

Ten Blessings, Part 3 of 3
“Blessed are Those Who are Persecuted.”

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.

“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12)

Last month in two services we considered the first seven of what are sometimes called the ten blessings or beatitudes. One popular televangelist years ago called them “the be happy attitudes” because they describe how we can be inwardly happy in spite of worldly misfortunes, but as we have seen, the lessons are not really about worldly misfortunes, either; they are all about our spiritual states, highlighting our spiritual needs and the Lord’s promise to fulfill them.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness:” these are all those of us who have a real appreciation for what we lack and what we need in order to be truly blessed. And the thing is that when we realize what we are missing we are motivated to seek and find it, but even more importantly the realization itself can awaken a sense of humility that is critical for our ability to receive what the Lord provides.

“Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peacemakers:” whereas the first blessings were all about our needs these promises are all about our relationships with other people – again, not merely outward relationships but our inner attitudes toward them. Mercy involves pity and compassion, purity of heart involves personal integrity in the way we deal with them, such that the truth of the Word really guides and informs what we do from affection, and peacemakers... well, to make peace is to make the effort, to actually do what we know is right and not do what we know is wrong so that the Lord can be present among us.

To complete our series today we have come to the eighth blessing, where we read about those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. And you will recall, perhaps, that we defined righteousness as justice. At face value it seems like a term that would refer to getting things *right*, that is, precisely according to the law, or the truth. But in the Hebrew and Greek of the original Scriptures it refers primarily to doing what is **good**, acting from love and charity, striving for fairness (even as judges in courts of law do) based on motives and not deeds alone, generally nurturing positive relationships rather than rigidly enforcing every rule.

So the eighth of the beatitudes is “Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice’s sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” But again, the question is, how can anyone be blessed when he is being persecuted?

And the answer, like the answers to the other questions we have raised, lies in understanding the teaching on a deeper level. Remember, the persecution is not for just any reason, it is on account of justice, “for justice’s sake.” This means the person is being attacked for taking a stand in favour of justice. Sadly, human history reveals shameful records of unjust persecution throughout the world, not just on a small scale but with institutionalized power, as in cases of slavery and fascism and all sorts of tyranny, religious and civil. And we know that when people of integrity have stood up to these forces they have been systematically tortured and executed.

The apostle, Paul, testifies to his own brutal treatment of early Christians as a matter of “principle” until he had his conversion experience, when he understood the whole matter differently. Then he wrote in his epistle to the Romans, having faith in the Lord, and peace, and grace, “we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance character, and character hope” (5:3-4). James, too, wrote, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience” (James 1:2-3).

Still, as we indicated earlier, the real lesson goes much deeper. It is not only about what happens to us outwardly, but about what happens inwardly. For the fact is, when people impose on us outwardly we can very easily fall into an arrogant sense of martyrdom and self-justification, with the result that we simply look down on them and feel superior to them. And that is about as far as we can get from a state of heavenly blessing.

But when we experience the inner doubts and temptations that really threaten our love and faith, there can be no arrogance, for we know that the enemy we are up against is none other than ourselves. And we know that the only hope of relief from this conflicted state is in the Lord.

Of course the temptations we face ultimately come from the spiritual world, that is, from spirits who are so confirmed in their selfish and external states that have no inhibitions about their evils or their desire to attack the good. And because they are spirits, in a sense there is no escaping them. Wherever there is good they will attack and persecute it, just as they did the Lord Himself. But how is this about the conflict in ourselves?

Well, it’s simple: receiving everything as we do from the spiritual world our unique gift is the freedom to choose between what comes from heaven and what comes from hell. But the two influences clash. So if we have some from heaven, what we get from hell argues against it, and if we have some from hell – which we all do – heaven argues against it. (Actually, this is the reason we have temptations: we are all born with hereditary inclinations to selfishness and misunderstanding, and these contribute to our identity. Setting then aside so that we can receive a higher form of life from the Lord is a struggle.)

But getting back to the beatitudes, look at it this way: if we had no sense of justice we couldn’t be attacked “for justice’s sake.” So if we are attacked and persecuted on that account it is a sign that we have this quality and that it is working within us. The fact that we are caught up in temptations does not mean that we are worse than other people, it means that we have a good, working conscience, and in this conscience we are blessed! We know what is good. We actually have the kingdom of heaven within us.

Yes, it's hard to believe at first that we could be blessed in a state of temptation (or spiritual persecution), but the Lord reminds us that He is actually closer to us at such times than at any other times, defending us, protecting us, preserving our freedom. Otherwise we would feel no tension; we would just "go with the flow" of what appeals to our senses.

So in the last two blessings the Lord takes up this all-important point and drives it home in a terrific climax. In a sense the series is already complete - in the abstract: Blessed are those who recognize and acknowledge their needs. Blessed are those who love and care for others. Blessed are those who love the truth and love sincerely to be guided by it. Blessed are those who work to apply that good and truth together in the uses of life. Blessed are those who are persecuted, for they have something precious from the Lord to be attacked. But the Lord is with them, and He will protect them. So what does He say next?

"Blessed are YOU when they revile and persecute YOU, and say **all manner** of evil against YOU - falsely - for My sake." This is the ninth blessing and now it's personal; it's not about "them or "those" anymore, it's about YOU. It's about us. Think of it. The most bitter Psalms in the Old Testament are the ones where David complains about the lies and slanders of his enemies against him. We know how difficult it is to be accused and condemned for things we have done wrong; how much more difficult is it to face the lies and deceptions of those who wrongly accuse! And yet this is TYPICAL of the evil spirits who are with us every day. They insinuate their **own** evil thoughts and intentions into our minds and then turn right around and blame **us** for them! How wrong! How cruel! And how vital therefore it is for us to know that the Lord is still with us at those times, fighting for us, helping us maintain our equilibrium.

Notice the phrasing in this blessing, by the way: "Blessed are you **when** they revile and persecute you..." That is key. They may do it but they cannot do it unless the Lord is with you to provide the balance. Nor would they care otherwise, for it really is the Lord's own good and truth that they attack in you. So the blessing is real; without it we would simply dive headlong into hell. But because we have it, though it may be an unconscious thing, we can grow in our enjoyment of it day by day. We **are** blessed when the hells attack precisely because the hells attack us **when we are blessed**.

And so we come to the tenth blessing. Some don't even see it as a blessing because the literal word isn't there. But remember, blessing is happiness. The Lord has now described all the qualities that provide for real happiness; He has also urged us to recognize these spiritual qualities in anyone (including ourselves) who may suffer on account of them. Finally, He has addressed each one of us directly, anticipating His words in John as He predicted His own crucifixion: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; **not as the world gives do I give to you**. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (14:27). So you **are** blessed when they revile and persecute you..." Again, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (16:33).

Now the Lord concludes with a tremendous personal exhortation in the imperative voice: (YOU, don't just be happy, but) "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

What possible comparison is there between worldly and eternal rewards! How poor and simple

and ultimately disappointing are the joys of selfishness compared to the delights of knowing the Lord and doing what He says! And this *is* heaven: knowing the Lord, seeing how He works, being confident in His providence, feeling His love and acknowledging His presence from day to day as we relate all the things that we experience in this world to His eternal plan. Of course we are not *in* heaven every day; we are a mixed bag of good and evil as long as we live on this earth. But we can have heaven in *us* any day that we choose, for it is not “out there” somewhere far away and difficult to get to, it is here, now, in the thoughts and feelings that the Lord gives every one of us immediately, unceasingly, if we will only receive them.

In fact, when we examine the spiritual qualities of joy and gladness we find that joy is a function of the affections flowing from our will, and gladness is a function of the thoughts flowing from our understanding, so joyfulness and gladness together fill the whole mind. And *exceeding* gladness is the enduring, over-riding sense of confidence and delight that we experience when our thoughts are focused *consistently* on the truths of the Word.

Persecution may come, indeed we know it *will* come, “for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Prophets represent prophetic truths, teachings we need to know in order to find our way to heaven. These truths WILL be challenged, as they always have been. But as we read together in Psalm 139 the Lord never leaves us alone. His love and mercy are all around us; His wisdom and the understanding of His Word protect us. He will address every challenge we face if we will only let Him – and we let Him by co-operating with Him.

So “Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad!” This is what it’s all about: eternal values, internal peace; the delights of real love, real wisdom and real enduring usefulness to others. This is the experience of heaven, and the reward, the blessing of it is great not just because in the end it makes all the suffering and pain worthwhile, and not just because it lasts forever, but because it is pervasive in our daily thought and affection here, now.

We have a saying in the church, that “the purpose of creation is a heaven from the human race.” If we believe this is true, and we believe that the Lord has given us all the tools, the freedom and the ability to choose it for ourselves, even as we live in this world, then why don’t we say *this* instead? – The purpose of OUR creation is a heaven from US! WE can do this. We can be the loving, caring, intelligent people the Lord wants us to be. It’s just a matter of making the right choices, and recognizing that the Lord is with us to help us if we turn to Him.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 5:1-12
 Children’s talk on blessings in temptations
 Psalm 17
 Arcana Caelestia 751 or 8403 (about temptations)