

The Sermon on the Mount (Part 1)

The Good Life – A Fresh look at the Beatitudes

Study 8 – The Joy of the Persecuted

Introduction

No-one enjoys opposition, especially when such opposition is unjustified or unfair. All of us recognise that at times we are in the wrong and that those who oppose us are right in doing so. We may have to swallow our pride, but wisdom hopefully prevails and we are able to learn from our mistakes. As Proverbs reminds us those who would be wise need to learn from a rebuke given in love. However, when our cause is just and when we are truly acting for the good of others, then we do find it very difficult when those whom we are seeking to help turn against us. It is hard to be misunderstood, misrepresented or rejected for doing what is right. It is no easy thing to be persecuted for righteousness.

It is precisely for this reason that Jesus' words in Matthew 5:10-12 seem so strange to us. How can those who are persecuted for doing what is right possibly be 'blessed'? How is it possible to 'rejoice' in the face of slander, misrepresentation or persecution? Surely such a response is not only un-natural but wrong. Surely if we are to admit the truth of our errors then it is only fair that we should defend ourselves when we are in the right? And is this not especially true when the things we stand for are truly 'righteous', things that matter to God and not just to us?

There are of course a number of misunderstandings that need to be avoided if we are to grasp the true meaning of Jesus' words in this final beatitude. First, note that Jesus' does not glorify persecution for its own sake – he is not promoting fanaticism. It is those who are persecuted *for righteousness* that are blessed and the blessing in this beatitude as in the first is the possession of the kingdom of heaven, not the fact of persecution. Second, Jesus is not sanctifying suffering as if suffering, even suffering for righteousness, earns the kingdom of heaven. Here elsewhere in Jesus' teaching the kingdom is a gift which is given by the grace of God, not a reward to be earned. Third, Jesus is underlining again that the world in which his disciples bear witness for Him is a fallen and a hostile world. Sadly, it is a world opposed to God and thus opposed to all true righteousness. It was for this reason that the world opposed God's prophets who spoke about Jesus (5:12). It was for this reason that the world opposed Jesus even though He was truly righteous. And it is for this reason that those who stand for and with Jesus in this world will themselves be persecuted (5:11). It is in the light of this sad reality that Jesus ends the Beatitudes with a solemn word of warning about what we are to expect as we live for Him but also with a word of promise to those who stay true to Him no matter what the cost.



Investigate and Think



Read Matthew 5:10-12

- What do you understand by the word 'righteousness' in vs 10?
- How does this relate to the 'righteousness' mentioned in vs 6?
- What forms of persecution is Jesus referring to in these verses?
- What is the blessing that those who are persecuted for righteousness enjoy?
- What do you think that Jesus' means by the statement "great is your reward in heaven"?

