

Blessed Are the Persecuted

Matthew 5:9

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March 26, 2017

Sometimes you just need a great theologian like Comedian/Singer Ray Stevens to explain things in simple language.

Many years ago, he sang about prosperity preachers in a way that shows something of the incongruity of their message with the simplicity of the Son of Man from Galilee.

I woke up this morning and turned on the T.V. set/ there is living color was something I can't forget/ this man was preachin' at me/ yea, layin' on the charm/ asking me for 20, with 10,000 on his arm/ He wore designer clothing and a big smile on his face/ selling me salvation while they sang Amazing Grace/ asking me for money while he showed all the signs of wealth/ I almost wrote a check out/ then I ask myself/ Would He Wear a pinky ring/ Would He drive a fancy car/ Would His wife wear furs, and diamonds, would his dressin' room have a star?/ If He came back tomorrow, well there's somethin' I'd like to know/ (Could ya tell me), would Jesus wear a Rolex on His television show? (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYgRKHrmrM8>)

Ray Steven cracks me up. While I can't sing that song well at all, it's fun to sing and I think it has a lot of truth in it.

I am no different from you in that I want to be comfortable. I'd rather be rich than poor. I'd rather be healthy than unhealthy. I do not want to suffer. These are among the reasons that the prosperity gospel is attractive.

But this morning, think about Jesus' greatest message, the Sermon on the Mount, and think about whether you hear any prosperity gospel in his message.

Granted, every beatitude begins with, "Blessed are those," so Jesus wants to bless us, but how many have of the beatitudes does Jesus talk about blessing the people with great monetary wealth? Not in a single beatitude does Jesus promise great wealth or physical well-being.

Instead, His blessings are equated with happiness and fulfillment in life. This is a different kind of prosperity.

He says we will be blessed when we are poor in Spirit, that is, when we acknowledge that we need God in our lives; when we mourn, that is, when we are brokenhearted about our sin and the brokenness of the world around us; when we are meek, that is, when we choose to bridle our power and use it to love and forgive, as opposed to wound or exert it over others; when we hunger and thirst for righteousness instead of things of this world; when we show mercy instead of having a hard heart toward others; when we are pure of heart, that is when we allow God to clean our hearts of all impure thoughts, desires, attitudes, unconfessed sin; and when we work for peace.

We are promised blessings for doing these things, but notice the kinds of blessings we are promised: He will give us the kingdom of heaven. He said we would be comforted, but he did not promise we would be comfortable.

He said we would be satisfied in our efforts of seeking righteousness. He said we would be shown mercy, that we would see God and be called children of God.

Nowhere does He promise that life will be devoid of troubles, hardships, tragedy, difficulty, problems, doubts, or questions.

In fact, Jesus ends up the beatitudes by honestly telling people that if they followed him, they would end up becoming uncomfortable because it was likely that they would be persecuted.

“Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Isn’t that honest?

Recently a South Orange, New Jersey Girl Scout sold over 23,000 boxes of Girl Scout cookies by rating how the cookies taste and she emailed her ratings to potential customers around the Charlotte area. Her sales eventually broke a record for Girl Scout cookie sales.

Charlotte McCourt called one the cookies the Girl Scouts sold “a bleak, gluten-free, flavorless wasteland, and rated it a 1 out of 10.” How can you sell cookies by dishing your product?

She rated the Tagalongs as an 8 and the Do-si-dos as a 6.

She emailed her descriptions of her cookies to potential clients and her sales took off. (<http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2017/01/31/girl-scout-cookie-reviews/>)

Why? People were touched by her honesty. Honesty is something that is refreshing and missing in our world today.

Aren't you tired of living in a world where we are told one thing only to discover days, week, months, or sometimes years later that it was a lie? We don't know who to believe any more. We are hungry for some honesty, aren't we?

The prosperity gospel would have been an easy sell in Jesus' day. Think about it. After he fed the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread and a few fish, he could have told the people to follow him and they would never be physically hungry again.

After he told the disciples to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and their nets they were tearing, Jesus could have said, “If you'll follow me I can make your businesses prosper just like this.”

People are like sheep. People often follow those who tell them what they want to hear. But Jesus did not yield to that temptation.

As Jesus gathered a group of poor, vulnerable, people on a hill in Galilee, that were oppressed by the Romans, he realized that if they seriously began to do the things he asked them to do, there would be a price to pay for their actions. Instead of taking advantage of them, he was honest with them.

The beatitude about peacemaking was placed next to the beatitude about persecution for a reason. One naturally leads to the other. There is a price for real peacemaking.

When we get involved in resolving conflict, when we begin to bring change, even through non-violent means, we are going to end up with some wounds.

Try stepping into a situation where there is chaos, violence, arguing, disagreement and offer yourself as a peace agent and see how much love you get.

Try offering someone some mercy and see if you make everyone happy. Show a little meekness when you have the opportunity to wound an enemy and see if you are everyone's hero. Go the extra mile and see how many people call you a fool. Try loving your enemies and see if some of your friends don't abandon you.

I'm telling you, being a disciple of Jesus is not for sissies. This is not easy stuff.

That's one of the reasons Jesus said that only a few people would enter the small gate and walk the narrow road called discipleship, but many would walk through the wide gate and a walk broad road offered by the world. It's much easier.

There's a problem, though. It leads to destruction. Jesus' path is the only one that leads to life.

As Jesus met with those people on the hillside there in Galilee, he knew where his story would end. He tried to prepare the disciples by telling them that the Son of Man had to suffer but that he would be raised from the dead.

However, they were no different from us. When you have the miracle worker living among you, who thinks of suffering? Who thinks of death?

Jesus did. Even as his ministry began, he tried to prepare them.

“Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Before the cross, Peter may have been willing to die for Jesus, but he wasn't willing to be persecuted for him. There is a difference.

Peter was willing to pull a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane and defend Jesus physically. He was willing to die for him because he was defending a false image of the kingdom. When Jesus

did not fight, when Jesus did not use any of his power against the Romans, Peter became confused.

Peter wasn't willing to follow Jesus anywhere, certainly not to a cross.

The realization of that hit him when the rooster crowed and he realized that he had denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus said he'd do, as Jesus was being tried before the religious leaders.

Peter continued to hide during Jesus' crucifixion, along with most of the other disciples, as they feared for their lives.

So, what changed? How did Christianity grow? What changed the mind of these people and caused them to have the courage to stand up and be willing to be persecuted if necessary for being a follower of Jesus.

Jesus conquered death. That made the difference. The resurrected Lord appeared to his disciples with the nail prints in his hands and his feet and the spear wound in his side and that changed everything.

“Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The Kingdom of Heaven! Now they understood. So, this is about not about an earthly kingdom? No, this is about something more, something greater.

Following the resurrection, Peter and the other disciples finally understood that the kingdom Jesus came to establish was not of this world. While man could kill the body, he could not kill the soul.

Some days later, Jesus met Peter on the beach and had breakfast with him and Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, not once, not twice, but three times.

Jesus told Peter if he loved him he should feed his sheep. Peter left his nets for good.

In 1 Peter we see evidence that Peter remembered the beatitudes when he writes:

⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. (3:8-9)

In verses 13-17, Peter writes, ¹³ "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."

This is the way Peter lived his life. It is the way many first century Christians lived their lives. It is the reason the gospel spread rather than died.

People were willing to live for Jesus. They were also willing to be persecuted for their beliefs. They were also willing to die for Jesus. Peter did die for Jesus. Tradition says that he was martyred, crucified for his beliefs. Not believing he was worthy to be crucified as Jesus, he requested to be crucified upside down.

While none of us will likely ever be called on to die for our belief in Christ, are you willing to stand up for Jesus?

Are you willing to speak up for justice for others? Are you willing to give an answer to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have? When insulted, will you repay the person with an insult or will you respond with love?

No one is going to crucify you upside down like they did Peter, but when you feel the world's sting of persecution because of our faith in Jesus, that is the moment we should stop and realize that someone has recognized that we are different. It means we are making an impact.

So don't disappoint an enemy. Don't give persecutors the same stuff they expect to receive from any other person of the world.

Instead, give them more of the Jesus they've recognized within you and don't understand.

Give them kindness when they expect to hear unkind words. Give them love when they expect hate.

When they take advantage of your generosity, give them a little more with a verbal witness to God's love for them.

We should never mistake Jesus's words as permission to allow others to abuse us physically or emotionally. Part of loving ourselves is maintaining our own dignity and sense of self-worth as a person of worth in God's eyes.

While the responses Jesus advocates sound like uncommon sense, they are responses that give us a great deal of power over those who are persecuting us. Doing the right thing sends a message that they may take a lot from us but they cannot take away from us our ability to choose how we will respond to them.

When we choose to respond to them with love instead of hate, we show that we are the ones who have the power over them, not the other way around. That is possible because of the Christ who lives within us. The Christ who rose from the dead is the one who imparts the power to us, because "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26b).