

## BUILDING CHARACTER: On Being Persecuted

### A Study of Matthew 5:10-12

Characteristic of Completeness: Eternity

Big Idea: A scar is a score.

Related Scriptures: Daniel 3:24f; John 15:20; Acts 5:41; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 1:20; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 3:3f; 1 Peter 3:13-17; 4:12-16; 1 John 5:19

#### Introduction

1. I've said it before: Jesus messes up this life. Follow Him and you're in for some flack. If you're looking for something that will make your daily life easier on earth, look elsewhere. I'm afraid the way of Jesus isn't going to do it for you.

I know, this is lousy marketing. Apparently, Jesus had no training in sales. No political coaching. No speechwriters. Surely they would have told Jesus not to mention the persecution, the mistreatment, the hurt that can come from following Him. "Accentuate the positive," they'd say. "Downplay the persecution."

But Jesus doesn't downplay the persecution; He features it. And not only does He feature it, He goes further. He says that, when we're persecuted and mistreated and hurt as a direct result of following Him, we ought to be happy about it. That's right. We ought to be happy, fortunate, blessed to be thrown under the bus for Jesus. Because it's good to get creamed for Christ. That's right. *Good.* Jesus says we're better off persecuted.

Hard to believe, but it's right there in black and white, in the Bible. Our text for today is Matthew 5:10-12. I invite you to turn there. Matthew 5:10-12 is a quote from Jesus. He ► says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Rejoice and be glad? Oh boy, I just got ostracized!?! Hooray, I just got harassed!?! What's up with that?

2. This morning, I want to work through ► two important questions we'll need to answer in order to get a grip on what Jesus is saying. The two questions serve as the basic outline of my sermon. First, ► what exactly does it mean to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness? What kind of persecution is Jesus talking about? And ► second, how are we better off by being persecuted? How can persecution actually be a blessing?

I. First ► things first. What does it mean to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness? What sort of mistreatment is in view? What kind of hurt? Let's start with the idea of persecution in general, and then we'll move on to the specific kind of persecution that's identified by the phrase, "for the sake of righteousness."

A. Initially, I want to show you that to be persecuted is to be mistreated in all kinds of ways. It is a broad idea, encompassing pretty much any form of mistreatment—physical and nonphysical.

1. The ► original Greek word for "persecuted" in Verse 10 simply means to be harassed.<sup>1</sup> It is to be mistreated.<sup>2</sup> And there are no apparent boundaries on the word. It's general mistreatment and harassment of any kind.

2. Verse ► 11 provides examples. Persecution includes, but isn't limited to, being insulted and slandered. It says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:11 "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you . . ."

3. And, according to ► Verse 12, the prophets provide examples of what it means to be persecuted. It says . . .

Matthew 5:12 ". . . they persecuted the prophets who were before . . ."

When Jesus voiced these words, Jewish listeners would have mentally scrolled through the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament for a sampling of prophets persecuted.

- a. There's Noah. We can only imagine the ridicule from people of Noah's day as he spent years on end building a monstrous ark.
- b. There's Moses. He was a lightning rod for incessant complaining from his own people.
- c. There's Jeremiah. He was a prophet who spent his life preaching messages that were largely ignored.

---

<sup>1</sup> W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. "διώκω," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. "διώκω" (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).

- d. There's Daniel. He was thrown into a lion's den by a pagan government for praying to God.

There are many more prophets, some of whom were martyred, but from these alone we see that persecution includes all kinds of mistreatment.

- B. But in ► Verse 10, Jesus puts an important qualifier on the persecution in our text. He's talking about persecution that is "for the sake of righteousness." It still includes all kinds of mistreatment, but it narrows to field of persecution to that which comes as a direct result of righteousness. Still many forms, but only one cause: "for the sake of righteousness."

What exactly does this mean? I want to show you that to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness is to be mistreated for living a godly life as Jesus did. It is to be persecuted for following in the footsteps of Jesus. It is to be hurt as a direct result of imitating Christ.

1. The context of Jesus' words confirms this. Back in Matthew ► 5:6, Jesus uses that same word, "righteousness," when He says:

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . ."

When we studied this a few weeks ago, we learned that Matthew most commonly uses the word "righteousness" to describe a right way of living before God.<sup>3</sup> The righteousness of Matthew 5:6 refers primarily to living as Christ lived.

2. And our immediate text confirms that "for the sake of righteousness" refers to living as Christ lived. You see, ► Verses 10 and 11 are parallel. Verse 11 is simply a restatement of Verse 10.

In ► Verse 10, Jesus says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted . . ."

Then in ► Verse 11, Jesus restates the same idea in different words:

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:11 Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you . . .

Back in ► Verse 10, Jesus points to the cause of persecution as being,

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, Matthew 1:19; 3:15; 5:10.

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:10 . . . for the sake of righteousness . . .

Then in ► Verse 11, He restates the same cause of persecution as being,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:11 . . . because of Me.

Therefore, to be persecuted “for the sake of righteousness” is to be persecuted “because of Me”—that is, because of Christ. This confirms that the righteousness in view is the imitation of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> To be persecuted for the sake of righteousness is to be mistreated for living a godly life as Jesus did. It is to be persecuted for following in the footsteps of Jesus. It is to be hurt as a direct result of being Christlike.

3. This is an important qualifier. Not all persecution counts. Just because I am a Christian and just because I happen to be persecuted doesn't necessarily mean that I'm being persecuted for the sake of Christ. You see, being persecuted for acting like Jesus counts; but, being persecuted for acting like a jerk does not.

For example, when I fashion myself as the moral Gestapo of pagan culture, and when I become more interested in pointing out the splinter in someone else's eye than taking out the log from my own, I will probably be persecuted. But that persecution doesn't count. No matter how many times I self-righteously tell myself, “I'm just taking a stand for righteousness,” it still doesn't count. Because I'm afraid that would be in the “jerk” category, not the “Jesus” category. I need to continually ask myself, “Am I being persecuted *for the sake of righteousness*? Am I being mistreated *for living as Jesus lived*? Am I suffering *for being Christlike*?”

One ► noted Bible scholar warns us:

*This final beatitude does not say, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are objectionable, or because they rave like wild-eyed fanatics, or because they pursue some religio-political cause.”<sup>5</sup>*

4. Persecution ► for reasons other than the sake of righteousness is to be avoided. We don't need jerks for Jesus. But the avoidance-of-persecution pendulum can swing too far. For example, if I never experience persecution relating directly to my walk with Christ, I have to wonder: Am I really living for Him? In ► 2 Timothy 3:12, the Apostle Paul tells us:

<sup>4</sup> D.A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: And His Confrontation with the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1978, 1987, 1999, 2005), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, 28.

<sup>NAU</sup> 2 Timothy 3:12 Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

It follows that, if I'm never persecuted, I need to question my desire to live godly in Christ Jesus. I'm not suggesting we ought to pursue persecution; I'm afraid that would lead us right back the "jerk" category. I'm merely pointing out that living as Jesus lived will bring persecution, and so, the absence of persecution raises an important question: Am I following hard after Jesus?

5. Have you been persecuted for the sake of righteousness? What would that look like today? Where does it show up in Moon Valley life?

From one point of view, persecution for the sake of righteousness is light in America. Christians aren't being burned or tortured or killed for their faith as in some other cultures or times. But there are still other forms of persecution. We should expect it.

Let me give you a few examples.

- a. I worked in the business world for fifteen years. When I was put in charge of the Phoenix office of my company, I discovered that quite a few employees were using pirated software on the job. For the sake of righteousness, I decided to eliminate all the pirated software and buy licenses and new software, where necessary. As I recall, the move cost about \$12,000 at the time. When my boss in Minneapolis found out about it, I got reamed for compromising our profitability. On another occasion I was told that I was "just too principled."

It's certainly not torture or martyrdom, but it's persecution, and persecution comes in all different forms.

- b. When my daughter Candace was engaged to be married, some of her college classmates and coworkers asked her how her fiancé performed in bed. For the sake of righteousness, Candace had decided to remain a virgin until she got married, and so, she confessed that she didn't know how he was, because she was waiting until they were married. They gave Candace the "you idiot" look, and said incredulously, "How will you know if he's any good in that department?" To which she responded: "I'd rather have no point of comparison."

It's certainly not torture or martyrdom, but it's persecution, and persecution comes in all different forms.

- c. Some friends I know have endured persecution at the hands of a pastor who became spiritually abusive. Their spiritual leader began to manipulate through guilt and shame and accusation. He took advantage of their strong desire to be like Jesus. Looking back, some of my friends feel foolish and betrayed. But, as far as I can tell, they've been wounded for the sake of righteousness. It's a form of persecution. It can even happen in the church.
- d. Perhaps you are surrounded by unbelievers in your family or in your workplace or in your school. And when it comes to light that you are a believer, or that you've decided make some sacrifices in following Jesus, you get the look. The "you've-got-scrambled-eggs-for-brains" look. Or the "you-poor-duped-cult-member" look. Or the "you're-one-of-those-bigots" look. Persecution.
- e. Or maybe you've decided to buck the financial norm of buying the nicest house you can possibly afford and plowing every dime into making your life more comfortable and fun and classy. Instead, for the sake of righteousness, you've chosen to live modestly and give away a bunch of your money. And you go to the Christmas parties of colleagues with bigger houses and bigger cars and bigger trips and bigger diamonds. And you're reminded in subtle ways that, in their eyes, you're well down the social ladder. Persecution.
- f. Or maybe you're in a job where, for the sake of righteousness, you have worked honestly and diligently and humbly and unselfishly. And you get passed over for some squeaky-wheel, self-promoting politico. Persecution.

We ► have answered our first question. What does it mean to be persecuted for the sake of righteousness? It is to be mistreated for living as Jesus did; it is to be persecuted for following in the footsteps of Jesus; it is to be hurt as a direct result of imitating Christ. And the hurt can take many forms.

II. That brings us to our ► second question: How are we better off being persecuted? How does persecution pay? How are we actually blessed by it?

- A. Verse ► 10 tells us that we're better off because, when people, like us, are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, ► "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven belongs to the persecuted.

Which means you're not going to heaven unless you're persecuted, so you better get out there and drum up some suffering. No! That's not what Jesus is talking about.

In previous sermons, I've tried to explain that "the kingdom of heaven" in Matthew often refers to the reign of God, not a place. The kingdom of heaven describes the rulership of the Lord. It describes God's economy in which He rules.

As such, I believe God's rulership belongs to those persecuted for the sake of righteousness in the sense that kingdom blessings belong to them.<sup>6</sup> Theirs are the benefits of God's rulership. In God's economy, they are the ones who get rewarded. We will be richly rewarded in heaven for the persecution we endure on earth. It's not about *getting* to heaven; it's about getting *rewards* from the King of heaven.

This idea is reflected in our text. In Verse 10, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the persecuted. Then, ► in Verse 12, He explains what that means, saying: "your reward in heaven is great." Therefore, having the kingdom of heaven is about having *rewards* in heaven. When you're persecuted for living as Jesus lived in this life, you'll be rewarded in the next. When you're living for Jesus, a scar in this life is a score in the next. That's the ► big idea of my sermon: A scar is a score.

This perspective changes everything. When I'm wounded for the sake of righteousness, it's the difference between thinking "That hurt, so I'll never do that again," and thinking, "That hurt, but I just scored." A scar is a score. Not in the short run, but in eternity. In fact, ► Eternity is our Characteristic of Completeness. We're talking about having an eternal perspective. From the viewpoint of eternity, a scar is a score.

Here's an example of how this perspective changes everything. In the early church, some apostles were first imprisoned and then flogged by the Jewish governing Council for telling people about Jesus. There were persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Acts ► 5:40 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Acts 5:40 . . . after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and *then* released them.

It would be perfectly reasonable for the apostles to be thinking, "Hey, that hurt, so let's not do that again." But they knew something. They knew a scar is a score. And that changed everything. Verse ► 41 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Acts 5:41 So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name.

The apostles were not masochists. They didn't enjoy the beating right then. They didn't relish being degraded in that moment. But they rejoiced in light of eternity. Here's the thinking: Hey, Jesus died in taking our place on the cross, now we're willing to suffer in taking His place on earth, because our reward comes in heaven. Score!

---

<sup>6</sup> This parallels Matthew 5:3, where Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven also belongs to the poor in spirit.

- B. We're ► left to wonder: Score for what? What rewards? What will the payoff be like? We're not given details. We're simply told it'll be worth it. Romans ► 8:18 tells us:

<sup>NAU</sup> Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Second ► Corinthians 4:17 affirms:

<sup>NAU</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison

- C. How ► could this knowledge—that a scar is a score—change things for you? Well, let me ask you a question. What would you do differently if you viewed persecution not through the lens of risk, but reward? What would you do differently if you were absolutely convinced that a scar is a score?

As for me, I am encouraged to reach out more to my unbelieving friends and neighbors with the hope that I can have an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Not be pushy or obnoxious. But bold and unashamed as the Spirit leads. Not shying away from possible persecution.

I wonder sometimes if my rationalizations—"I don't want to force my views on anybody; I don't want to offend; I don't think I know enough share my faith"—I wonder if they're just good-sounding ways of saying: "I don't want to be persecuted."

This came to me last night, while I was driving home alone from Tucson. I left Cathy there with her mother. You see, we got a call early Friday night. Cathy's stepfather, Gene, had died suddenly that day. It was a day like any other. Gene was sitting at his computer, probably hunting for some collectible on e-bay. He had a massive heart attack and died in his chair, between mouse clicks.

I don't know whether Gene was a believer or not. And that's the thing. I don't know. It's been years since I've had a conversation with Gene about Christ, though I've seen him quite a bit. He sat on my couch this Christmas. And I wonder: Have I missed some opportunities to talk with him over the years because I wanted to avoid the awkwardness of it? I'm not sure.

But I think it's good to ask. Not as some big guilt trip. Not as a form of self-condemnation. But as an important reminder. Opportunities are limited. People die between mouse clicks. Eternity is a long time. And a scar is a score.

I imagine you appearing before Jesus. He's smiling. He notices your scars, the seen and unseen. He reaches out to gently touch each one. He says, "These are because of Me, aren't they?"

And then He points to His own scars, on His hands and His feet and His side, and He says, “These are for you. Enter your rest. Great is your reward. Well done, my good and faithful servant. Well done.”