



## Matthew 5:10-16

# Persecution: The Acid Test for the Spiritually Prosperous

Stephen was one of the first deacons in the church at Jerusalem. They were men who were well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Stephen is described as full of grace and power and the Spirit was with him as he spoke. When it came time to give witness to Jesus Christ he did not appease the politically correct crowd. He spoke before the Jewish Council in Jerusalem and gave one of the finest presentations of how God is sovereign over the affairs of the Jewish people (Acts 7:1-53).

The listening crowd became furious and ground their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked intently toward heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (v. 55). Stephen spoke up, Look! I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God! (v. 56). The crowd responded by covering their ears and shouting out with a loud voice, and rushed at toward him. They drove Stephen out of the city and began to stone him. They continued stoning him while he prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit! Then he fell to his feet and cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them! (v. 57-60).

There is a happy land where saints in glory stand,  
There's a land that is fairer than day,  
And by faith we can see it afar:  
For the Father waits over the way,  
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

Another chapter was written in the Book of Acts.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:10-12).

## **SPIRITUALLY PROSPEROUS PEOPLE ARE PERSECUTED**

### *Spiritually prosperous*

The person describe as "blessed" is in a right relationship with the LORD God through Jesus Christ. He is being conformed to the image and likeness of

Christ (Col. 27- 29; Rom. 8:28-29). He can be described as being after God's own heart. It is a serene and untouchable self-contained joy that is beyond the chances, changes and circumstances in life. This spiritual prosperity has its root, not in outward circumstances, but in inward condition of character. It is a life lived in a right relationship with God. This kind of life is absolutely secure and impregnable. It comes from walking in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ and being conformed to His image and likeness.

Jesus gives us a well-rounded portrait of His disciples. It begins with a humble admission of spiritual poverty and mourning over sin and depravity. This produces an attitude of gentleness in his relationships. He is a Spirit-controlled person who hungers and thirsts after righteousness. This hunger causes him to grow in grace and knowledge of God. He has a humble transparency in his dealings with God and men. He has experienced the mercy of God and treats others with the same mercy. He has experienced God's peace in the inner most part of his soul and now he wants others to experience that same peace. The disciple of Jesus experiences the same hostile treatment as his Master.

Such a person is approved of God and as a result is in direct antagonism to the values of the world system. It is because the values and standards of Jesus Christ are in direct conflict with the commonly accepted values and standards of the world. We have heard much in the news and media publications about values, family values and clarifying our values. It is the *iff thing* in the media. *Values* is a word you can throw around and have it mean anything you want it to mean and make everybody else think you mean the same thing they do. It is a politician's *catchall* word. But what you are not being told is there are clearly two opposing standards of values – one that is distinctively characterized by the righteousness of Jesus Christ and the other standard that is set by the world. Like water and oil they do not mix. Jesus said you will love one and hate the other. You cannot serve God and the world system at the same time. In fact, the world won't let you do it. You cannot serve two masters. Because of your identification with Christ you will be persecuted.

### ***Definition of Persecution***

Jesus said the "persecuted" are blessed. Theirs is the *kingdom of heaven*. We have come full circle. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (v. 3). The spiritually poor and the persecuted have one thing in common.

The word *persecuted* means to pursue with hostile intent; thus, ridiculed, denounced, ill treated, injured, threatened with death, inflict injury upon you. It is the imagery of being hunted down like an animal and killing it. In our context it means being chased or driven away. In the New Testament it is used of inflicting pain and suffering on people who hold differing beliefs. This is the kind of persecution Jesus has in mind.

The tense of the verb suggests those "who have allowed themselves to be persecuted, or "have endured persecution." The idea is that they did not flee from it, but willingly submitted to it when it came to them.

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### Matthew 5:10-16 Persecution: The Acid Test for the Spiritually Prosperous

In verse eleven, Jesus said, "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me." Jesus said they will "revile you" meaning reproach, revile, heap insults upon you, upbraid them in violent language, will call you evil and contemptuous names, ridicule you because you are Christians. The enemies will try to capitalize on hostility toward you and use verbal abuse, reproaching, and abusive and offensive language. However, believers are to live above reproach so they never rightly deserve this kind of abuse as a form of punishment.

Believers can expect that they will say all kinds of evil against you falsely. These are a great variety of hostile accusations, lying, deliberately inventing the most improbable lies. Every conceivable harmfulness in a hostile sense, such as hostile speech and hostile accusations are intended.

A number of years ago newspapers in a Latin American country deliberately printed disinformation on Quechua Indian ministries and mission directors, pastors, etc. On one occasion an embassy manufactured poll results, surveys, interviews, and documentaries and provided them as exclusive interviews for a very popular radio station to broadcast. This disinformation was provided to sway voters and turn the election. When confronted with the evidence they confessed up and said it had been going on over a long period of time. They just happened to get caught that time. Even a professing Christian, the pride and joy of evangelical outreach, and the head a large news department in a prestigious radio station of high integrity doctored the news to reflect an anti-Christian, communist viewpoint when President Allende was assassinated in Chile. The news director deliberately rewrote the news and gave it a procommunist slant. Persecution comes in many ways and varieties. Sometimes it is focused on individuals or churches or mission organizations, and at other times it is broad anti-Christian propaganda.

### **Cause of persecution (vv. 10-11)**

Jesus is specific as to the cause of persecution. The important thing Christ emphasized is for the sake of righteousness, and "on account of Me" (vv. 10-11). If you are a disciple of Christ this is what is going to happen to you. The believer is persecuted because he is a certain type of person and because he behaves in a certain way. This what is going to happen to you because you are a Christian.

People will suffer for doing evil things, but such suffering is punishment, not persecution. Jesus is not saying that people in general will receive a blessing because they are persecuted for whatever cause. Those who receive the blessing for being persecuted are those who are identified with Christ and persecuted because they are like Him. Reproach, persecution and slander are occasions of blessings, not punishment for unrighteousness.

Jesus will not compromise His standards to accommodate the world's values. And neither can or will His true disciples. Thus we are thrown into a sharp conflict of values. The result is a cosmic spiritual warfare.

Who will be persecuted? Those who are characterized as having Christian character will be persecuted. They are righteous, i.e. they are those who have a right standing before God based upon the death and resurrection of Christ. They are *dikaiosune* righteous. They are like Christ. They are persecuted because of the character and quality of their lives. They uphold God's standards of justice and refuse to compromise with paganism. In the process they are being conformed to the image and likeness of Christ.

Because of our identification with Christ we are "salt" and "light" and the world cannot tolerate that standard. Anybody who enters into fellowship with Jesus must undergo a transvaluation of values, said Thieliicke. It is like sprinkling salt into open putrid sores and shining a light on to the corruption in a dark pagan world.

The gulf is between the disciples and the people. Jesus refused to be in tune with the world or to accommodate to its standards. Jesus did not fit into the politically correct crown. The world has always rejected the disciples of Jesus for the same values. Things have not changed. They are unwelcomed guests in a world that is diametrically opposed to the values of Christ. Just like the first century apostles they are disturbers of peace by the world's standards.

The New Testament is full of examples of persecution and how the early church dealt with her distinctiveness. Here are a few for you to check out: Hebrews 11:33-38; 2 Cor. 11:23ff; Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-8:1; Jn. 15:18-25; 1 Peter 4:13, 14; Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12. Cross-reference these with other Scripture passages and I think you will be amazed at how major a theme this is in the Bible.

Jesus said this persecution is "on the account of Me." It is because you belong to Christ.

### ***Not because they deserved it***

This persecution comes not because they deserve it. It is not because of power struggles with others. It is not because of selfishness, martyr complex, paranoia, or because they are hostile, critical, and judgmental and are now getting back what they have been giving out to others. The Christian is not to give them a reason for punishment by the very character of their lifestyle.

Our Christian character affects every aspect of our life: our work, social life, home, politics, etc. And we become salt and light in those crucial areas of our lives.

There came a time in the history of the Rome Empire that it became compulsory for its citizens to pinch a small piece of incense and throw it on the altar and say, "Caesar is Lord." This is what the believer of the Lord Jesus Christ refused to do. Jesus Christ is Lord and none other. God the Father has "highly exalted" Jesus Christ above every name. Every knee will bow to Jesus Christ in heaven and on earth and under the earth. One day "every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to be the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

Modern day Christians would quickly brand the early Christians narrow minded bigots and extremist. In a day when tolerance is taken to the extreme to mean you cannot have any deeply held personal convictions it is in vogue to be intolerant of those who are committed Christians. The most intolerant people you see and hear in the media are those who are intolerant of Christians who desire to be like Christ.

The apostle Peter concluded one of his greatest messages saying, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The religious leaders of his day did not like what he said, and they hounded him like a wild animal. The words of Jesus were fulfilled once again.

## **THE RESPONSE OF SPIRITUALLY PROSPEROUS PEOPLE TO PERSECUTION.**

### ***Attitudes of the blessed***

Jesus describes our attitudes by saying, "rejoice and be glad" (v. 12). The original word for "be glad" is from the verb *agalliasthai* meaning "to leap exceedingly." It is a joy that "leaps for joy." This joy does not leave them when the circumstances in life change. We can translate it "exult, be glad, overjoyed, be exceedingly glad," or literally "jump for joy."

## ***This is not our typical response.***

The typical response of the world is to sulk like a child, to lick our wounds in self-pity like a dog, or just grin and bear it like a Stoic or pretend we enjoy it like a masochist. Jesus said, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:44-48).

## ***Worthy to suffer shame***

The apostle Paul demonstrated in his life that mature Christianity rejoices while being persecuted. Paul and Silas were in the inner dungeon in the Philippian jail after having been severely beaten with many stripes. Their feet were secured in stocks with chains on their feet and at midnight Paul and Silas were praying, and singing praises unto God. They were having a worship service in the jail! Jesus said, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (Matt. 18:20). They were rejoicing in His presence counting it a privilege and opportunity to suffer for Him.

Acts chapter five tells us about "great fear came upon the whole church" in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit purged Ananias and Sapphira from it. The church was filled with the Holy Spirit, but the high priest and all his associates "were filled with jealousy, and laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in a public jail" (v. 17-18). An angel came during the night and set them free. At daybreak the apostles were in the Temple preaching! Someone reported it to the authorities and they were once again confronted. "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us" (v. 28). They still whine that same tune. Peter, filled with the Spirit of God said, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (vv. 29-31). That didn't calm things down. "But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and were intending to slay them" (v. 33). Finally the Sanhedrin listened to Gamaliel and "after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus, and then released them." What was the response of the apostles after another flogging? Verse forty-one reads, "So they went on their way from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (vv. 40-41).

Believers in the early church could rejoice and be glad because they were persecuted because of the Name of Jesus. The joy of the believer under fire is to be, not in spite of, but because of persecution. It is an indication of true discipleship.

## ***You are in good company***

Rejoicing in persecution is completely contrary to the world's way of thinking. Persecution is the evidence of genuineness. It has been described as the certificate of authenticity of the true believer. Jesus and the writer of Hebrews reminds us we are in good company—they killed the prophets before us. In the great hall of faith chapter the writer tells us of those who have walked by faith down through the centuries who "experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (*men* of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground" (11:36-38). Jesus said, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is

and caves and holes in the ground" (11:36-38). Jesus said, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:12). If we are persecuted today we belong to a noble succession of believers. In the early church persecution for the true believer was as widespread as universal popularity was of the false prophets. If we have the privilege of being persecuted we are in good company. We are in a fellowship that is rejected by the world system. It is the badge of true discipleship.

## ***Salt and light***

Jesus went on to describe the penetrating power of the gospel in people who are transformed by it as likened to "light" and "salt" (5:13-16). "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

Christians must be salty. We need to pour a lot of salt on that which is corrupted, and we need to focus the light of God's Word on spiritual darkness. We are to live Christ before a watching world. We are to live it out as salt and light.

You are "salt" (v. 13). Salt preserves from total corruption and destruction. It preserves and gives flavor to life. It also stimulates the appetite.

We are to be a moral disinfectant in a world whose standards are low, constantly changing, or non-existent. We are to have a preserving effect upon the community.

Pure sodium chloride does not deteriorate. Jesus is probably emphasizing adulteration of character. It would be unthinkable for the disciples to lose their character just as for salt to become salt less.

Moreover, the world is absolutely dark spiritually; light penetrates and illumines that darkness. Jesus said told His disciples, "You alone are like the light of the world."

In the same way a small well-placed lamp lights every one in the one room house. Let your light shine before men. Our Christian life should be perfectly visible to all men, at work, at play, at home.

You ask, what has this to do with persecution? Everything. What is your light? It is our daily life style and witness. It is where you live out your Christian values. If you live Christ before a watching world there is a price to pay. The cause of persecution is salt and light. The world does not like salt rubbed into its open putrid sores and rottenness. It detests the Light of Jesus Christ exposing its corruption in a dark and wicked world.

Don't miss the important message in this beatitude of Christ. We live in a day where the emphasis is come on down cast your vote for Jesus. Come on sign up here today and we will guarantee you a life of your dreams. Christ will give you all your desires if you just come on and vote for Him today. We have a prosperity plan for you. We will guarantee you with eternal security and joy and happiness and fulfillment.

Give me a break! Jesus promised none of the sort. He did promise, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Does that

glad, for your reward in heaven is great for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Does that sound like a Madison Avenue ad campaign and multimedia blitz?

## **REWARD OF THOSE WHO ENDURE PERSECUTION (VV. 10, 12).**

Those who undergo persecution for God's cause and not for any fault of their own receive a blessing —*the kingdom of heaven is theirs.*

The reward is not salvation. The disciples are already saved. This is a blessing that is in store for those who follow Christ in persecution because of His righteousness. God sustains the persecuted with His grace today. But He also rewards them in the future for the persecution they endure in the present.

You are "blessed" because you submit to the will of God. Because of persecution you are being conformed to the image and likeness of Christ. Note in verse one this is the same underlying attitude and the same ultimate reward. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Now Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . Blessed are you when . . ." Perhaps it is even a double blessing.

"Theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 10). "Your reward in heaven is great" (v. 12).

I like the reminder of John R. W. Stott: "We may lose everything on earth, but we shall inherit everything in heaven —not as a reward for merit, however, because the promise of the reward is free."

## **Some abiding principles and practical applications**

*When you hunger and thirst for righteousness you will suffer for the righteousness you hunger after.* This has been true in every age of Christianity. It is true to day. We should be surprised if anti-Christian hostility does not increase.

What is my life and witness like when the heat is on? What are our reactions to the pressures of life? Do we compromise and give in? Do we stand alone? Do we face the battle? Are we prone to compromise and therefore become adulterated? Have we become worthless salt?

Am I like salt and light to the community? It is the nature of light to illumine —to shine.

Do I rejoice and am I glad when I am persecuted because I am like Jesus?

Are my attitudes and behavior being conformed to the image and likeness of Jesus Christ? If so, we can expect to be persecuted (v. 12).

Am I quick to compromise even on little things? Am I quick to seek peace at any price ?

In second century Christianity a businessman went up to Tertullian discussing business affairs. He ended the conversation by asking, "What can I do? I must live!" "Must you?" replied Tertullian. "Must you!" We too are faced with choices of loyalty and living.

Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna in the early church. He was dragged before the tribunal of the Roman magistrate and given the choice of sacrificing to the godhead of Caesar or die. The old venerable preacher replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my

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replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" They proceeded to take him to the stake and as the flames leaped upon his body he prayed, "O Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy well beloved and ever blessed Son, by whom we have received the knowledge of Thee. . . I thank thee that Thou hast graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour."

May He give us courage to do likewise.



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