

Blessed Are The Persecuted

The persecution of Christians is on the increase in the western world. In a few nations the persecution has taken the form of physical violence. In others churches are being burned. In most countries the followers of Jesus Christ are being insulted, ridiculed, and maligned because they will not change their viewpoint. One website was very open, “I don’t believe in a god, so I don’t hate Christians because a nonexistent entity nonexistantly loves them more than me. I hate them because they fail to realize the truth: there is no god” (www.sciforums.com). Christians are being increasingly charged with intolerance because they refuse to adopt the changing moral standards accepted by society. The moral religion of western culture is in fact the absence of morality, and the persecution of Christians is increasingly acceptable. Is that tolerance? Persecution of Christians is not new. It is like a boomerang. It occurred under the Caesars of the Roman Empire because Christians upset the social order. The ancient historians record that Christians refused to adopt the moral or religious practices and social order accepted by those cultures.

BACKGROUND. Jesus knew that His disciples would eventually be persecuted. It was coming and it would be severe. So it is not surprising that Jesus refers to it in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount describes the characteristics of a true disciple. Jesus told us that those who saw themselves as spiritual beggars and mourned over their sin would be blessed. They would see the Kingdom of Heaven and eventually be comforted. They would hunger and thirst to be holy. They would yield or submit to God as a dog does to his master. A disciple would show mercy to others, and be honest without deceit. In our last study we saw that the disciples would seek peace with others. They would seek to live in peace with everyone as much as possible. But unfortunately, that virtue is missing in some spiritually immature Christians.

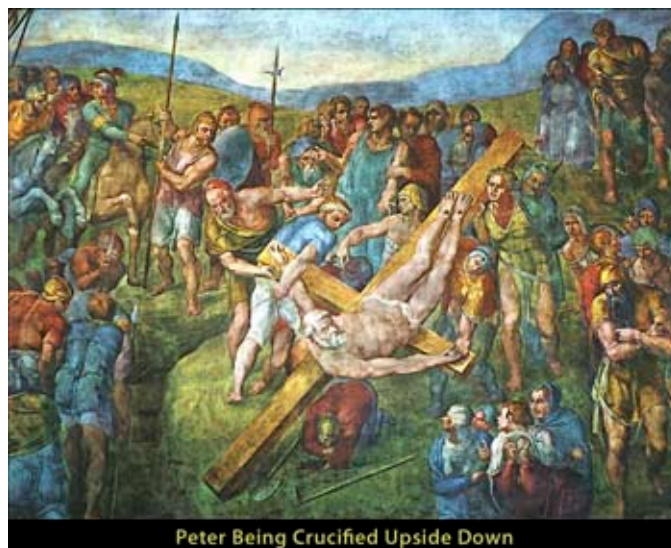
The Beatitudes list the virtues of a disciple. So what is their reward? Jesus answers that question in the

next beatitude.

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. (NASB) Matt. 5:10-11

Jesus says their reward is persecution. The Greek word that He uses for “persecuted” is DIOKOO. The word has the idea of hot pursuit, oppression, and harassment. It implies that someone really wants to hurt someone else. It is not acci-

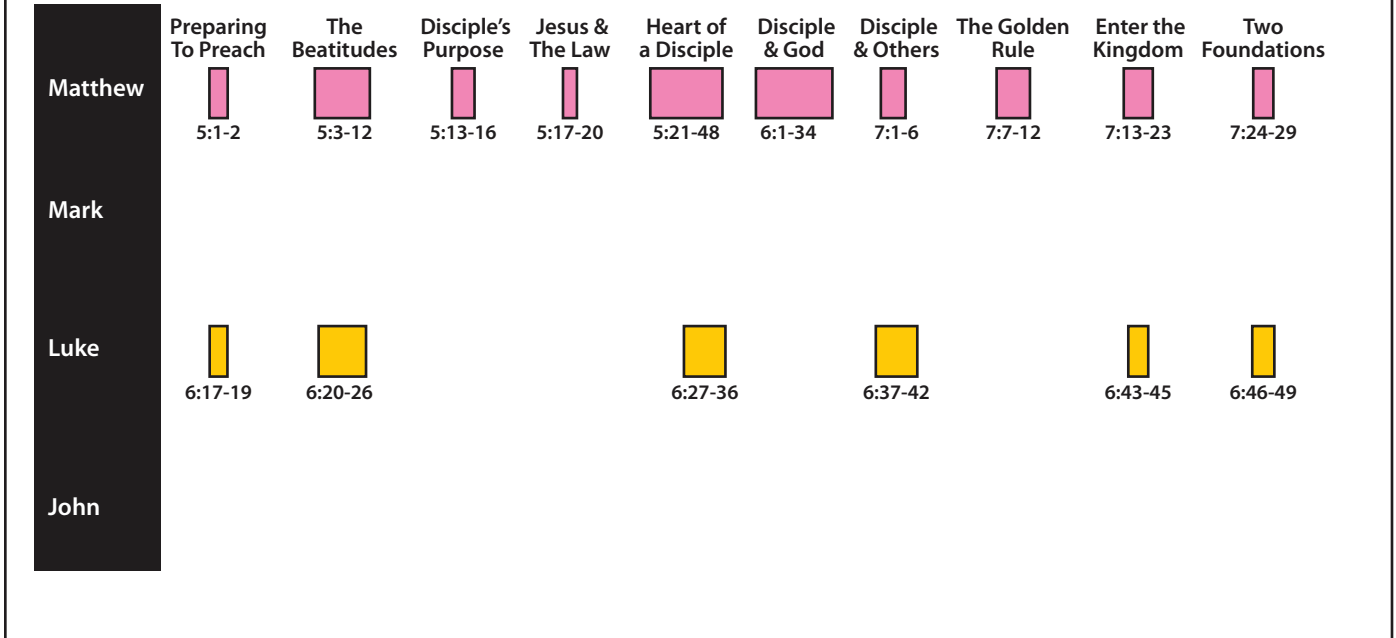
idental. It is intentional. The word is also used in John 5:16 where we are told that Jesus was being persecuted. In that passage the Jewish religious leaders were upset with Jesus. They were not causing Jesus physical pain, but they were repeatedly insulting and confronting Him. This tells us that persecution includes more than just a physical attack. It can



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Jesus' Ministry in Galilee - Sermon on the Mount



include insults, negative comments, slander, and lies about one's character. The religious leaders of Jesus' day eventually lied about Jesus at His trial before King Herod because they wanted Jesus murdered. He was eventually crucified.

BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED. The first verse of this beatitude says that the disciples of Jesus can expect to be persecuted for doing good - pursuing holiness or righteousness.

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (NASB) Matt. 5:10

The current wave of persecution in the western world has come because Christians are declaring that certain conduct is sin. Christians are standing for holiness or righteousness just as they did in the early church.

Jesus was not talking about suffering because a disciple insulted someone, lacked grace, was unkind, committed a crime or hurt someone. God warns us that the followers of Jesus can suffer for sinful conduct. If we sin, we should not

be surprised that we suffer.

For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. (NASB) 1 Peter 2:20

For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. (NASB) 1 Peter 3:17

There are times when we deserve what happens to us. If God warns us and we disobey, then we should not be surprised when heartache and suffering follow.

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. (NASB) Gal. 6:7

But we can still ask for mercy.

The followers of Jesus can suffer for two reasons. We can suffer for messing up, as we have already discovered, or we

can suffer for doing good. This is the message of the first verse of this beatitude - the eighth beatitude. It is also the message given to us by the apostle Paul.

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (NASB) 2 Tim. 3:12

The message is that every Christian who desires to live godly will suffer persecution. Do you desire to live a godly life? If you do, are you suffering for righteousness? If you claim to be a Christian and you are not suffering, then you are either not a follower of Jesus Christ or you do not have a desire to live a godly life. People will see how you live; they will discover that you will not lie for them. They will notice that you go to church. They will discover that you believe in Jesus, and they will take offense.

This beatitude is not talking about intentionally being an irritation to others. It is about simply living a holy life - just being righteous. That alone will be an irritation to others. It is just amazing that Christians can suffer because they stand for holiness. Yet, it is not a surprise. It is proof that we live in a very evil world. God warns us that darkness and light do not mix. Darkness hates the light (John 3:19) because the light exposes evil deeds. In fact the world wants us to accept their sin and join them. That is the message of Romans 1:28-32.

So we should not be surprised at the following statement regarding Christians.

They're too far gone, for their beliefs have changed radically over the last few years. They worship a different God than the one we grew up with; perhaps it's more accurate to say that they worship the Old Testament God, without the moderating influence of Jesus, who's considered symbolic and sweet and nice-but nobody whose teachings must be obeyed. Ask a conservative Christian about Jesus' teachings, and you'll be told that they're wonderful spiritual teachings-for the inner life, not the outer. Conservative Christians have adopted the warrior mentality of Onward Christian Soldiers, and intolerance is nothing to be hidden under a white robe

and pointed white hood: it's to be waved proudly as a flag demonstrating Christian rigor and personal righteousness. Indeed, their conscience, their moral values, and their spiritual priorities have been altered, but not by hypocrisy. They've been reversed. What was wrong is now right. What was down is now up. What was evil is now good . . . (www.counterpunch.org)

The author does not understand that Jesus' teachings focus on the attitude and intentions of the heart. The Sermon on the Mount describes the inner and outer life of a real follower of Jesus. The result is a changed outside (Matt. 15:16-20). What was wrong is still wrong and what was right is still right. What has occurred is that the morality of the western culture is changing because the culture has rejected God.

Remember that John the Baptist was murdered because he rebuked King Herod for adultery. Herod had a grudge against him according to Mark 6:17-19. As a result, John's head was cut-off. Yet, Jesus has called us to love those who persecute us while we continue to stand for holiness.

Holiness begins in your home in front of your television, with your VCR and DVD player. Your commitment to holiness determines what you search for on the internet and what you look at on your computer, or read in books and magazines. Holiness is more than sex. It includes the words you speak, the attitude that you have for others, and your honesty. Holiness is about mourning over sin, submission to God, the desire to be holy, mercy, truth, and peacemaking. Where do you stand?

BLESSED WHEN THEY INSULT YOU. The second part of the beatitude appears to be a repeat of the first part, but if we look closely we discover that it is not a repeat.

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. (NASB) Matt. 5:11

Yes, the second part of the beatitude refers to insults, lies, and persecution, but it is primarily about suffering because of our relationship with Jesus Christ. The world will also persecute us because we follow Jesus.

It started in the early years when the Jewish leaders ordered the apostles to stop telling others about Jesus. The apostles refused to stop, and the early followers of Jesus started being physically persecuted. Acts 4:5-20 records that event for us. Jesus warned us that the world would hate us and persecute us because it hated Him.

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. (NASB) John 15:18

Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. (NASB) John 15:20

The unkind words and attitudes are still being spoken two thousand years later.

The following quote comes from a person who is offended that the followers of Jesus want to obey His command to evangelize or to tell others about Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20).

As they lurched through a blinding snowstorm over Tokyo, the Rev. Billy Graham watched as the nervous pilot focused single-mindedly on his cockpit instruments. When it came time to land that plane, the pilot and the air-traffic controllers followed a dogmatic set of rules. They were intolerant of errors, and Graham was thankful for that. "I did not want these men to be broad-minded," he said, in a sermon that is currently circulating on the Internet. "I knew that our lives depended on it." There are times, said the evangelist, when tolerance is bad. For centuries, Christians have proclaimed that the journey from earth to heaven is like any other difficult journey. It is crucial to have accurate directions and a trustworthy pilot, when souls are at stake. Thus, Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Jesus is intolerant, said Graham, when it comes to matters of salvation.

... If the world's most famous evangelist preached the same sermon today, it would make headlines and draw flack on the evening news. It would be hard to imagine

anyone making a more inflammatory statement than the one attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John: "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him . . .

While visiting India, Pope John Paul II said "there can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord." The heir to Graham's pulpit - his son Franklin - angered many non-evangelicals when he urged non-Christians at the Columbine High School memorial service to turn to Jesus, before it was too late. The list goes on and on . . .

There is no question that the First Amendment protects the free speech of non-Christians and others [in the United States] who are offended by intolerant, narrow-minded Christians who proclaim that Jesus is the only savior for all of humankind. Right now, the question appears to be whether Christian evangelists will retain their right to preach that message in the public square (tmatt.gospelcom.net).

HOW SHALL WE RESPOND? For millennia the prophets, apostles, and Christians from all walks of life, countries, cultures, languages, and races have suffered for Jesus. It is what Jesus predicted, and He has been correct. Some of the prophets were ignored, and others were murdered by their own people (Is. 30:10, Matt. 23:31; Heb. 11:36-38). All of the apostles were murdered, except for the Apostle John, because they preached that Jesus Christ was the Only Way.

Many Christians other than the apostles also died because they believed in Jesus. Stephen was the first martyr for his faith (Acts 7). History records that Nero, Caesar of the Roman Empire, wrapped Christians in animal skins and released hungry dogs into the coliseum to have dinner. Christians were also plastered with pitch and then torched to light the night. And some Christians had molten lead poured on their abdomens. Many Christians experienced unbelievable and exotic tortures and yet would not renounce Jesus as their God.

During the Decian Persecution (A.D. 249-251), Christians were ordered to renounce their belief in Jesus Christ by worshipping other gods and offering incense. Some people who said they were followers of Jesus purchased certificates which falsely claimed that they had renounced Jesus Christ. As a result they were called the *Lapsi* - those who had lapsed in their faith.

In the Diocletian Persecution (A.D. 284-305), Christians were ordered to burn their manuscripts of their Bibles. Those who did were called *Traditores*. We get our English word *traitor* from it. They were traitors to Jesus.

The catacombs under Rome contain the reminders that Christians were persecuted for their belief. One of those reminders is a cartoon of Daniel in the Lion's Den. It was put there to encourage the followers of Jesus. The early Christians refused to yield to the culture of their day and live unholy lives or deny Jesus Christ. The culture worshiped the god of the age - Satan - by worshipping gods and goddesses. Today, the god of the age is still active. He has blinded the eyes of the world as he has always done. We live in a different time but the forces of evil are still active. Satan is alive and well.

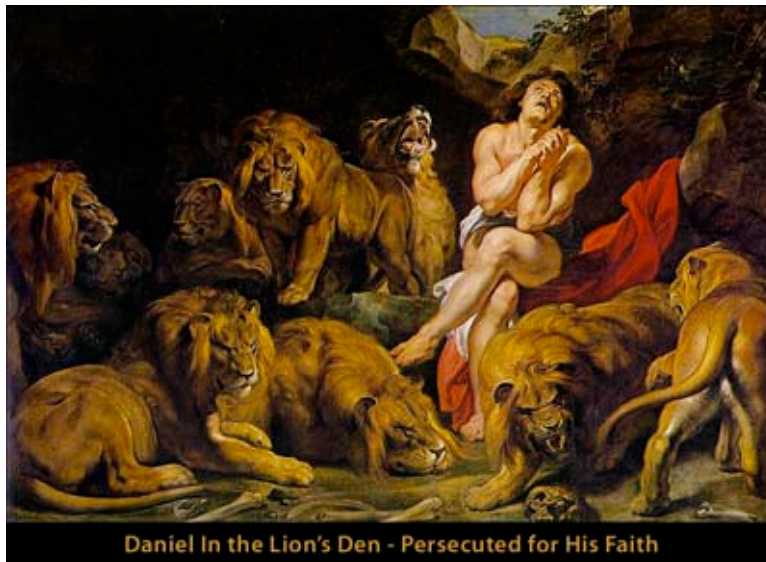
The following quote from another website (www.kstatecollegian.com) captures the signs of the time,

... Ted Turner shared his enlightened insight that Christianity is a "religion for losers." It's hard to argue with airtight logic like that. With all this irreligious rage, hypocrisy and viewpoint discrimination from the "tolerant" artists, politicians and elites, what are Christians to do? Perhaps tolerance exists in the Academia, where open-minded "free exchange of ideas" reigns. On the contrary, a Williamsburg Charter Survey reported

that one in three academics believe evangelical Christians are a threat to democracy. With academics like KU Religious Studies professor Paul Mirecki bragging about slapping "fundies" in their "big fat face," it seems the survey was quite accurate. But, it's cool. Christians accept it. When they get slapped in their big fat faces by artists, politicians and professors, they don't storm the streets with AK-47s. They just remember Jesus' words:

"If the world hates you, remember it first hated Me."

CONCLUSION. Should we complain? The last part of the beatitude answers the question.



Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (NASB) Matt. 5:12

We should rejoice under persecution, unless we are suffering because we have sinned. If we have sinned, it is time to repent and confess our sins. To suffer for

Jesus means that we belong to Him. What is our reward in heaven? We do not know, but we can trust Jesus that it is great. We have never been alone and will never be alone.

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (NASB) Matt. 28:18

Be at peace with all men as much as you can (Rom. 12:18). Seek holiness. Tell others about Jesus, and keep your eyes focused on Him . . .