

## Engage with the Persecuted

Matthew 5:10-12

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I stopped by a fast food restaurant one day this week for lunch. As I was eating my large fries without shame or guilt [no judging, please], I was jarred by a loud booming sound coming from behind me. I wasn't sure what was going on so I turned to look in the direction of the bathrooms and heard the thundering voice of a man yelling at a child. I looked around at my fellow fast food connoisseurs and only one couple seemed to be concerned even though everyone could hear what was going on. None of the workers heard the shouting because they were busy at work behind the counter. I immediately got up and raced into the bathroom, not sure what I was going to walk into.

When I opened the door I saw a man bending over yelling at the top of his lungs at a very young child. I raised my voice and said, "*Can I help with anything?*" The young boy reached for me and the man turned and started yelling at me. I held eye contact with him and repeated my question, "*Can I help with anything?*" The man took a step toward me and I slowly backed up. He said something else to me that I can't repeat and it was then that I played the pastor card – "*Sir, I'm a pastor and I was just wondering if I could help.*" He blew up at me again as we walked out of the bathroom.

And then a woman came up and told me to get out of their business because the child was hers and everything was ok. Because I wasn't so sure, I lingered a bit until the man yelled at me again. I watched until they left the restaurant, making sure the child was in no physical danger. They made some passing comments toward me and left.

I couldn't talk about this until I got home but it bothered me all afternoon. What happened is a picture of our topic today. Most of us have heard that there are some really bad things happening to Christians in other parts of the world. Their lives are in danger and some of us are bothered by it and want to do something. Others hear about the hurting, act like it's not happening, and don't want to get involved. And some, like the workers at the restaurant, are so busy that they don't even notice.

I engaged because I was outraged. That's my prayer for us today as we ponder the plight of the persecuted. *When we hear the hurting we'll want to help.*

But first lets define what a paradox is. *A paradox is a seemingly contradictory statement that is actually true.*

Here are some examples...

- Don't go near the water until you've learned how to swim.
- If you get this message, call me. If you don't get it, don't call.
- The more choices you have, the less satisfied you are with each one.

Jesus employed paradoxes in his preaching. Here are a few...

- ***“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*** (Matthew 16:25)
- ***“So the last will be first, and the first last.”*** (Matthew 20:16)
- ***“It is more blessed to give, than to receive.”*** (Acts 20:35)

→ **Operation Christmas Child** (Hold up box)

Speaking of giving, I'm so glad that we are partnering with Operation Christmas Child again this year. This is a practical way to meet the needs of children around the world. Simply fill up a box like this with items a child would enjoy and then bring it back by next Sunday. Samaritans Purse will put a gospel presentation in each box in the language a child can understand before shipping them all over the world.

In the greatest sermon ever preached recorded in Matthew 5-7, Jesus listed 8 beatitudes or blessings for Christ-followers. It's easy to celebrate the first seven, but the final one is hard to face.

When Jesus preached His message on the mountainside at the beginning of His ministry, He knew what awaited Him, and He knew what was in store for His faithful followers. Listen for the paradox of persecution from Matthew 5:10-12: ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”***

A pastor friend suggests some reasons why we can't ignore the paradox of

persecution:

- It's the last beatitude and serves as a test of all the others. Persecution is as much a mark of discipleship as being merciful is.
- It's the longest one because it's the hardest to embrace.
- It's the only beatitude with a command: ***“Rejoice and be glad.”***
- It's the only one with an explanation.
- It's the only one repeated twice. The word ***“blessed”*** is used two times as though Jesus is saying, *“You are doubly blessed when you are persecuted.”*
- It's the only beatitude addressed directly to us. The tense changes from ***“blessed are those”*** in verse 10 to ***“blessed are you”*** in verse 11.

Beatitude #7 focuses on the applause that comes from heaven when we do the hard work of making peace in the midst of conflict. That's a good word for us the weekend after the election. It may seem out of place that Jesus would move from peacemaking to persecution, from harmony to hostility. But not all attempts at reconciliation succeed, and no matter how hard we try to make peace with some people, they refuse to live at peace with us.

What's hard about this beatitude is that we all like to be liked. As an interesting side note, those who were listening to Jesus probably had a real difficult time with this one. It was a common idea back then that all suffering, including persecution, was an indication that God was not pleased and that the one who was suffering was somehow to blame for what was happening. This is particularly evident in the Book of Job. Jesus reverses this view by pointing to three paradoxes related to persecution.

- **Persecution is a Given**
- **Persecution is a Gift**
- **Persecution Brings Gladness**

As we walk through this passage, let's remember: *When we hear the hurting we'll want to help.*

### **Paradox #1: Persecution is a Given**

Some of us have bought into the belief that once we have Jesus in our life, everything will go great. Maybe we've even thought that we should be successful, be financially well off and experience our best life now. Actually, the Bible says

the exact opposite will happen for those who honor and obey Christ. Jesus never taught the “prosperity gospel,” but He did preach the “persecution gospel.”

Let’s look again at Matthew 5:10: ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*** The word ***“righteousness”*** refers to living the ***“straight”*** way, of following Jesus. John Stott suggests that we should not be surprised if anti-Christian hostility increases, but rather be surprised if it does not.

In John 15:20, Jesus said, ***“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”*** In John 16:33 He adds, ***“...In this world you will have trouble...”*** Speaking of their futures, in Matthew 24:9, Jesus told the disciples that they would face incredible struggles: ***“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.”***

2 Timothy 3:12 says, ***“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”*** This is echoed in Philippians 1:29: ***“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”*** Peter, after witnessing all that Jesus went through, wrote in 1 Peter 4:12: ***“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”***

Jesus gives us two reasons why we will be persecuted.

1. **Because of the life we live.** Verse 10: ***“those who are persecuted because of righteousness.”*** Some of us might feel mistreated but it may have nothing do with righteousness. Ray Pritchard writes [by the way, Pastor Ray will be preaching at Edgewood the second weekend in January], ***“If you don’t use deodorant, don’t claim persecution because no one wants to sit next to you at work.”***
2. **Because of the Lord we love.** In Verse 11 Jesus says that people will insult, persecute, and say false things, ***“because of me.”*** This helps us define the word “righteous.” To be righteous simply means being like the Lord Jesus Christ. Some people are so upset with Jesus that they take it out on those who love Him.

As we think of those who are being persecuted right now, let’s remember: *When we hear the hurting we’ll want to help.*

## Paradox #2: Persecution is a Gift

The first paradox is that persecution is a given. The second is that persecution is a gift. According to verse 11, it takes three forms: ***“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”*** Notice the change of tense from the third person to the second. We move from “those” who are persecuted to the much more personal “**you**” are persecuted. The Almighty applauds from heaven when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you *because of Christ*.

- **Verbal Insults.** The word “**revile**” means to chide, taunt, or defame. This often takes the form of verbal abuse and insulting language. Matthew 27:39 tells us that people “**hurled insults**” at Jesus, “**shaking their heads**” as they passed by the cross.
- **Physical Attacks.** The word, “**persecute**” means, “*to chase away or pursue with hostile intent, to be hunted down as an animal.*”
- **False Accusations.** Followers of Christ also face those who “**utter all kinds of evil against you falsely.**” The psalmist cried out in Psalm 35:11: “**False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not.**” Some will say things behind our backs, but remember they did the same to Jesus.

We can agree that persecution is a given, but to say that it is a gift is a stretch for us. God congratulates those who face persecution and He gives the kingdom of heaven as a gift to those who absorb the anger and ambushes of others.

Persecution is the trigger that causes God to pour out His blessings on your life. Never forget what the martyred missionary Jim Elliot said, “*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.*”

While most of us are not experiencing pernicious persecution for our faith, many today are. *When we hear the hurting we’ll want to help.*

## Paradox #3: Persecution Brings Gladness

The third paradox is really mind-boggling and is found in verse 12: ***“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*** We generally rejoice when we get good news. The phrase, “**be glad**” is a command and means to “*leap forth with exuberant gladness, to*

*jump with exceeding excitement.*” That’s how Jesus put it in Luke 6:23: **“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy...”** Jesus is not implying that we should be happy about persecution itself but we are to leap for joy for what it represents.

Every Christian who puts Christ first will face flack somehow, somewhere, at some time. Remember, persecution is a *given*. It’s a *gift* that comes with blessings. And, it should bring us *gladness* because the rewards are worth the risk.

### **Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.**

Hebrews 13:3 says, **“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.”**

As best we can, we must show solidarity with those who are suffering. Listen to the New Living Translation: **“Don’t forget about those in prison. Suffer with them as though you were there yourself. Share the sorrow of those being mistreated, as though you feel their pain in your own bodies.”** We are to put ourselves in their cells and in their shoes. When believers are mistreated for their faith, we must show that we are in harmony with them. We can’t look the other way because we have been joined with other believers. *When we hear the hurting we’ll want to help.*

It’s time to engage. We can’t ignore the shouting and the yelling any longer.

### **Megan Interview**

1. How did you first hear about persecuted believers?

The students had an Exile Night a couple weeks ago to help you guys get a feel for what believers in other countries are going through. Pastor Kyle captured what it was like with this brief video.

→ **Play video clip of Exile Night.**

2. What stood out to you during this night?

3. What impacts you the most when you think of persecuted Christians?

Let’s watch a video now that captures how God is at work in Iran.

→ **Play Padina from Iran Video**

## Chasity Interview

1. Can you share some information about the persecution that's taking place around the world?
2. What can we learn from persecuted believers?
3. How can we pray for them?

### → Play "i-am-n" Video

Are you "N"? Will you ask, "*Can I help with anything?*" It's time to answer that by saying, "*I will not let them suffer in silence. I will not let them serve alone.*"

When things are big and insurmountable, it's easy to wonder what can be done. Let's be proactive and not passive. I came across some helpful words from a pastor this week.

- Start where you are
- Use what you have
- Do what you can

Ponder these unsettling words from Jesus in Luke 12:48, "***Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.***"

Here are some next steps we can take...

- When you leave today please pick up a bracelet that has the phrase, "i-am-n" on it. Wear this as a reminder of your solidarity with the suffering.
- Watch the "i-am-n" videos for free on RightNow Media. We'll be showing the first one in our evening service tonight at 6:00 pm.
- Check out [persecution.com](http://persecution.com) for more information
- Pray.

## Prayer Time

Close your eyes. Imagine yourself in China, where the church you're attending is held secretly in someone's house – no air conditioning, no padded chairs – with the threat of arrest hanging over you because the meeting is unregistered and against the law.

Imagine yourself now in Sudan, where as a Christian you live with the constant reality of retaliation, enslavement, destruction of your church or home, and even death.

Now I'd like you to think of the front door to your house, your apartment or your dorm room. ISIS has just spray painted the Arabic letter "N" in red on your door to mark you as a follower of Jesus the Nazarene. They're coming back tomorrow and will give you a choice to convert to Islam, run to a refugee camp, or be killed...after they capture and torture you and your children.

Imagine all this as if you yourselves were part of the persecuted church...because you are.

These believers are your brothers...these saints are your sisters. Those persecuted are your parents...these refugees are your relatives.

Now put your hands behind your back as if they were handcuffed. Your only crime is that you believe in Christ.

So here's a question: *If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?*

### **Prayer Time**

With your hands still behind your back, please join me in praying for the persecuted. Their number one request is for prayer. When asked how we can pray for them, their answers are stunning:

- Pray for access to Bibles
- That God would give them courage
- That God would restore their hope
- That God would give them gospel conversations with their captors
- That the church would expand and grow

*When we hear the hurting, we'll want to help.*

### **Baby Dedication (10:45) – Kevin and Caitlin Goveia (Harrison)**

### **Benediction**

Please stand as I read Romans 8:35-39: ***“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***