

Sermon Title: "The Persecuted"

Prelude

UMH #530 "Are Ye Able"

Congregational Reading: UMH #531 (All together)

Opening Prayer/Congregational Prayer

Apostle's Creed UMH #881

Scripture

Matthew 5:1-12

Matthew 13:5-6; 20-21

1st Peter 4:12-16

John 15:18-20

Sermon: "The Persecuted"

Lord's Prayer

UMH #534 "Be Still, My Soul"

Closing Prayer and Benediction: Number 6:24-26

Postlude

Memory Verse: Matthew 5:11 "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me."

Monthly Challenge: This month your challenge is to memorize the Beatitudes. More importantly, beyond just memorizing them you are also challenged to memorize what the individual Beatitudes actually mean.

“The Persecuted”

Pastor Jacob Hanson

3/17/2021

Opening Prayer

“Blessed are the persecuted...” Beloved, I hope tonight’s message finds you well. It is fitting that the final of the Beatitudes is one of persecution, for this has often been the lot of God’s people in this life. “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.” Persecution, strife, danger, insults, false testimony, evil words... all because someone is a Christian. In our world here in rural Dodge county we can easily forget that persecution is something that has affected more Christians than not over the centuries. Christians in Rome for most of its history? They were persecuted. Christians in Rome after its “conversion” to Christianity? Often persecution persisted if you were doing something out of line like preaching the truth that the emperor and pope were just as sinful as everyone else. Christians in the European middle ages? Persecuted if they did not adhere to the Pope’s heretical calls, and often were burned at the stake for daring to believe such things as the Pope being fallible or that one should be able to read the scriptures in their own language. Christians in Feudal Japan? Put to death for believing in a “white man’s god.” Christians in tribal South America? Killed for being seen as puppets of a foreign master. Christians in any Communist nation? Killed for participating in “the opiate of the masses” as Vladimir Lenin called it. Christians in almost any modern day Muslim nation? Put to death for either apostasy against Mohammad or because their faith is outlawed. There are far more examples than this Beloved, but I hope I have made the point to you that persecution follows God’s people. Why? Because if we are in league with the Lord then we are at odds with the world. It has always been this way, as Jesus says in Matthew 5:12 “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” God’s people may be hated by the world for loving the Lord, but Beloved we are blessed to be counted worthy to suffer for His name.

Out of respect for our brothers and sisters over history who have paid the ultimate price, I would encourage us to not think that we are so persecuted (at least not yet) in our country. A North Korean Christian risks his life and the life of his whole family to worship the Lord, we risk only perhaps being ostracized by our family at worst. While that is a great payment for sure, it does not really compare. We do though, especially with the way our country continues to devalue the faith, see a great increase in insults, hatred, and hardships for the outspoken Christian. I have heard many of you lament at length about how you fear for your children and grandchildren’s futures with regards to faith. I can sympathize. You have seen prayer, the Bible, and most morality disappear from courts and classrooms across the nation.

You have seen a distancing between the world's standards for morality and ours in the church. In today's world the only time our politicians speak of faith is when it is convenient for them. No one in their right mind thinks that our leaders value Christ as we do in the church. Fifty years ago there was a veneer that everyone was a Christian in our nation, today that veil has been removed and people have abandoned even the pretense that they love Jesus. The proof is in the pudding. Confirmation classes have shrunken, folks don't attend church out of duty anymore, sexual immorality is celebrated and expected, chastity and purity gets you labeled, all manner of activities are conveniently placed over Sunday worship, the list goes on forever.

If you are here in person worshipping this evening or if you are watching online then it is not because you are forced, it is because you want to be here. For that I thank you and praise the Lord for you... it is hard to be a believer in our day even if we are not persecuted to the point of death just yet. Distractions, deceptions, contradictory teachings, and downright subterfuge from the world seeks to steal you away... praise Jesus that those of us who hold to Him have a champion who protects our souls beyond the world's grasp. Paul's words in 2nd Corinthians 4:7-10 speak to us in all of this when he states "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." Beloved, none of this should come as a surprise to us, it is shown over and over again in scripture that this is the truth.

John 15:18-20 reads "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also." In a week and a half we will enter holy week, where we will mourn the crucifixion of Jesus and celebrate His resurrection. It is appropriate that the last of the Beatitudes we are studying leads perfectly into the persecution of our Savior. Jesus's words here are to the disciples just before He is to be taken away, and He speaks them at the Last Supper. His words applied to the disciples, who all would be heavily persecuted to the point of death (with the exception of John who was only exiled), and it applies to most Christians. We are not greater than our master Jesus, we are not more special than Him, and so we should expect the world to hate us. Again this is because the world loves darkness and evil and sin. In John 3:19 Jesus states exactly this when He says "This is the judgement, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil." People don't only steer clear of churches because we did something wrong or because we didn't tickle their fancy... they also will steer clear of our doors because they don't want to hear the truth.

People love sin, they revel in it, they don't want to be told that any of their deeds are evil, and so instead of running to the Savior they run from Him to continue on in their sin. When they are then confronted with the truth, if they do not repent, then they will be offended, just as perhaps many of us felt before Christ came into our hearts. Just as Jesus was first persecuted for proclaiming the truth, so too are His people when they speak His truth as contained in scripture. When this comes though, we should not be only pained but also count ourselves as blessed, and if we cling to the truth even in difficulty then it shows we pass the test.

1st Peter 4:12-13 read "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation." Persecution, insults, and difficulties that come from bearing the truth serve as testing for us Beloved. We read just a small part of the well known parable of the sower where we saw what happens to seed that falls on rocky soil. The roots aren't deep, so while the weather is good the plant prospers, but when the days are hot it wilts and fails. In Jesus's description to His disciples on it He compares the seed on rocky soil to a man who receives the word when all is well, but the second it gets difficult he forgets about his faith and walks away. In our world even when we are not persecuted, but merely inconvenienced, we see many who walk away. One who will not even take the time to invest in the church when it is only a mild inconvenience will certainly not do that when there is actually something at stake. The seed on good soil and the seed on rocky soil are perhaps indistinguishable to much of the world, but once any difficulty comes up it becomes very clear which is which.

There is a story from Soviet Russia about a group of soldiers arriving at a church during service. They stormed the place, barred all exits, and presented the people inside with a simple choice. If you renounce Jesus, and leave, then you will be allowed to go. If you stay and claim Jesus as your own, then you will be shot. As expected, many got up and left in tears as some of their family and friends stayed behind. When it was only a small group left the soldiers asked them again, and when the group confirmed their staunch faith, the soldiers sat in the pews with them, sharing the truth that they were believers and did not want to risk worshipping with those who did not truly believe. That is an example of a happy ending, but there are many more examples that are sad, such as the practice in feudal Japan where a suspected Christian was forced to either step on a mat with the cross on it (disgracing Christ and confirming they did not believe) or be murdered. Many saints in heaven met their earthly end in that manner. Beloved, persecution and difficulty are our lot as Christians because we are at odds with the sinful world just as Jesus was, but persecution also shows if we really are Christ's or not. If you are wondering how persecution is related to being blessed, if you are wondering how Christ could command us to stand up even to the point of great difficulty for Him, it is because being persecuted for His sake is a mark of being His.

Do all Christians live in the threat of death for their faith? Perhaps not. Do all Christians live in the threat of great difficulty? Perhaps not. Are all Christians called though to stand firm in the faith and to be at odds in the world (not for bad actions as 1st Peter 4:15 reminds us) because they believe? Yes. We stand alone, Beloved, preaching the good news and we should know that there will be testings. So Beloved, what do we do with this? We should take this knowledge and steel ourselves against the difficulties that will come our way in this world. If you are never put to the test over your faith, then it means you are no threat to the evils of this world. True Christians always stand apart from what the world desires. That is not a negative, but rather a mark of who you are. Beloved, we are blessed when we are put to the test for Christ. When we stand up and share the truth that we believe Jesus is the only way and others dislike us for it, we are blessed because we shared the gospel with them. Young men and women, you are blessed when you are mocked for wanting to save yourselves for marriage at God's calling. Those of you in the workplace are blessed when you reviled for praying or for attending church or for having morals that don't fit the company policy. Young believers, if you are just getting your faith life put together and you are tested harshly for it, then you too are blessed. When we are hated for loving God, it shows who we are versus the world. We are linked to Jesus when persecution, insults, hatred, etc. arise because we believe in His salvation. Take heart Beloved, there will be these things in this life, but the kingdom of heaven is ours if we stay firm. "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Let's pray.

Closing Prayer