

We're back at it this week, our second-to-last Beatitude message. We took a little break last week. Today we're looking at the last 'Blessed' verses, and next week we'll close off the series looking at the whole group of them.

And perhaps you've noticed, but I changed the title again. Which sounds flighty but hear me out, because I think Jesus has something for us in this. It's not just a change in title but a change in perspective.

The first title was "How Shall We Live?" And that's a fair title when we're first approaching the Beatitudes, because we instinctively think that Jesus is telling us how to live.

But remember, back in chapter 4, Jesus has started His preaching ministry by saying to the crowds, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He's shown signs of that Kingdom come near, and now He's explaining what that looks like. How shall we live *in light of* that Kingdom come near?

So then I changed the title to "Make Something of Us." Because as we journey through these beatitudes, we realize that we're not being asked to just follow some rules. Jesus isn't giving us a moral guidebook here, as if these Beatitudes are a Kingdom to-do checklist.

We need Him to make something of us, *so that* we can live into these realities, heaven's realities, that He has brought near. The Beatitudes are what we look like when the Kingdom breaks through us. That's something that the King needs to be involved in.

Like we saw with King David in Psalm 51 a few weeks back: "Create in me a clean heart, a pure heart, oh God." We come before God in poverty of Spirit, in grief, in meekness, in humility, hunger and thirsting for Him to *do something* in us.

And as we've gone along in this series, yes, this is our great prayer, for God to do the necessary work within us. But to what end?

A couple weeks ago we talked about having a Beatitude impact. And that has stuck with me like glue. It's something to carry with us. It's a line that actually gave me chills as I was writing this.

Because *that's* ultimately what our greatest prayer should be as we study through these verses. That we wouldn't *just* be memorizing them, contemplating them, even applying them, but that these words would actually sink down so deeply into us that they start to have an outward impact. That the Kingdom-come-near starts to have an impact. It starts to break through.

So that *we* then start to have a Beatitude impact on one another. So that a "Beatitude impact" is the litmus test for us to gauge how integrated we really are into heaven's realities. So that seek to be a Beatitude Church that has a Beatitude impact. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

So on that note, we're going to read these verses like we've done every week.... **Read Matt. 5:1-2, then verse 10.**

Every Sunday morning before the service begins, the worship team and myself meet together in the Prayer Nook to run through the service and spend some time in prayer.

And almost every week, someone mentions in prayer how much of a privilege or a blessing it is that we get to gather in this place.

Why do we say this? Well, because we know that the freedom and safety that we experience here in this building is not the case for many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world.

Now, that's not to say that we don't experience different levels of pushback, discrimination, or even hatred as Christians here in Canada.

But we need to be careful that we don't minimize the word that Jesus uses here, because it's a weighty one—so much so that it's the only Beatitude Jesus felt a need to explain in further detail.

The word here for persecute is also the word for *pursue*—so when it's used in the context of oppressing or harassing someone or a group of people, there's this added oomph to the harassment. The individual doing the harassing is in active pursuit, almost like they're chasing after them.

So when Jesus speaks about being persecuted, He's not speaking about harassment or bullying or belittling—although those are all serious things in their own respects. I'm grateful for the growing awareness and intolerance that we have here in Canada for bullying and harassment—especially in schools and in the workplace. But persecution is on a whole other level.

With persecution, there's an added intensity to it, because it means to actively pursue someone in an aggressive and targeted way in order to oppress them.

Why on earth would Jesus say that you are blessed when this happens to you? Why would he tell us in verse 12 to rejoice and be glad when this happens?

Why would Jesus speak about persecution like this, when He knows that many of His followers will be sought out and killed because of their pursuit of *Him*. Because of *Him*. When in pursuing Jesus, many—at that time, in history, and even more so in our day-and-age today—will be arrested, beaten, put in prison, abused, oppressed, and even killed.

They will be pursued *because they* are pursuing Jesus. What kind of leader would then say to His followers that “you are blessed” because of this?

About six weeks ago, in the area of Khartoum in Sudan, about 30 individuals with heavy machinery demolished a Pentecostal church while police and military personnel just looked on, doing absolutely nothing other than preventing some of the church members from intervening.

Rafat Samir, a local church leader, told a journalist that the future of Christianity is uncertain, and that churches located outside of the main cities are at risk of direct attacks. Sudanese authorities have also made it clear that permits are needed to reconstruct buildings, and they won't be given out to churches.

If this happened to you, to your church, would you consider yourself blessed?

A month ago today, a Syrian pastor and several members of his family were killed in what church officials have called a targeted massacre. More than 20 people were possibly killed.

Just days before this happened, leaflets were tossed around the city that called for violence against the 'cross worshippers,' and they were stamped against the doors of many churches. And a few weeks before, a church in Damascus was targeted by a suicide bomber.

If this happened to someone you knew, would you consider them blessed?

And just this last week...

Again, if this happened to you, would you consider yourself blessed?

Jesus' words here in vs. 10 and in the two verses that follow alone could cause even us—his followers—to question Him and get a bit upset. How can He say this? How can He encourage us to think this way? Why would He want this for us?

Churches set on fire. Pastors and their entire families killed. Whole villages—increasingly in countries like Nigeria—where militants are a regular threat. Women abducted and forced to convert to another religion. Government policies that make Christian practices and teaching illegal, or at the very least, that make conversions illegal.

This happens *all the time*. I don't think we here in our comfortable chairs always grasp or understand this. This happens *all the time*.

But look at the text. Jesus specifies here that His Kingdom belongs to those who are persecuted *because of righteousness*, or for righteousness' sake. And it's the same word that was used back in verse 6, when Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*"

For righteousness. For right relationship with God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted *as a result of* being in relationship with Jesus. As a result of their hungering and thirsting for right relationship with Him.

Blessed are those who have encountered the grace of God *in* Jesus, who want to taste the Kingdom-come-near Spirit, and who know that there is nothing else in this world that can satisfy them, *so much so* that they face the world's hate because of it.

Now, most of us really don't know what this is like. Some of us here have experienced what it means to be hated because of Jesus. Some of us here *know* what it is like to sacrifice everything because you have been called to follow Jesus.

But if you're like me, you've probably at most only had moments where someone maybe yelled at you or laughed at you because they found out that you were a Christian. But we haven't really experienced persecution in the way that Jesus is speaking of it here.

And perhaps His own disciples never assumed that they would either. Because in their minds, at least early on, Jesus was the one who was going to make sure they never had to experience persecution ever again.

That was the whole point of the Messiah—right? In their minds. That He would establish the Kingdom of God *right now*. And God's people wouldn't have to worry about oppression any longer.

But the disciples had to find out pretty quickly that Jesus wasn't there to fulfill their hopes for Him.

Later on in Matthew's gospel, in chapter 16, the text says that "*From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day to be raised to life.*"

In other words, it was at this point that Jesus started actually explaining to his disciples that they needed to change their assumptions about who He was and what He was intending to do.

And interestingly, this is when we have that famous scene of Peter standing up to Jesus and saying, "*Never, Lord!*" We will never let this happen to you! We won't let them take you! We'll protect you and fight for you!

But Jesus says to Peter, “*Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*” Harsh, harsh words. And to one of his closest companions.

But we have to see here that what Peter was saying to Jesus wasn’t so different than what the devil himself said when he was tempting Jesus in the desert—back in chapter 4—when he encouraged Jesus to jump off the temple building because angels would surely save Him.

Angels will protect you Jesus. We will protect you Jesus. Completely unaware, Peter was messing with Jesus’ mind and tempting Him to consider an alternative, one where the Messiah *doesn’t* need to be hated, or to suffer, or to be killed. Because there must be a better way, an easier way, a less painful way. One where Jesus is in the spotlight and admired rather than hated.

But Jesus knew that voice of deception, and He knew that Peter had drunk the Kool-Aid and was living in that deception.

Jesus *had* to go to Jerusalem. He *had* to face all the anger, vitriol, and violent wrath of the chief priests and teachers of the law who absolutely *hated* Him. And He had to be killed *by* those who hated Him *in order that* the hope of His presence and of resurrection could be made known to all those who would later be hated for following Him.

Again, Jesus never asks us to do anything that He hasn’t already done Himself. It’s why He says to His disciples in John 15:18, “*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.*”

In other words, this is inevitable. If the world hated me, it’s fair to assume that it may hate you as well. And the fact that He has gone before us is the *only hope* for we who follow Him and who are regularly tempted to find an easier way, a safer way, a more dependable way.

For those who have sacrificed homes, jobs, family connections, friends, their own country; who have literally left everything to now depend *on Jesus* for everything.

It is these brothers and sisters around the world to whom we should be giving the microphone, the megaphone, the highest platform. Because they are in a position to remind all the rest of us of what courageous faith really looks like, what *relying* on the Kingdom-come-near really looks like.

What poverty of spirit, grief, meekness, spiritual hunger, mercy, and purity of heart looks like when face-to-face with your enemy.

Blessed are you when your faith-under-fire brings others closer to the Kingdom. Blessed are you when, like Jesus, you are not swayed by the voices who say to you, “It doesn’t need to be this hard.” Blessed are you when you draw nearer to the Kingdom *because* you are carrying your cross as Jesus asked you to.

Friends, we need to understand that we are not here to live easy lives. This isn't supposed to be easy. We have been called, elected, and invited into God's holy family as adopted sons and daughters *to be a light* to those who do not know Him. To speak the name of Jesus.

Of course it's going to be hard. Because although things seem rather comfortable here, our world is a spiritual battlefield, and there *are* forces at work trying to stamp out any seed that speaks of Jesus.

Have you ever thought that maybe the devil's key tactic for Canadian Christians is to make us mute? Shy? Inactive? Uncomfortable?

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that we go *looking* for persecution—like some tactless, thrill-seeking street preacher. That's not why Jesus was persecuted.

Pastor Darrell Johnson puts it this way: "Clearly Jesus was not persecuted for being obnoxious, or for being tactless or insensitive in the way He lived and spoke the good news. He was not running around shoving His gospel down people's throats."

So then why was He hated and persecuted? Because He preached a different Kingdom. He represented and embodied the values of a different Kingdom—a Kingdom that threatened the authority of the would-be religious powers; that flipped their control issues upside-down; that challenged their assumptions about what God's power in this world looks like.

A Kingdom that looks exactly like what Jesus has been teaching us these last two-three months.

When we sit with our King, and through relationship with Him seek to have a Beatitude impact, there will naturally be those who are drawn to Jesus' Kingdom, and others who will push back on it.

Some, like Peter, will think it's supposed to look different: more powerful, more obvious. And others, like the Pharisees, will just hate it. And we won't always know why.

But this is why I'm growing more and more convinced that the future of the church will rest in three things: in the faithful and unashamed teaching of God's Word, in the testimonies of God's people, and in the power of prayer—in the power of our voices and the voices of our persecuted friends pleading for the Kingdom-come-near to truly come near.

You may have heard of it, but Open Doors International is an agency that seeks to provide aid and advocacy for persecuted Christians around the world. And every year they put out a "World Watch List," which is basically a map depicting the top 50 countries for persecution.

I want to encourage you to keep the top 10 on your prayer list. (Name the countries.)

Yes, they need practical aid sometimes—food, money, resources, advocacy. But most often, when I read the testimonials of those in prison or facing violence, what they desire most is for their brothers and sisters around the world to be praying for them. To be aware of their situation and to pray.

For strength. For courage. For the presence of Jesus to be near. And not just for them. But for their enemies as well.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because they *courageously* hunger and thirst for righteousness. Because they aren't swayed by the persuasions of this world telling them that Jesus isn't worth following. Because this Kingdom-come-near is actually worth sacrificing everything for.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of relationship with Jesus. Who get pushed down but not destroyed. Who are suffering the aggressive pursuits of others yet continue to pursue Jesus no matter what the cost. Who rely on the power of heaven to sustain them, and the kingdom-come-near-in-Jesus to inspire them.

Who teach the rest of us what abandonment looks like, and who show us the depth of sacrifice that is possible when believers believe in and live under the Lordship of Christ.

Blessed are you when you face persecution yet pray for your enemies because your persecuted Saviour inspires you to do so.

Yours is the Kingdom of heaven.