

We come to the last in our series in the Beatitudes. Later on in the summer we will pick up the rest of the Sermon on the Mount but today we finish the Beatitudes.

Just a reminder that Jesus had gone up a mountain and sat down with his disciples closest to him but with a large crowd listening in. As he spoke we get these 8 Beatitudes. They all begin with the word “blessed” and they are a statement of how fortunate people are who are in the kingdom of God.

That is not all for the beatitudes also contain an implicit invitation to become this kind of person.

These Beatitudes describe what we should all be like as Christians, hence the title of the series, “How then should we live.” Jesus has something to say to all of us here and we have been seeing that over the weeks.

So Matt 5:10, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

If we wish to understand these words we must stand under them and we can do that by first asking questions of the text and then seeing how that text speaks to us in a context which is very different to those original listeners.

1. Who are ‘those who are persecuted’?

As Jesus spoke to his disciples and those listening in who did he have in mind? I think there are three clues in the passage to help us understand who Jesus had in mind. In v10 he spoke of those who were persecuted “because of righteousness”. Now as he said that perhaps they wondered what he meant. Later on in 5:20 he said their righteousness must “surpass that of the Pharisees” if they would enter the Kingdom of heaven and, as he would explain later, the way to enter the kingdom of heaven was to accept him as Saviour and Lord. So righteousness here could be seen as short hand for believing and following Jesus. That leads to the second clue in the words “kingdom of heaven” for, as we will see more in a moment, he was saying to be part of God’s kingdom sets people against the world. The third clue is there in v11 and the reference to all kinds of persecution “because of me”, that is because of belonging to Jesus.

Can you see what he was saying to them about who would be persecuted?

Jesus made it even clearer to these disciples at the end of his life when at the last supper he said, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” (John 15:18-19)

Persecuted for belonging to Jesus just as down the ages we have seen people persecuted for being Jewish, coloured, protestant, Roman Catholic and so on.

This was what Jesus was saying to these disciples, that following him would not be glory, glory hallelujah but the way of persecution.

But note the words are general they cover all Christians and we must not in our day think that this only refers to people in countries like Iraq, Syria or Ethiopia. This is a much broader statement in which Jesus is saying if you follow me you will be persecuted. It is a Beatitude, a mark of the authentic Christian just as are the other Beatitudes.

I hope it is clear to us what Jesus was saying here. If we recognise we are poor in spirit, weep over our sin and in meekness seek God's righteousness, God will fill us with a desire to show mercy, create in us that pure and undivided heart and empower us as peacemakers. That is a great CV and you would think that such people would be welcomed by others with open arms. However, Jesus said if you do all this you will be persecuted.

We might ask why? We see the answer in the life of Jesus and how his life and teaching brought such fierce opposition that ultimately it cost him his life. His words to his disciples following on from those word from John earlier, "'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15:20) That was indeed what happened and that reading we had from 1 Peter 1 shows that as Peter wrote "now you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Peter 1:6).

There is a spiritual battle going on and, if we are followers of Jesus, we are not Switzerland, we are not neutral in that battle.

I tell you friends we have never had it so good in this country have we? If we vote in this party we will get this and this and this. If we vote in another party we will get lots of other things and so presumably if we get a coalition we will get the world.

Jesus was saying if you sign up for me you will get..... persecuted.

Who are those who will be persecuted? It is those who seek and follow righteousness, that is Jesus Christ.

The question that follows on from that should be obvious

2. How are such people "blessed"?

Well Jesus spells out the answer, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". Let's remember that the word blessed here is not about something subjective like happiness. Rather Jesus is describing something objective. Jesus is declaring not what they feel like but what God thinks of them. The blessing is to know that we are children of God and one of the signs of that is when we are persecuted -ouch!

But we must not miss what Jesus was saying here, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. Persecution is a sign that we belong to the King of Kings. That opens to us as children of God so much of God’s blessings and treasure store.

But what does that really mean?

I can understand if you sit here regularly and look at me and think yes this Ian, he drives a flash car, he is well dressed, enjoys great holidays and so on, I wouldn’t mind tapping into some of what he has. Well tough! However. When my son Philip comes home each Christmas he does exactly that. He uses my car, knows the pin number to my debit card, sleeps in my house and eats my food and so on – why does he have such access to the things that are mine because he is my son. Meanwhile my daughter dumps her problems, she calls them children, on me, sorry you parents of young children I am not a baby-sitting service. She can do that because she is my daughter.

Now I hope you can see where this is going. As sons and daughters of God we are blessed as his children by having access to the things of God, as with my son to so many things, God’s grace, power love, mercy, strength, and so on. As children of God we can dump our problems on him in prayer and know he will help us in times of troubles. These and more are the blessings of the kingdom of heaven.

However, there is so much more. Our children know that when we die all that we have will go to Battersea dogs home, no will be theirs. So they have blessings in part now but even more then.

With those who follow Jesus we have the blessings of the kingdom in part now but when we die or when Christ returns then we will receive the full blessings of the kingdom as in heaven we will see him face to face and rejoice in his presence and all our problems, weaknesses and tears will be put aside.

The blessings as we have said before are in part now but to be fulfilled in the future. If we are in Christ then ours is the kingdom of heaven.

3. How then should we live?

So what did Jesus expect those first listeners to do as a result of what he said and what does he expect you and I to do? Let me suggest four things out of many.

a. count the cost. I think that, while Jesus was saying this as a positive, “you will be persecuted but don’t worry it is part of being a child of the King and you have all the king’s resources behind you”, he was also letting them know that to follow him was not an easy option and in so doing to encourage them to count the cost of following him. The small print is made large if you like. There is a cost to following Jesus. Now Jesus as I said was saying these things because he wanted these 12 men he had selected to follow him. He speaks to us today through these words because he wants

you and I to follow him. I am setting them before us because I want us to follow Jesus and indeed the strap line for this Church is “to follow Jesus in every way.”

But Jesus didn’t want them following him blindly. He didn’t want them starting off thinking this is great and then later on, when the going got tough, bailing out with the thoughts, this is not what I signed up for”. Nor does he want us to do that.

Friends we are here to help people come to know Jesus as Saviour and Lord and to help people grow in their relationship with God. I hope that is happening for you. However, it would be wrong not to spell out the cost. I was talking with someone the other day about Satnavs and he said he had bought a new one which warned you about potential traffic hold up but only when he got it out and read the small print did he realise that you had to have a smart phone and the necessary app to link it to the satnav. If we would follow Jesus we need to be aware of the cost. Perhaps you are here today or listening on download and either thinking of following Jesus or are new to following Jesus if so then let me say to you that to follow Jesus is the best thing we can do but it can be tough. Not everyone will appreciate your faith and your life following Jesus. You will find persecution recognise that truth.

b. expect to be hurt. Is that a bit strong? I think it is what Jesus was saying when he moves in v11 from the impersonal “Blessed are those” to the more personal “blessed are you” and then follows it with these words “when people insult you, persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you”. That is the persecution Jesus was thinking of and that kind of stuff hurts doesn’t it? However, it is clear that Jesus speaks through these followers to us today because we know that these are the things that can happen and not just to people in other countries but to the ordinary Christian. I wonder for you as you run these words through your mind how do they resonate? Can you remember a time when someone has insulted you because of your faith? It may have been in a joking manner but what was said was offensive. Have people said evil things about you or perhaps cut you out of conversations of friendship groups because of your Christian commitment. For some indeed it will be much worse than that. I know people who have been cut off from their families when they came to faith and people who are slandered in the work place because of their faith. It happens and it hurts. I have to say at times some Christians deserve all they get because they behave in a weird, self-righteous, or plainly obnoxious manner that is not what Jesus was saying here. What he was saying is that if you stand for the truth of the gospel and if you live the way of Christ you will find people react against you and that will hurt. In the light of that I think flow the two further thoughts on how we should live.

c. trust in God and his resources. We are being hurt because we belong to the King of Kings so should we not expect the King to help us in that? But how should we respond when people persecute us? To answer that we listen to the words of Jesus and look to his example.

As I said earlier later in the summer we will look at the rest of the sermon on the Mount and there Jesus helps us understand how to respond in the face of persecution

i) don't retaliate, "do not resist an evil person" (Matt 5:39). Jesus makes us clear we are not to fight back against those who persecute us as his followers. We see that in his own life especially as he stood silent before Pilate. Resist the temptation to fight malicious talk about you with malicious talk against your persecutor

ii) "pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44) this is positive action as we bring to God our King those who are seeking our harm and seek his help in turning the situation around. Can you do that if you at the moment have someone in mind who is persecuting you? Can you pray for them? Jesus would encourage you to do that. Perhaps at the end go and speak with those doing prayer ministry and ask them. Being part of the kingdom of heaven means the resources of God are there for us let's use them.

iii) trust God. We have all seen the child who has fallen over and got hurt run to his mother or father and be comforted and in a sense that is what I'm saying here. If we are hurting through persecution then so is God our Father. His heart is warm in love towards us and he would encourage us to run into his arms and find our comfort there and the strength to go on. "Have we trials and temptations take it to the Lord in prayer in his arms he'll take and shield you, you will find a solace there". Do that will you? Run into the welcoming arms of God and find his love a comfort and solace.

d. "rejoice and be glad", v12. Yes that is what Jesus said. When you are being persecuted rejoice! What Jesus was saying here is that if we stand for him we will like Moses, Jeremiah and many other prophets and saints down the centuries be persecuted. It is a sign of being children of God and so in that sense we should rejoice. But more as he says here "your reward is in heaven". That is we get the right perspective where we desire the reward of heaven and the approval of God more than we desire the rewards of earth and the approval of humanity. It is those who have this perspective who are the people who are the salt of the earth, but that's the next verse and that's for the start of the summer holidays. Jesus word here is to keep our eyes on heaven and to see our persecution in that light and as we are hurt to find a sense of joy that eventually we shall be with him round the throne receiving his approval for remaining faithful through our trials.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

If we seek and follow righteousness, that is Jesus Christ we will be persecuted. ". Persecution is a sign that we belong to the King of Kings which opens to God's blessings and treasure store. So recognise persecution is part of the Christian life. Recognise that you will find hurts following Jesus and in them trust God, his goodness and power to bring you through and rejoice that your reward is in heaven.