaven, so they persecute the prophets who are before you. We rejoice and be glad.

Why? Because we stand shoulder to shoulder with believers throughout history, because we recognize it as a mark of authenticity.

[25 : 52] It reminds us that we've been loyal to the truth of Jesus, that we've been tested and that our faith, God is taking our faith and using even the opposition to strengthen our faith, to take out the impurities of our faith like gold that's been tested in the fire.

You know, that whole picture. So that even the bad and the difficult and the troubling times are in the hand of a sovereign God who takes the trouble to use them to mold us and transform us to be more like Him, use it for our good.

So we can rejoice and be glad, not in a kind of in an unhuman or weird way, but in a deep-seated recognition of this mark of authenticity that stood through the ages and is an evidence of the love of God working in us and through us.

So we know God's favour and blessing. We rejoice and be glad. And we remember that the best is still to come, because that's what we're reminded of with the truth of the Kingdom of Heaven, isn't it?

We're part of the Kingdom of Heaven now, as this already belongs, but there's a future hope and the best is still to come. So the trajectory for us, even though we're persecuted and going through difficulty, is a brilliant one because the troubles and battles and difficulties and failings and tears that we experience now are temporary.

[27 : 40] And we know that God's justice has been satisfied in Jesus and what He's done on our behalf, and that we will meet Him not as judged but as Father, and He will be the one who wipes away the tears.

He will be the one who wipes away the tears. The battle will be over, and the evil and unbelief will no longer be the feature of the world in which righteousness will dwell.

So it's paradoxical, it's counter-cultural, it's challenging, but it's the truth of Jesus, and it's where we find blessing, His favour as we come to Him in Christ.

It's impossible without Him. So tonight it's all about Jesus again. It's all about what He's done and what He is doing and what He will do. And if you're not a Christian, I invite you with all my heart to consider Jesus.

These are great Saviour. Amen. Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would bless our thoughts on your word. We thank You, Lord, for the beatitudes.

[28 : 52] We recognise them as offering a manifesto that is impossible and unattractive in many ways unless we see the beauty of Jesus and see the power of His great love and grace and the life that He offers as it exposes our selfishness, our sinfulness, and our pride which keeps us from knowing Him and loving Him and loving others.

So Lord, we pray that we would become people who are triggered to pray more and more through looking at this beautiful life, beatitudinal life that's spoken of here and may we strive by grace to have the Holy Spirit transform our hearts more and more into these remarkable children of the living God.

We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.