**Beatitudes 8  
Persecuted and blessed**

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Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 6:20-26

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:10)

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There is a polling company called “Public Policy Polling,” and they have just released the results of a poll[[1]](#endnote-1). (They’re a Democratic polling firm, that didn’t do well in the 2016 election, but it generally seen as not terrible.)

They asked a lot of questions, but one of the questions they asked was the following:

Which of the following groups do you think faces the most discrimination in America today: Christians, Jews, or Muslims?

Overall, 49% of those polled said Muslims; 29% said Christians, 8% said Jews, and 14% said they were not sure. Among those who said they voted for Trump in the last election, 54% said Christians. Eight percent of Clinton voters said Christians. That’s a pretty big difference.

It’s a little hard to parse out what this means.

Republican voters label themselves as Christian more often than Democratic ones (and more so, I think, for the Trump/Hillary split). So perhaps it means Christians see it Christian persecution “on the ground” than more secular groups. Of course, there are more Christians than other groups, so discrimination that affect them might, by sheer numbers, mean we are discriminated against more. Or it might mean we are blind to the discrimination against the others.

This is kind of a now-classic Facebook fight. You can imagine, or perhaps you don’t have to imagine, the memes going back and forth. Christians are not discriminated against! Christians are discriminated against! And let’s not even start talking about “Merry Christmas” vs. “Happy Holidays.”

When Jesus spoke these words, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” there was literally no one called a Christian. His followers numbered only a few. In fact, if I am right, these blessings are spoken to people who are being welcomed into the kingdom of heaven; they are not yet Jesus followers, but they are being invited to follow.

Jesus, with his rugged honesty, needs to tell these potential followers that there will be a cost, as well as blessings, to following him.

To live as a follower of Jesus really is to live at odds with the worlds’ values. And, when there are differences, there will be consequences.

As I have said previously,

Jesus reminds us that this blessedness of which he talks can take a dark turn. In fact, the world isn’t always kind to those who seek peace and mercy and poverty of spirit. We seek the “really real,” but most people live in the apparently real, and sometimes (not always) they get upset and even violent against those who try a different way. Jesus could point to the Jews’ history with the prophets who were often persecuted. The early church could point to people like Stephen the martyr. We could point to the early Anabaptist martyrs or Martin Luther King. Above all, we look to Jesus, the author of these beatitudes, murdered for our sake. Sometimes, people don’t like it when we shine lights where they don’t want lights to be shone.

But Jesus reminds us that this doesn’t negate the kingdom of heaven, the “really real.” His path leads to the kingdom of heaven whether or not we criticized or punished or even killed for following it. Just as Jesus himself was raised from the dead, so too the kingdom of heaven last forever and expands forever. In fact, our very persecution might give us some joy as we recognize that good people have been being persecuted for doing the right things for a long time, and it’s evidence that we’re doing the right thing. Paul, mysteriously, said *he* wanted to complete the sufferings Christ felt for his church, and I think it is clearly true that the church still has some sufferings to do.

It’s also important, I think, is Jesus’s says we are blessed when we are persecuted *for righteousness’ sake*. The shape of that righteousness is poverty, mourning, meekness, the desire for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, and peacemaking.

It should go without saying that Christians, Jesus’s followers, should never be in the place of the *persecutors*, for that truly would be wicked. Sadly, people who name the name of Jesus have so very often been in such a place. When we are discriminated for that reason, I think we have a special burden to meekly receive that chastisement, and seek to make peace, to make amends even for our sisters and brothers who have done the wrong thing.

But we should also remember our sisters and brothers elsewhere who are under extreme pressure. For example, Mennonite and Church of the Brethren believers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are being displaced in great numbers. Due to a conflict between rebels and the national security forces, about half, or about 5000, Mennonites have been forced to flee their homes. Both sides are targeting civilians for killing, conscription, mutilation, and rape. And of course there are many others, Christians, co-religionists, and people of no particular faith who are under duress for doing the right thing, or just being in the way.

Let’s finish up by reviewing the beatitudes, seeing if we can remember all eight. Here are some things we might remember:

There are eight in total.

The first and the last end in the blessing of “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The first three name states, pretty much open to anyone: poor in spirit, mournful, meek. The next is a state of desire to live righteously. The next three describe actions: mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking.

That’s a 3-1-3 pattern, a nice Biblical seven!

Finally, there might be blowback as we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

(There are three ‘states’, one ‘desire’, three ‘actions’: a good, Biblical Seven; and persecution to follow)

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

1. “Trump holds steady after Charlottesville; Supporters Think Whites, Christians Face Discrimination”. http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2017/PPP\_Release\_National\_82317.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-1)