

Persecution
Matthew 5:11-12
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

- I. The Person of the Christ (1:1-7:29)
 - A. The Incarnation of Christ (1:1-2:23)
 - B. The Preparation of Christ (3:1-4:11)
 - C. The Beginning of Christ's Ministry (4:12-25)
 - D. The Beginning of Christ's Teaching (5:1-7:29)

The Sermon on the Mount is the first block of Jesus' teaching that Matthew provides us. It begins with the character qualities that allow us to live righteously. Matthew 5:11-12 develops the topic of the eighth and last beatitude in Matthew 5:10, "*Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" The beatitudes provide a foundation for us to respond to persecution.

The context of Matthew 5:11-12

Matthew 5:3-10 are the beatitudes, which at first glance could seem to include Matthew 5:11-12. This is because the word "blessed" begins 5:11 as it does each of the preceding eight verses.

Yet there are important differences that lead us to separate Matthew 5:11-12 from the beatitudes:

Matthew 5:11-12 is in the second person, not the third person. Therefore, it is not a truth statement for the crowds (cf. 7:28-29) but is addressed specifically to Jesus' disciples (5:1). There is a presupposition that the ones addressed in 5:11-12 are Jesus' true followers.

Matthew 5:11-12 does not fit the same design of a characteristic followed by a promise. It is rather an expansion of the last beatitude in Matthew 5:10, developing further teaching regarding persecution.

Matthew 5:11-12 fits between 5:1-10 and 5:13-16 and has been linked more closely with Jesus' teaching that the disciples are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This is because persecution is associated with the world that rejects Jesus. Thus the context of Matthew 5:11-12 demands that we give it special attention.

The subjects of persecution

As Matthew 5:11-12 expands on the topic of persecution from the preceding verse, it informs us of what defines persecution. Matthew 5:11 teaches us that persecution is “against you because of Me.” Therefore, we ought not to call all bad things that may happen to us persecution.

General affliction is common to mankind. Just as He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45), all people have afflictions come to them in a variety of ways (Matthew 13:21). Sometimes we suffer because of our own doing. There is no credit to us when we sin and are harshly treated and patiently endure (1 Peter 3:20). Sometimes our suffering includes sickness, disappointment, mistreatment, disdain, but are not specific to our standing as believers.

Christians commonly feel mistreated by the world. We see the world making decisions that can negatively affect us and wrongly conclude it to be persecution. When people do things that are viewed as bad but those things are not specific to Christians for the cause of Christ it is not persecution in a biblical sense.

A recent example is how many politically oriented Christians claimed to be persecuted because of Covid restrictions that were imposed upon the population as a whole rather than the Christians specifically. Indeed, in some way churches received treatment from the government in our state that was preferable to certain other institutions.

To consider general affiliations, much less simply things that we don't like, to be persecution is biblically unwarranted and hardly similar to the persecution suffered by the prophets who came before us.

The basis for persecution

While we may be persecuted because of Jesus, we should not be persecuted because of our message of condemnation of this world. If we are persecuted because of Jesus it would be because we are truly following Him, and not some confusion about what we think about Him. Our message to the unsaved must be the message of hope for salvation, which is the gospel.

“For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him” John 3:17

When we explain the truth about the hope of salvation in Jesus Christ, people have an opportunity to be saved through Him. When they reject Jesus Christ, this will judge them on the last day.

"If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day" (John 12:47-48).

It is the Holy Spirit who convicts the world of sin, it is not our role to convince people that they are evil.

"And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8).

Our attitude toward the unsaved ought to be compassion, not judgment since this is the attitude of Christ toward people.

"Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest" (Matthew 9:36-38).

Jesus and the apostles reserved their condemnation for one unique group of people, the religious leaders who were leading people astray from the truth. To misrepresent God is serious and potential followers of false teachers should be warned (Matthew 7:15-20; Matthew 23:1-36).

The motive of persecutors

In practice, few people who persecute the disciples of Christ claim to be acting against God. Indeed, much, if not most, of persecution occurs *because* people believe that they are acting on God's behalf. This certainly was true in the New Testament when we look at the conduct of the Pharisees. They considered themselves to be doing God's will.

"The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get' " (Luke 18:11-12).

Furthermore, they criticized Jesus and His disciples for not doing God's will.

"When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?' " (Matthew 9:11).

"But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, 'Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath' " (Matthew 12:2).

"Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread' " (Matthew 15:1-2).

In addition, their motive was selfish.

"But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men" (Matthew 23:5).

In their selfishness they seized authority as they considered it their right and did not acknowledge Jesus' authority.

"The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses" (Matthew 23:2).

"When He entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"" (Matthew 21:23)

Jesus repeatedly called them hypocrites for they did not do what they said other ought to do.

"Therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them." (Matthew 23:3)

When we look at the ministry of the apostles in the book of Acts we find something very similar. The opposition to Peter and John came from the same religious leaders who opposed Jesus (Acts 4-5). The opposition to Stephen came from the same religious leaders who opposed Jesus (Acts 6:8-7:60). The opposition to Paul came from the Jews (Acts 13:50; 14:4-6, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:12; 21:27ff).

When we look at church history we find something very similar. The primary antagonists to Bible believers in church history have been religious people. The reformers were prime examples, put to death by the religious forces of Roman Catholicism.

The observation that much of Christian persecution has been from people who are religious is important because while persecution is by definition "because of Me" (Jesus), those doing the persecution consider themselves to be acting on God's behalf. Therefore, there is a distinction between those who believe they are acting on God's behalf and those who are truly acting on God's behalf. Simply believing that we are acting in service of God proves nothing. We can evaluate whether we are delusional in our ministry by examining our ministry approach with the objective teaching of the Scripture.

We can see this with Paul who was himself a Jew, a Pharisee and a persecutor of the church. He was indeed a persecutor of Jesus but had to be informed that it was Jesus that he was persecuting (Acts 9:5). He viewed himself as being zealous for God (Acts 22:3). Paul described himself as having acted ignorantly in unbelief (1 Timothy 1:13).

When we are insulted, persecuted and slandered it is done in ignorant unbelief, even if it is done within the church itself. This lack of faith moves people to follow in the footsteps of their forefathers who practice religion of works, not true faith. They consider outcomes that must be achieved by any means necessary. From their perspective, if it requires insults or false accusations to accomplish a greater good then it is worth it.

The desired outcome is not about trust in God but about power and control. All persecution occurs because people don't act in submission to Christ but believe they know best about what must happen. When the outcome is blocked, anger can build and evil words will be said. This lack of faith is rooted in the pride of people who think they are greater, more knowledgeable and more righteous.

"I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think" (Romans 12:3).

When we are persecuted it is fundamentally because people hated Jesus first (John 15:18). Jesus said, *"If they persecuted Me they will persecute you also"* (John 15:20). However, they typically believe they are acting on the side of good rather than on the side of evil. We ought not be swayed by this delusion.

The description of persecution

In contrast to our common perception of persecution that is physical in nature, the persecution described in Matthew 5:11-12 is entirely verbal in nature. Of course whatever Jesus said about verbal persecution is certainly even more true of physical persecution. But verbal persecution is just as real and more common than physical persecution.

A survey of the persecution that Jesus Himself suffered that was verbal in nature included:

1. Shame

"Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

2. Betrayal

"The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born" (Matthew 26:24).

3. Mockery

"They knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" (Matthew 27:29).

4. Insults

"The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words" (Matthew 27:44)

5. Lies

"For many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent. Some stood up and began to give false testimony against Him, saying, 'We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands.' '" (Mark 15:56-58)

Persecution that is verbal is destructive in nature and when we endure such opposition because of Christ the Lord has promised to reward us.

The joy of persecution

There are two imperatives given by Jesus for our response to persecution: “rejoice and be glad.” These are synonyms that describe the joy that we should have in persecution. There is very little observable difference between these words other than possibly the first may refer to a qualitative emotional experience and the second may refer to a quantitative abundance of this emotional experience (“be exceedingly glad” KJV).

Jesus provides us with reasons why we should rejoice in persecution:

1. We are called blessed by Jesus

The simple statement “blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness” is enough to move us to emotional rejoicing. If Jesus says we are blessed then this is the final verdict on our state of being. If we are blessed by God then we must rejoice.

“For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

2. Our reward in heaven is great

The Lord will reward us in heaven. The reference to heaven is connected to the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 3:2, 4:17, 5:3, 10). This will be when the kingdom will be delivered at the second coming of Christ (Matthew 25). Because our reward is in heaven it is (1) future, (2) undefined, and (3) secure. Our reward will come for Christ has promised it, and while not fully comprehended at the present time, we know it is protected (Matthew 6:20).

Our emotional response must be joyful because the value of what we gain is exceedingly far beyond what persecutions are endured. This is why Jesus uses the term “great” to describe our reward.

“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.” (Romans 8:18)

If we have true faith we will know that this reward is ours, is secure, and is of great value. This ought to make us exceedingly glad.

3. The prophets were persecuted also

The third compulsion to be joyful in persecution comes from the experience suffered by the prophets from earlier times. The pronoun “they” refers to a general collective of people who are persecutors, not specifically to any specific group of persecutors since the prophets had long since passed away. In the same way that people were persecuted in the past, people will also be persecuted in the future.

This motivation is powerful in part because of the reverence that followers of Jesus would have had for the prophets. These heroes of Israel’s history, testified to by the Scripture, were beloved.

When we have an awareness of the suffering of the Old Testament prophets we will be encouraged to endure. Hebrews 11 provides the testimony of these prophets who suffered for their faith.

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

Since we have the example of those detailed in Hebrews 11, we ought to persevere.

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

As we learn of Christians during the church age who endured persecution, we likewise can follow their example.

Conclusion

Paul taught in 2 Timothy 3:12, *“Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”* This persecution is more likely to come from the lips of man rather than the fists of man. When we experience insults and slander because of Jesus, we must rejoice. It is a blessed honor to suffer for His name sake.