

Happiness Under Fire

Matthew 5:10-12 and Acts 17:16-34

Pastor Tom Anderson

Jesus has saved the hardest teaching about happiness for last: “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...” It is a double beatitude worthy of our special attention. If we choose to be happy by living in the first seven beatitudes, we will make ourselves stand out. People who stand out draw attention, and that attention is usually negative because the world is negative, and negative people really do not like positive, happy people. Jesus spent a great deal of time preparing his followers for persecution, and he assured them it would be fierce, and it was, as we see just a little sample in the lesson from Acts today.

Christianity is a religion that was born, formed and matured in persecution. This is one of the things that makes Christianity historically distinct from Islam. The first three hundred years of Christianity were a time of a persecuted minority, and so Christianity developed a deep emphasis on love for enemies, humility and faithfulness in suffering. By contrast the first three hundred years of Islam were a time of conquest and empire building, hence Islam carries an inherent aspiration to power.

The persecution of the early Christianity took two main forms: 1) from 35 AD to about 90 AD, Jewish persecution in the form of violent expulsion from the synagogues of the ancient world, and 2) from 64 AD to 311 AD, state-sponsored persecution of Christians. Nero kicked second phase off by blaming Christians for a fire that nearly destroyed Rome. He had them rounded up, tortured and crucified by the hundreds. Why was Christianity so consistently despised and opposed for nearly 300 years, especially given the pluralistic attitudes of the Roman Empire towards nearly all religions and philosophies? The consensus of historians both ancient and modern is clear: it was because of the radical monotheism and exclusive obedience to Jesus Christ proclaimed in Christian preaching. The Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was seen as a direct challenge to the empire where Caesar was Lord.

Christians are persecuted today for the very same reason; because we believe and proclaim there is one God and one Lord, to whom we owe exclusive allegiance. Human rights organizations have made a list of the ten worst places in the world for Christians to live: North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Maldives, Bhutan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Laos, Uzbekistan and China. We should always be in prayer for our sisters and brothers in Christ who are losing their lives, their jobs, and their families because they follow Christ. May God protect them, deliver them, relieve them and give them the freedom we enjoy.

Persecution wears many faces, and it is to be seen in our own land as well. Some years ago when my parents lived in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, I learned the school board there decided to end the practice of having the school children say the pledge of allegiance to the flag every morning because it mentions You-Know-Who (God). In defiance, many parents began taking their children to school and gathering with them in the parking lot to recite the pledge together en masse. Five years ago as a Scoutmaster, the local United Way hauled me before their board for an interrogation because they were concerned that the Scout oath mentions a duty to You-Know-Who. Two years ago, Richard Dawkins released his blockbuster attack on Christianity *The God Delusion* which became a bestseller. In the spirit of the age, a survey of university faculty in America revealed that 55% had a negative reaction to the word "Christian". Christians are not well thought of in the modern world for the same reason as in the ancient world: because they dare to proclaim there is one God and one Lord.

There are some real advantages to being persecuted. Number one: it means that you stand for something. The best way not to be persecuted or singled out for anything, the best way to fit in and be at peace with everyone is to be a nobody, to stand for nothing. Once a church member complained that all I ever talked about was salvation. I took his criticism as a badge of honor.

Number two: it means that other people are taking you and your beliefs seriously. In fact, to be scandalized by the gospel message is the first sign that someone is beginning to understand what it really means! Number three: it means that you are in the best of company. Jesus reminds us that we are in the company of all the great prophets: Moses and Miriam, Deborah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and others. We might add John Wesley, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Theresa, all of whom were viciously attacked. A

final advantage is the assurance that God will settle the score; God will have the last word, and it will be a good one. Think of Rome—all of its soldiers and Caesars are gone and forgotten, but the church lives! Think of the Soviet Union where Stalin put to death 30 million of his own people and sought to extinguish Christian faith—it is gone and forgotten: just ask any school kid today if they even know what the Soviet Union is.

You see, Jesus tells us that we can choose our reactions to persecution. The one thing that no government or force on earth can take away is our ability to choose how we will react to what happens to us. On this score, some people are their own worst persecutors. They lament their failures and missed opportunities and say to themselves “if”; “if only”... When you catch yourself playing the “if only” game, try replacing “if only” with “next time.” It is impossible to be happy without a good sense of self-respect.

What should you do when you are persecuted? First of all, none of us should go looking for it. Jesus never wanted to raise up a bunch of loud mouths with chips on their shoulders, itching for confrontation. The Bible says, “as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Romans 12:18)

By the same token, we ought not to try to completely escape it either. Jesus said, “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” (John 15:20)

We ought not to return evil for evil, or we will lose our witness. If we return evil for evil, then it is not persecution anymore; it is just a fight.

Finally, we pray for our enemies and hope in God for our salvation and deliverance. We know God is able to see us through as he did Jesus and all of the prophets, apostles and saints who have gone before us.

Let me close with a letter written by a Baptist Missionary to Iraq, Karen Watson, prior to leaving for the Middle East in 2003. She wrote it to her pastors to be opened in case of her death. Karen was killed, along with four other missionaries, a year later.

Dear Pastor Phil and Pastor Roger:

You should only be opening this letter in the event of my death.

When God calls, there are no regrets. I tried to share my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn't called to a place. I was called to him. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected, his glory my reward.

One of the most important things to remember right now is to preserve the work....I am writing this as if I am still working with my people group.

I thank you all so much for your prayers and support. Surely your reward in heaven will be great. Thank you for investing in my life and spiritual well-being. Keep sending missionaries out. Keep raising up fine young pastors.

In regards to any service, keep it small and simple. Yes, simply, just preach the gospel....Be bold and preach the life-saving, life-changing, forever-eternal gospel. Give glory and honor to our Father.

The Missionary Heart:

Care more than some think is wise.

Risk more than some think is safe.

Dream more than some think is practical.

Expect more than some think is possible.

I was called not to comfort or success but to obedience....There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving him. I love you two and my church family.

In his care,

Salaam,

Karen