

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

Sermon Series

Sermon 10: Persecuted for Righteousness

Matthew 5:10-12 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Remember that Jesus' listeners were anxious for Jesus to announce a rebellion against the Romans. The people desired to be an exalted nation and wealthy. They were disappointed when Jesus spoke about being poor in spirit and meek. The principles of the kingdom of heaven do not foster pride and selfish ambition.

Instead of wealth and position in a powerful nation Jesus suggests that His followers would be persecuted for righteousness. That sounds strange doesn't it? Why would someone be persecuted for righteousness?

Have you heard this saying before?

A righteous man is driven from 9 villages.

Why would a righteous man be driven from 9 villages?

The systems of the world are built on the principle of self. They work through selfishness, pride and greed. And people love those systems. They operate in those systems and support those systems as long as they are benefited by those systems.

I have used the Kemal Sunal film *Koltuk Belası* as an illustration before and I will use it again. Kemal Sunal is a government official in a small resort town. A contractor comes into Kemal's office and wants to build a hotel on a government protected bay. Kemal tells the contractor that it is illegal. What does the contractor do? Does the contractor say to himself, "I want to protect our country's natural beauty and obey its laws"? No, he offers Kemal a bribe. Why? The contractor wants money. The contractor is thinking of only himself. Kemal refuses the bribe. Does the contractor love Kemal for his righteousness? No, he hates him because of righteousness.

Kemal becomes the mayor and he systematically begins to enforce the laws of the municipality. The bread maker is caught making underweight bread. The gas station is selling adulterated gas. Kemal has them shut down and fined. Do the people love the mayor for righteousness? No. They hate him.

People love to be connected. They love to get advantages for themselves through contacts and connections that other people cannot enjoy. It may be to get a traffic fine dropped. It may be to build a home on government land. It may be to see the doctor without waiting in line. It may be to get a government contract. It may be get permission for a business that others cannot. People love this system of "connections" as long as they can benefit from it. They don't want a system where everyone is treated as equal. They want a system where they can get an unfair advantage.

I know a wealthy man who built a university dormitory for financially struggling students. A relative who was not struggling financially wanted to live in the dormitory so that she would not have to ride the bus to school. She wanted the rich uncle to put her in the dorm instead of a poorer student. The rich uncle refused, saying that the niece did not need such benefits. Did the niece love the rich uncle for helping the poor or hate him because he did not give privileges to a relative?

Many people have found that when they quit smoking and drinking and laughing at dirty jokes that they lost friends? Why? Their purity and righteousness offended their friends. Their consciences were stricken. Righteousness itself is a silent yet loud rebuke to sin.

Genesis 4:3-8 And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. ⁴ Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, ⁵ but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. ⁶ So the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?" ⁷ "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it." ⁸ Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.

Why did Cain kill his brother? What did Abel do to Cain that made him so angry? Abel didn't do anything to Cain. Abel was righteous and Cain was not. This made Cain angry enough to kill Abel.

John 3:20 "For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

It is this anger that motivates persecution. It is this anger that drives a righteous man from 9 villages. It has its origin in Satan. If you will try to live a righteous life, I promise you that your life will become more difficult. Troubles will spring up from places you never dreamed they could come from. Satan is at work to discourage you and urge to give up righteousness for sin. And you may be tempted to think you are on the wrong path. You may think to yourself, "If I was on the right way then God would bless me with peace and comfort. I wouldn't have all these troubles." Jesus assures us that the righteous will have troubles. The wicked will put you away from their company.

Matthew 5:11 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.

Jesus specifically mentions persecution because of Himself. You can be an atheist and no one will bother you or care. If you are a Buddhist or if you hold fancy ideas about reincarnation you will probably not draw much attention to yourself. But if you say that you are a follower of Jesus Christ then there will be persecution. People will think that God will punish them with bad things if they associate with you. They will distance themselves from you to protect themselves from the vengeance of God. They will not do business with you. They will speak badly about you.

You may think to yourself, "Before I began following Christ everything was fine and now it is going badly. God must be punishing me because I follow Christ." Jesus said that if you follow Him into the kingdom of heaven that you will be persecuted.

Jesus Himself never sinned. And yet He was persecuted all the days of His life and finally killed. If He never sinned why did people hate Him so much?

John 3:19-21 "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ "For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹ "But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."

Jesus said that when we are persecuted we should be glad. How can we be glad when we are persecuted? Because we know that the prophets were persecuted before us. The prophets were sustained by God's power. The promise is:

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The reward of the prophets is great and so is our reward.

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, ¹⁸ while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.

Are you suffering because you are a follower of Jesus? Do people make fun of you and disassociate themselves from you? You are not alone. People persecuted the prophets too. The Lord is by your side. You can be glad because you know that God will strengthen you. You know that you have a place in the eternal kingdom of God.