

Trinity United Methodist Church

February 9, 2020

“Bless This Home: Persecuted”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Matthew 5:10-12

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

We are in the final week of our series, “Bless This Home.” We took a break last week to focus on our theme scripture for the year:

Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

But today we pick back up with the final Beatitude that we find in Matthew chapter 5. We’ve been looking at these sayings of Jesus as we consider what it means to have our lives blessed, and the reality is that God can bless whoever God wants to bless, right? God even blesses the unrighteous sometimes, and we say, “Well, that’s not fair.” But guess what? Grace isn’t fair, either, right? That’s why it’s undeserved.

So God can bless whoever God chooses to bless, but there are some ways that we can ensure that we would experience God’s blessing, and we find these in these sayings of Jesus at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

And one way in which we can be more sure that we are experiencing God’s blessings is if we live not just as Christians. If you ask many people, especially probably

around our county here in Isle of Wight, being part of the Bible Belt, so to speak, you would go out and ask people, “What religion would you say that you are?” And they might say, “Well, I’m Christian.” And we might follow up and say, “Oh really? Which church do you go to?” And they draw a blank, right? Or, “When was the last time you read the Bible?” And they draw a blank. “When was the last time you prayed?” “This morning, when I was hung over,” or whatever the case might be.

But it’s not about just being Christian in name only, but truly living with Christ at the center of our lives. If we want our homes to be blessed, whatever our homes look like, to truly live with Christ at the center of our homes. With Christ influencing every single decision we make as families, as individuals. Come on. Every single decision? What about buying a car? Yes, like buying a car. What about... Whatever the case is, yes. Living Christ-centered in all that we do. Everything that we do revolves around our faith in Christ.

And the good news is that if you live this really Christ-centered life with Christ at the center of all that you do, Jesus says you will be persecuted. Isn’t that what you wanted to hear? Isn’t that what you came for this morning, a nice, uplifting, feel-good, warm and fuzzy sermon that we’re going to be persecuted? Awesome! That’s just fantastic. But yes, the more Christ-centered we live, the more we can expect to be mocked, to be ridiculed, to be made fun of.

Craig Groeschel of Life.Church tells a story of how he and his family moved into a new neighborhood and they soon learned that they had moved in just before this huge neighborhood block party at someone’s house that had a pool. So they were like, “Oh, maybe we’ll get invited.” They were the new neighbors on the block, and they were invited. He’s at the party and strikes up a conversation with another neighbor and they were chit-chatting and telling about each other’s kids and so forth. And the guy says, “Hey, I got to tell you, usually these parties are a lot more fun than this one’s going to be.” And Craig says, “Well, why is that?” The guy said, “Because usually we get a huge keg and we get bleppity drunk and we have all kinds of bleppity fun.” And Craig said, “Well, why is that not happening at this party?” And the guy said, “Well, the word on the street is that some bleppity pastor and his family moved into the neighborhood and they’re going to be here tonight, and so that’s why there’s no keg here tonight.” So the conversation went on, and the inevitable “So what do *you* do?” question came up for Craig. And he said, “Well, to be honest with you, evidently, according to what you said, I ruin keg parties for a living.”

As we look over our sermon series, if we’re hungering and thirsting for righteousness in an unrighteous world, people are going to mock us. If we’re trying to live pure in heart and we’re trying to live that way in a world that idolizes impurity, we’re going to get made fun of. If we try to be peacemakers in a world, and especially in a

church and especially in families that are full of dysfunctional *peacekeepers*, we're going to be thought of as weird, as unusual, and maybe even called crazy. I can't tell you the number of times that I have interrupted somebody in their complaint about somebody else to say, "Hold on. Have you gone and talked to that person directly?" Then they look at me and say, "*You must be crazy* to think that I would do that first." Then why are you coming and telling me about the person?

What does it mean to be persecuted for Christ? What does it mean to endure hardship for our faith in Christ? Some of you might say, "Well, obviously, Dan, you are the preacher and you're going to be persecuted. And after all, you're kind of odd, so you've got it coming to you, anyway." But the reality is that you don't have to be the preacher (or the preacher's family) to be persecuted. And I would even add that you *shouldn't* have to be the preacher or the preacher's family to be persecuted.

Because Jesus said we will be persecuted because of righteousness. And what does righteousness mean? I said in Bible study this past Wednesday that there's a big difference between being righteous and being *self-righteous*. And if you don't know which one of those two you're being, ask somebody who lives with you or who knows you well. They'll tell you. But righteousness means living right. Living holy as God is holy. Living perfect as our God in heaven is perfect, as Jesus commanded us to do. It does not mean to be persecuted simply for the positions or the opinions that we hold, especially our political ones. We're not talking about that. We're talking about something altogether different. We're persecuted because of how we live our faith in Jesus.

For instance, the story of Cain and Abel. You remember that story from Genesis? Cain and Abel were brothers and they both offered up sacrifices to God, and at the end of the story, Cain does what? Kills his brother Abel. But in that story, Abel didn't say a word to Cain. Abel didn't *do* anything to Cain. Cain was upset because of Abel's righteousness and so burned inside by that that he murdered his brother.

Now in our US culture, we might say a word of thanks that persecution doesn't quite look like that. It doesn't look nearly as bad. It mostly looks like being made fun of and being mocked, which can hurt in and of itself. Sticks and stones break our bones, but words *do* hurt also. If we're teenagers or if we're not married yet, it might look like being made fun of or being broken up with because you won't have sex before marriage. It might look like folks being exasperated with us when we won't go to certain movies or watch certain TV shows because there's a little bit of poop in them, and a little bit of poop goes a long way, right? (And if you don't know what I'm talking about, go back and listen to the "Pure in Heart" sermon; there was a little bit of poop in the brownies. Ew, right? And that's why we don't go to those movies.)

It might mean that we get made fun of for giving church and worship a priority above sports and our hobbies. If we are a Christ-centered family, we will be persecuted.

And so what should we do in response? The best is just to be prepared for it. To number one, to flat-out expect it. Paul writes to Timothy in the second letter to Timothy, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Plain and simple. It’s been happening to Christians from the first century onward. And throughout the whole Bible, we’re called to live differently than all of those around us. And the more that we live with Christ at the center of our lives, the more we’re going to live differently from those around us, and the more that we live differently from those around us, the more we’re going to get strange looks and comments at the least. So just expect it. Be ready for it. It’s kind of fun when you play with people, right? You know, make some smart comment about it back to them. It might be jabs that are thrown at you at holiday dinners, when you go, “All right, it’s time to pray,” and people roll their eyes, and *there goes the ‘Christian’ member of the family*, right?

Maybe it’s harassment on Facebook from religious posts that we might put up there, Scripture or otherwise. In the early days of Facebook I had a fraternity brother that felt the need to comment on just about anything I put up there. “Oh, that’s a nice comment, *Preacher*,” and “Oh, how about that, *Pastor*,” and so forth. He would even use the F-bomb in comments on my posts. And another Christian brother or sister asked me, “Why don’t you edit those posts? Why don’t you delete them?” I said, “Because I would much rather him interact with me and keep up a relationship that I might be able to influence in some way than to just sit there and delete his posts.” After all, a little bit of cursing doesn’t bother me. Why do we expect non-Christians to act like Christians?

Maybe it’s being made fun of for reading your Bible at school or at work. Maybe it’s not being invited to the party because the word on the street is that you’ve ruined keg parties also. Maybe it’s being overlooked for a promotion. Persecution here is *nothing* like what it is in other countries. What we consider as persecution here in this country amounts to a loss of *privilege*, yes. And when we’ve been privileged for so long as Christians in this country and we lose that privilege, it feels like persecution, but it’s nothing like what brothers and sisters go through in other parts of the world.

Jesus said, “be prepared for it. If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. If you belong to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I’ve chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you. A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me,” Jesus says, guess what: “they will persecute you, also.”

So just expect it. And then when it happens, endure it. It is not the time for whining and complaining. “Oh, why me?” Why *not* you? Why *not* me? It’s not the time to

retaliate or get revenge. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure it. Our example is Jesus, who suffered even a death on the cross.” He was taunted on the cross: You claim you save the world—save yourself! And he could have. He could have called down all kinds of wrath on those who were doing that to him. But he didn’t.

Again, brothers and sisters around the world are literally losing their lives, being disfigured, being disowned by their families when they convert to Christ, losing homes because of their faith in Christ. I think we can handle being ridiculed for choosing to use our vacation time for a mission trip instead of kicking back somewhere warm and sunny, or being laughed at because we dress modestly instead of looking like we’re headed out to work the corner. Or being embarrassed to drive around our old beater of a car because we’re committed to getting out of debt so that we can use our money better at God’s direction.

When we endure persecution, it also does something in us. I’ve heard of so many clergy friends that have been mocked for leaving lucrative jobs in order to go into ordained ministry, even by really close family and friends. “What in the world are you doing?”, they say. It helps us realize when we endure persecution that we’re living for God’s approval and not people’s approval.

And it does something in others, too. When we look at the history of the church around the world and the fastest times of growth and the largest times of growth of the church, it’s when we’ve been persecuted, literally persecuted. When China finally opened its doors to missionaries coming in from the West, all these missionaries went rushing in saying, “We’ve got all these godless Chinese people to convert to Christianity.” And they got in there and they realized that the Chinese church was already numbering in the tens of thousands, if not more, because they had been underground and they, under persecution, had grown so rapidly. When you’re facing life or death, literally, because of your faith and you choose to risk death because of your faith, other people see that. And they go, “*That* must be something worth believing in. I want to be a part of that.”

And, in fact, so little persecution that the church faces in the western world and has for centuries has been one of the death knells for the church in the western world, because we’ve become just one option among many of how to spend our time and talent and energy, rather than being *the* source of light and life in the midst of darkness.

So expect persecution, endure persecution, and lastly, embrace it. Peter wrote a couple letters in the Bible also, and one of those he wrote to persecuted Christians in Rome. These were the Christians who were being tossed into the Coliseum for thousands of people to watch as they were devoured by lions, right there for all to see.

And so Peter was writing to those who were waiting to be thrown literally to the lions, and he said, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

Expect it, endure it, and even more so, embrace it, and turn it into an opportunity for praise and prayer.

You might have seen on the news more recently of Pastor Lawan Andimi, a pastor in Nigeria, who was captured by Boko Haram, an extremist Muslim group, and was made to do one of the hostage videos, where they give a script of “I’m being treated wonderfully here,” and all that sort of stuff. He ignored the script and turned it into a video of testimony about the goodness of God and faith in Jesus, even while being literally a prisoner. A few weeks later he was beheaded for that.

But embracing it also serves a practical purpose, because oftentimes bullies, and those making fun of us, are trying to get a rise out of us. They’re trying to get us to lash back out at them so they can say, “Ha! That’s what I thought! Some Christian you are.” But praise and prayer lowers our heart rate. It lowers our blood pressure. We all have a certain point when our heart rate hits that point, the point of no turning back, where our brain kicks in, the lizard part of the brain, the reactive part of the brain, and we lash, or flee, or whatever. The praise and prayer lower the heart rate so that we don’t reach that point. It lowers our chances of exploding back at them. And friends, *nothing gets under their skin more than when they can’t get a rise out of us.*

But then lastly, the word that Jesus uses for “persecute” in other places in the New Testament is translated as “pursue.” Paul writes in Timothy, “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness.” Those who are persecuting us, who are coming at us—they’re pursuing us, in a way, aren’t they? Their attention is focused on us. And maybe in the midst of persecuting us, they’re really pursuing us, whether they realize it or not, because they see what we have and they want it, too, whether they realize it or not. They see the fruit of the Spirit in us: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control. And whether they realize it or not, they really want those things for themselves and they see that we’ve got it, and they want it, too.

So really, Jesus is saying: Don’t worry when you’re persecuted. That means you’re on the right track. Worry when you’re not. Because it comes down to, are we just simply being Christian, or are we really living with Christ at the center of all that we do?

Thanks be to God. Amen.

