

ST. ARMANDS KEY LUTHERAN CHURCH

SARASOTA, FLORIDA

STUDY NOTES FOR SAKLC CONVERSATIONS ON THE BEATITUDES OF JESUS

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“THE BLESSEDNESS OF PERSECUTION”

(Matthew 5:10-12)

[SEVERAL COMPARATIVE TRANSLATIONS]

(NRSV) - *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

(GNT) - *“Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them! ¹¹ Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven. This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted.”*

(CE) - *“Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. ¹¹ Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. ¹² Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.”*

(MSG) – *“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom. ¹¹⁻¹² Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”*

(AMP) - *“Blessed [comforted by inner peace and God’s love] are those who are persecuted for doing that which is morally right, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [both now and forever]. ¹¹ Blessed [morally courageous and spiritually alive with life-joy in God’s goodness] are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil things against you because of [your association with] Me. ¹² Be glad and exceedingly joyful, for your reward in heaven is great [absolutely inexhaustible]; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

THE SHARING OF GOD'S PEACE

and a brief time for you to talk with others:

1. Describe a time in your life, or in the life of a friend or family member, when you felt that you were being persecuted because of your Christian faith?
2. Identify one or more widely known modern day personalities who have suffered persecution because of their faith in Christ?

SOME INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS:

1. This Beatitude serves as the “*acid test*” for anyone who claims citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven!
2. This final Beatitude reverts back to the very first one. The first Beatitude states the condition of becoming a citizen of the Kingdom; the last describes the character of one who has become a citizen of that Kingdom, and who being in it is exposed to all of the opposition, persecution and scorn for the cause of righteousness.
3. It has a proper place in the sequence of the Beatitudes – ultimately pointing to Pentecost. (*Remember that the disciples were not persecuted before that event.*)
4. It is, therefore, a prediction of the church after its establishment on Pentecost. (See Hebrews 10:32-33 – “***But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.***”
5. This last Beatitude sees the disciple of Christ at his/her highest, triumphing by the sheer spiritual power of the new Kingdom over all forces of opposition.
6. He/she is not necessarily in the “*martyr category*,” but represents the disciple of Christ anywhere and in any age who overcomes the storms of hostility; who is personally maligned due to his/her loyalty to the principles of Christ’s Kingdom. Those who attempt to live righteously will inevitably be persecuted for it. The truth is that Godliness generates hostility and antagonism from the world.

7. As we endure persecution we are related to the prophets of old who were persecuted:

- 2 Chronicles 36:15-16 – [Fall of Jerusalem] –***“The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; ¹⁶ but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD against his people became so great that there was no remedy.”***
- Acts 7:51-53 – [words of Stephen before he was stoned] ***“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. ⁵³ You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”***
- James 5:10 – ***“As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”***

8. Consider this quote from the commentary authored by biblical scholar William Barclay:

- ***“All the world knows of the Christians who were flung to the lions or burned at the stake; but these were kindly deaths. Nero wrapped the Christians in pitch and set them alight, and used them as living torches to light his gardens. He sewed them in the skins of wild animals and set his hunting dogs upon them to tear them to death. They were tortured on the rack; they were scraped with pincers; molten lead was poured hissing upon them; red hot brass plates were affixed to the tenderest parts of their bodies’ eyes were torn out’ parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted before their eyes; their hands and feet were burned while cold water was poured over them to lengthen the agony. These things are not pleasant to think about, but these are the things a man had to be prepared for, if he took his stand with Christ.”***

9. The Christian life is full of paradoxes. None is more astonishing than the fact that persecution can be a blessing. In America we generally do not suffer physical persecution for our commitment to Christ, but we may suffer social rejection and abuse and perhaps financial loss. Modern day persecutors may not beat you with whips, but they may verbally abuse you. They might not lock you behind bars, but they could incarcerate you in a prison of ostracism. They might not physically take your children, but they could steal their minds and affections. They might not kill your body, but they might kill your career.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF THIS PERSECUTION?

1. We are persecuted ***“for righteousness’ sake.”*** [Matt. 5:10]
 - a) ...just because we are righteous, or are the friends of God. We are not to seek persecution; we are not to provoke it by violating the laws of civil society; nor by engaging in speech or actions that are offensive to others.
 - b) ...some people may suffer for doing evil, but such suffering is punishment not persecution; believers are NOT to suffer in that way [1 Peter 4:15 – ***“But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker.”***]
2. This persecution is because of righteous living, NOT because of our sins or some character defect:
 - 1 Peter 3:14 – ***“But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated.”***
 - 1 Peter 4:14-15 – ***“If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker.”***
3. The same thing that influences some sinners to obey the gospel arouses animosity in the hearts of others. St. Paul was very much aware of this, but always thought of himself and his fellow apostles as being part of a triumphant body, figuratively marching around the world – much as Roman Emperors in Paul’s day victoriously marched in actuality across many lands – conquering for Christ! Paul was certain nothing could stop this movement! Paul was the eternal optimist!
 - 2 Corinthians 2:12-16 – [THE MESSAGE translation] - ¹²⁻¹⁴ ***When I arrived in Troas to proclaim the Message of the Messiah, I found the place wide open: God had opened the door; all I had to do was walk through it. But when I didn’t find Titus waiting for me with news of your condition, I couldn’t relax. Worried about you, I left and came on to Macedonia province looking for Titus and a reassuring word on you. And I got it, thank God! ¹⁴⁻¹⁶ In the Messiah, in Christ, God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade. Through us, he brings knowledge of Christ. Everywhere we go, people breathe in the exquisite fragrance. Because of Christ, we give off a sweet scent rising to God, which is recognized by those on the way of salvation—an aroma redolent with life. But those on the way to destruction treat us more like the stench from a rotting corpse. ¹⁶⁻¹⁷ This is a terrific***

responsibility. Is anyone competent to take it on? No—but at least we don't take God's Word, water it down, and then take it to the streets to sell it cheap. We stand in Christ's presence when we speak; God looks us in the face. We get what we say straight from God and say it as honestly as we can."

4. We should not be surprised when anti-Christian hostility confronts us; and, we need to be aware that some people love the darkness of sin more than the light of Christ.

➤ John 3:19-20 – [THE MESSAGE translation] **"This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is."**

5. Christians are God's *"own special people."* (1 Peter 2:9-10) [MSG] **"But you are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted."**

a) Righteous people do not love the world. (1 John 2:15-17) **"Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; ¹⁶for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever."**

- b) The life of the righteous person is a constant rebuke of sin.

➤ Noah condemned the world by his life (Hebrews 11:7) **"By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith."**

➤ Lot was hated because he kept *"acting as a judge"* (Genesis 19:9) **"But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down."** (2 Peter 2:8) **"for that righteous man, living among them day**

after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard”

- c) A godly life interferes with the progress of sin. (John 2:13-16) – ***“The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”***
6. The condition of being despised and rejected, slandered and persecuted, is as much a normal mark of Christian discipleship as being pure in heart or merciful. Every Christian is to be a peacemaker, and every Christian is to expect opposition. We should not be surprised when anti-Christian hostility occurs, but rather if it does not.

WHAT SHOULD BE OUR REACTION TO THIS PERSECUTION?

1. A believer’s response to persecution and affliction should not be to retreat and hide. To escape from the world is to escape responsibility. Because we belong to Christ, we are no longer of this world, but He has sent us into this world to serve just as He Himself came into the world to serve.
 - John 17:14-18 – [MSG] ***“Now I’m returning to you. I’m saying these things in the world’s hearing so my people can experience my joy completed in them. I gave them your word; the godless world hated them because of it, because they didn’t join the world’s ways, just as I didn’t join the world’s ways. I’m not asking that you take them out of the world but that you guard them from the Evil One. They are no more defined by the world than I am defined by the world. Make them holy—consecrated—with the truth; your word is consecrating truth. In the same way that you gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world. I’m consecrating myself for their sakes so they’ll be truth-consecrated in their mission.”***
2. Persecution should fill us with joy (Acts 5:41) ***“As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.”***
3. Persecution puts us in the glorious company of the O.T heroes who have preceded us (Hebrews 11:32-40) ***“And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the***

mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.”

4. *“Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”* (James 1:12)
5. The clear teaching of Scripture is that persecution brings us greater rewards! With that in mind, which of the following statements do you find yourself agreeing with most:
 - ✓ *I don't mind a little persecution, as long as it doesn't affect my family...*
 - ✓ *Suffering makes no sense at all. I can see no purpose in it...*
 - ✓ *It seems that if God loves me, He would protect me from persecution...*
 - ✓ *I try to remember that this life is not what it's all about.*

WE CAN EXHIBIT BAD REACTIONS TO PERSECUTION, such as... [all references from MSG]

1. Grumbling and complaining (Romans 11:1-6) - *“Does this mean, then, that God is so fed up with Israel that he'll have nothing more to do with them? Hardly. Remember that I, the one writing these things, am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham out of the tribe of Benjamin. You can't get much more Semitic than that! So we're not talking about repudiation. God has been too long involved with Israel, has too much invested, to simply wash his hands of them. ²⁻⁶ Do you remember that time Elijah was agonizing over this same Israel and cried out in prayer?*

*God, they murdered your prophets,
They trashed your altars;
I'm the only one left and now they're after me!*

And do you remember God's answer? I still have seven thousand who haven't quit, Seven thousand who are loyal to the finish. It's the same today. There's a fiercely loyal minority still—not many, perhaps, but probably more than you think. They're holding on, not because of what they think they're going to get out of it, but because they're convinced of God's grace and purpose in choosing them. If they were only thinking of their own immediate self-interest, they would have left long ago."

2. Seeking personal vengeance (Romans 12:17-19) – *"Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."*
3. Becoming discouraged and giving up (Galatians 6:9) – *"So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith."*
4. Failing to pray for our persecutors (Matthew 5:43-45) – *"You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that."*
5. Failing to realize that persecution is a crucible (1 Peter 1:6-9) – *"I know how great this makes you feel, even though you have to put up with every kind of aggravation in the meantime. Pure gold put in the fire comes out of it proved pure; genuine faith put through this suffering comes out proved genuine. When Jesus wraps this all up, it's your faith, not your gold, that God will have on display as evidence of his victory.⁸⁻⁹ You never saw him, yet you love him. You still don't see him, yet you trust him—with laughter and singing. Because you kept on believing, you'll get what you're looking forward to: total salvation."*

IN CONCLUSION:

1. Jesus said to be happy when you're persecuted for your faith. Persecution can be beneficial because....
 - a) It takes our attention away from earthly rewards;
 - b) It strips away superficial belief;
 - c) It strengthens the faith of those who endure it;
 - d) Our attitude in enduring it provides an example for others to follow;
 - e) The fact that we are being persecuted proves that we have been faithful; faithless people would be unnoticed;
 - f) In the future God will reward the faithful by receiving them into His Eternal Kingdom.

2. Jesus' appeal to us does not exempt us from battle; he is very frank with us; he will allow no one to follow him without giving that person to understand that there are difficulties involved. He tells us openly that to be a Christian is to meet opposition. But if we dare to face the opposition our reward will be great.
 - a) In the present world it will bring us a deeper spiritual life and richer usefulness.
 - b) At the end of current time it will allow us to share eternity with Him and all those who have gone before us!

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