

Beatitudes: *Happy Subversives* - week 9

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - June 28, 2020
(Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's *Beatitudes: Living in Sync with the Reign of God*)

Today we are concluding our series on the Beatitudes drawing from the book by Rev. Darrell Johnson, *The Beatitudes: Living in Sync with the Reign of God*.

In his last Beatitude Jesus says in Matthew 5:10-12, **“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.**

Blessed? The persecuted? Fortunate are those who are insulted? Congratulations? Right-on? “You lucky bums”? There must be some mystery here. **Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.** What did Jesus do to provoke so much anger? And how did He get any followers with a promise like that? Before we wrestle with the last Beatitude, let me make some observations.

For the first time Jesus brings Himself into the picture when he says, **“On account of Me.”** He has, of course, been there in the other seven beatitudes, as we have seen. But in the eighth, He makes it explicit: **“On account of Me.”** It is as though Jesus is saying, *“I am the problem: you will find yourselves in a difficult place because of Me.”*

Then let us note carefully the reason for the persecution. Jesus is not blessing those who get persecuted for being obnoxious in peacemaking, or those who get persecuted for being tactless, or who are culturally insensitive as they bear witness in the world. Jesus is not congratulating those who are persecuted for being dogmatically dogmatic or narrow-mindedly narrow-minded. Jesus is not applauding the thrill-seeking confrontationist, or those with a “victim complex.” Jesus is blessing those who find themselves in trouble **“because of righteousness”** and **“because of Me.”** **“For the sake of right-relatedness”** and **“on account of Me.”** Jesus is blessing those who experience opposition because of their relationship with Him and their desire to see relationships work.

“Right-relatedness” and Jesus go together. This is why the “hunger and thirst for righteousness” He blesses in the fourth Beatitude turns out to be a hunger and thirst for Him. Jesus is blessing those who experience persecution because of their hunger to see relationships work.

But why is being persecuted a mark of being evangelized by Jesus? This is not a theoretical matter. Believers all over the world are experiencing persecution today, some in really painful ways. Why this persecution for those who have embraced Jesus and His gospel?

For one basic reason: the reason Jesus gave that night before handing Himself over to death, when He gathered the first band of disciples together around a table in an

Upper Room somewhere in downtown Jerusalem. **“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.... Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you”** (John 15:18, 20).

It is as simple as that. The question therefore becomes, **“Why was Jesus persecuted?”** Why would anyone want to insult or hurt a Man who brings good news of shalom? Clearly, Jesus was not persecuted for being obnoxious, or for being tactless or insensitive in the way He lived and spoke His good news. He was not running around shoving His gospel down people’s throats. He did at one point issue a series of **“woes”** against the entrenched leadership of the religious establishment (**“Woe to you hypocrites...”** Matthew 23), but that was long after the establishment had hardened their hearts against Him, long after they had resolved to eliminate Him. Why was Jesus persecuted?

Darrell Johnson presents three reasons: Let us consider these. First, Jesus got into trouble by simply being righteous. The mere presence of righteousness, justice, and goodness calls for change. Righteousness need not say a word.

Jesus of Nazareth is Goodness incarnate. **He is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.** When He imparts His righteousness to us, we are set apart and we begin to change. We are not made perfect, but we do begin to

change. We slowly but surely become non-conformists. As Flannery O'Connor is reputed to have said, "*You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.*"

In the Bible Christians set apart are called *hagios* or *holy ones*. Not holy in the sense of being perfect, but holy in the sense of being set-apart, other-than, different-from, marching to the beat of a different drummer. Jesus is different, wonderfully different! His mere Presence, His Goodness, can therefore be experienced as a threat to the old order. If the world (human society organizing itself without God) hated Goodness Himself, what will the world do with those who seek and reflect His goodness? That is the first reason Jesus was persecuted - simply for being righteous.

Second, Jesus got into trouble by simply doing righteousness. He was not merely present; He acted in ways that rocked the boat. Rocked the boat is putting it mildly! He disturbed the status quo. More to the point, He subverted the status quo. Not that Jesus went around as some kind of rabble-rouser. In fact, He shied away from public events and public attractions. He simply went around living His gospel, doing right-relatedness.

One of the ways Jesus began to disturb things was by always bringing the "wrong people" to the party. "**This man receives sinners and eats with them**" was the charge leveled against Him (Luke 15:2), and it was said in great disgust. Jesus' way with people upset the religious establishment's

whole concept of righteousness. They taught that people had to shape up before being allowed to “come home” to the Father. Jesus taught that all people had to do was to “come home” to His Heavenly Father. The religious establishment could not handle Jesus’ revelation of God’s love and grace, so they added requirements to it. Just watch how upset people get when they can’t add a requirement to God’s grace. They’d love to control you with those requirements. Jesus says, “No.” Grace subverts our pride, takes our control away, when we would like to say, “*I did it my way*” or “*You, do it my way.*”

Jesus invited the “wrong people” to the party, but Jesus disturbed things in another way: Jesus knowingly violated many of the Sabbath rules, though He didn’t break the Sabbath. He simply broke human rules that drove people farther away from our Father’s heart. If the religious establishments couldn’t handle Jesus breaking their rules, what will they do with His disciples breaking their rules?

Jesus rocked the boat in yet another way: He caused the kingdom to be manifested. He actually did “kingdom stuff.” He set people free. Simply by doing righteousness, Jesus was upsetting their value system. If the world’s systems - secular or religious - could not handle Jesus doing His gospel, what will they do with His disciples doing His gospel and setting people free in God’s grace?

Third, Jesus got in trouble by simply speaking righteousness about Himself. Consider the claims He

makes about Himself, especially the “I AM” claims. **“I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life”** (John 8:12). **“I am the Door,”** enter by Me (John 10:9). **“I am the vine.. apart from Me you can do nothing”** (John 15:5). **“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies”** (John 11:25). He says those loaded words matter-of-factly; there’s no fanfare, no hype. He just says them.

“I am the Bread of Life. *You need Me more than you need your next meal*” (see John 6:35). Whoa!

“I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Jesus does not say *a way, a truth, a life* - He says **“I am *the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*”** *“Jesus, if you would just say ‘a Way’ you would not get Yourself in trouble.”* To which He answers, *“What am I supposed to do, deny Who I am?”* *“Who are You, Jesus?”* the authorities asked in anger. **“Before Abraham was, I Am,”** He replies. And John tells us they took up stones to throw at Jesus (John 8:58-59).

If some people cannot handle Jesus speaking about Himself so outrageously, so amazingly, what are they to do with those who repeat His outrageous claims? And what will they do with those who seek to live out the implications of His claims?

When Peter and John were interrogated by the religious authorities for healing a crippled man, it was the last thing Peter said that got them into trouble, Acts 4:12, **“And there**

is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

No other name. That is what got them into trouble: the claim that life is found in Jesus and only in Jesus. You may have personally experienced what Peter and John faced. Just say, “*Jesus is one of many healers,*” or “*Jesus is one of many lords,*” and we are welcomed at the Feast of Pluralism in our age of tolerance. But say what Peter said - that is, muster up the courage and echo the way Jesus spoke of Himself, and say, “*There is no other healer but Jesus,*” or “*There is no other lord but Jesus*” - and we will be asked to leave the feast, or worse.

We will be accused of being intolerant. But the fact is, it has nothing to do with intolerance. It has everything to do with righteousness, that is right-relatedness. It has everything to do with faithfulness to a relationship with Jesus. He made the claims; we didn't. What are we supposed to do? Water them down? Give in to the spirit of the age, and deny who He is? We cannot. We can be kind and respectful, meek and gentle. We do not need to be obnoxious, but we cannot be unfaithful to who He claims to be.

Thankfully Jesus is putting everything in perspective for His followers. It is because God's glorious kingdom is already breaking into one's life that he or she is treated the way Jesus was treated. No, not everyday, thankfully, and

no, not for being obnoxious. It's because Jesus' gospel is already taking hold that we are getting caught in the crunch. With that perspective, I just might be able to keep my cool. And I may even be able to bless the persecutor.

Why be faithful to Jesus in times of trouble? Why let Him form us into Beatitude people? Because **“you have a great reward in heaven.”** And because you are not alone, you join a long line of others, **“for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”** And because **“yours is the kingdom.”** Not, “yours will be the kingdom,” but **“yours is the kingdom.”** Is - now.

Blessed! Right-on! Congratulations! To those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” You lucky bums!

Would you pray with me?

Dear Jesus, we know that as we seek to live in sync with You and Your love and grace in this age, we could find ourselves in trouble. We would rather it not happen, but we do thank You for warning us, and making it clear why it happens. Should we be persecuted on account of You, please work in us that we can follow Your lead and say, “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.” There is simply no one like You! Thank you, Jesus! Amen.