

Happy and Harassed

SERIES: THE LIFE GOD BLESSES

Author Mack Stiles tells the story of a conversation he had with a young Swedish man named Andreas. Andreas said, "I've been told if I decide to follow Jesus, he will meet my needs and my life will get very good."

To Andreas, this seemed like a point in Jesus' favor. But for Mack Stiles it was a temptation - to make following Jesus sound easier than it really was.

Mack said, "No, Andreas, no!"

Andreas looked at him with surprise.

"Actually, Andreas, you may accept Jesus and find that life goes badly for you."

Andreas asked, "What do you mean?"

Mack said, "Well, you may find that your friends reject you, you could lose your job, your family might oppose your decision; there are a lot of bad things that could happen to you if you decide to follow Jesus. Andreas, when Jesus calls you, he calls you to go the way of the cross."

Andreas stared at Mack in disbelief, "Then why would I want to follow Jesus?"

It's a good question. Why would anybody want to follow Jesus if it means a life of cross bearing? It's a question that Jesus himself invited as he insisted throughout his ministry that following him would not be a piece of cake. He even took this a step further when he said that bearing the cross would be the mark of a life blessed by God.

In the eighth and final Beatitude, Jesus says, "**Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**" Then, unlike any of the other Beatitudes, he elaborated and applied this directly to his disciples, "**Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.**" Jesus doesn't appear to be a very good salesman. Why would anyone want to follow Jesus if it meant being insulted and harassed and slandered?

I. What does it mean to be persecuted?

It's important that we don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not telling us to go out and invite persecution by acting like jerks. I remember in college a guy coming to our

campus named Holy Hubert. Holy Hubert would stand on the steps of the quad and in the most obnoxious way possible tell everyone within earshot that they were going straight to hell. As you can imagine, more than a few people got upset at Hubert. Now much of what Hubert said was true, and I certainly don't want to judge his heart, but it seems to me this is courting persecution. People like this might think they bear the offense of the cross, but the fact is they are just plain offensive. Jesus spoke of us being persecuted for righteousness, not self-righteousness.

There are also believers who invite persecution and ridicule just because they like being weird. They think a Christian ought to stand out so they wear weird clothes and use weird language. That's not the kind of people Jesus is talking about in this Beatitude. If you just follow Jesus you don't have to try to be weird; your lifestyle will be weird enough.

There are also those believers who invite persecution because they think that being a follower of Christ excuses them from the obligations and duties of normal people. They don't pay their bills because they are "giving to the Lord's work." They break the laws of the land because they are subject to a higher law. Peter had this in mind when he said, "**Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler**" (1 Peter 4:15). Peter says you're going to be persecuted, but make sure it's for the right reasons. Persecution is not the same thing as punishment. Punishment is deserved; persecution is not.

As a matter of fact, if you look at the Beatitudes as a whole, it doesn't seem to make sense that Jesus would end by saying his followers will be persecuted. Why would anyone want to persecute someone who is poor in spirit? People who see themselves as humble beggars before God don't seem to me to be likely candidates for persecution. Those who mourn over their inability to please God sure don't seem like troublemakers to me. The same thing goes for the meek. Meek people are submissive; why persecute them? And why bother with people who hunger after righteousness, rather than power and fame? Why get upset at the merciful and pure in heart? Why would those who try to make peace end up experiencing hostility? I

would expect Beatitude people to be loved, not hated. But Jesus says it's people who live like that who will be persecuted.

Why is it that Beatitude people are persecuted? It's because what we have here is a clash between two value systems. We have light invading the darkness. We have light exposing the deeds of darkness, and people don't like that. The world says the confident and assertive are blessed, not the poor in spirit. The world says those who are carefree and happy are blessed, not those who mourn. The world applauds the strong and the brash, not the meek and gentle. It's impressed with the full, not the hungry; those who stand up for themselves, not the merciful. The world doesn't want us meddling in other people's matters trying to make peace, it wants us to mind our own business. So what we have here is a clash of values.

When I met with our fifth graders to teach them the Beatitudes I wanted to get across to them this idea that what Jesus congratulates us for here in the Beatitudes is completely the opposite of what the world congratulates us for. So on the first day of class we brought in a pineapple upside down cake that hadn't been turned upside down yet. We flipped it over and they saw how upside down was really right side up when it came to how you made that cake. I think they got the idea. What the world says is upside down, Jesus says is right side up. That's why good people, Beatitude people, are persecuted. It's a clash of values. You don't have to make trouble; if you just live the Beatitudes, you're going to run into trouble.

Of course, Jesus himself is a case in point. No one lived the Beatitudes like Jesus. He lived in humble dependence on the Father. He was meek and merciful. He hungered for things to be made right. He was pure in heart. He came as a peacemaker. Almost everyone would agree, Christian or not, that Jesus of Nazareth was the best man history ever produced. Yet, the historical records show that the best man to ever live was the target of a conspiracy of lies which resulted in him being put on a Roman execution rack by religious and political authorities. I like the way Peter put it in a sermon found in the book of Acts. He said, "**You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went about going good...**" He says, "**We are witnesses of all the things he did...**" And then he says, "**They also put him to death by hanging him on a cross**" (Acts 10:38-39).

People who do good, Beatitude people, will be persecuted. Jesus said in John 15:20, "**If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.**" Before you accept a job, you

want a written job description. You want to know what's expected of you. Jesus says that persecution is part of the job description of belonging to him.

It's always been that way. Of the eleven disciples left after Judas' betrayal, ten died vicious and violent deaths. The one who was spared, John, died a prisoner on the island of Patmos. The apostle Paul was whipped five times with thirty-nine lashes, beaten with rods, stoned and hounded (2 Cor. 11:23ff). Early Christians were flung to the lions. Others were burned at the stake. Nero lit his garden parties with flaming Christians whom he covered with pitch and set on fire. He sewed the skins of wild animals on Christians and sent his hunting dogs to tear them to pieces. They were slandered as well. The Romans accused early Christians of being cannibals because of Jesus' words, "Take and eat. This is my body." They said their love feasts were wild orgies of lust. They were even accused of burning Rome because they believed one day God would destroy the earth with fire.

We say, "Well, those were different times. That was a long time ago. We are far more tolerant now; far more enlightened." But the modern world experiences the same clash of values. Church historians estimate that more Christian men and women died for their faith in the twentieth century than in any other comparable period in history. Today, 160,000 people are killed every year because of their faith in Christ. That comes out to an average of about 438 women and men each day. People are being imprisoned and tortured and killed today in China, Africa, and parts of the Middle East. In the past couple of weeks we've seen a plane shot down in Peru that carried a missionary and her daughter. We don't know if that was persecution or not, but we do know that between 1981 and 1985 the Peruvian government or rebels killed 35,000 Christians. All that is not to mention the people who have lost jobs, spouses, the opportunity to attend college - all because of their faith in Christ.

We say, "Well, those are different places. We live in America." I asked just our own staff this week to share some of the ways they have experienced persecution. As a committed believer in college one woman had roommates that spread rumors that she was sleeping around. Another had parents who told her when she came to Christ that she was a source of embarrassment to the family and she could never speak of Christ in their home. Some who were outspoken about their faith in the classroom were given poor grades. I know people in this church whose parents wouldn't attend their wedding because of their faith in Christ. Many of us know what it's like to be always kept just on the outside of a particular social group because we follow Christ. It's subtle, but it's there. We might think these are small things,

but Jesus purposely included more than just physical torture in v. 11. He talked about insults and slander because he knew that through the ages the hatred of the world would be expressed in different ways.

In Luke's gospel we have another version of these same Beatitudes. Look at what Jesus said in Luke 6:22, **"Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man."** And then skip over to v. 26, **"Woe to you when all men speak well of you..."** Jesus is saying, "If you are not experiencing some form of persecution or ostracism because of me, you really must ask yourselves why." Are we blending in the world just a bit too much? In our right desire not to create unnecessary barriers for people to come to Christ, have we watered down our witness? Are we Beatitude kind of people? Paul put it even more bluntly. He said, **"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"** (1 Tim. 3:12). Again, the point is not to go out and look for trouble; the point is to be sure we're living the life Jesus called us to.

There have been a few times in my life when people have lied about me. My reaction was twofold. First, I wanted to hunt those people down and set the record straight. Second, I filed a complaint with the Lord. "Lord, I'm being slandered." I expected the Lord to say, "That's awful. I feel terrible about that. Let me get right on that." Instead, he said, "Congratulations!" Jesus even takes it a step further and says in v. 12, **"Rejoice and be glad!"** In Luke he says, **"Jump for joy!"** When we are mistreated, the answer isn't to retaliate or sulk. We should rejoice; not because we enjoy suffering. Jesus says there are two reasons we should rejoice.

II. Why are those who are persecuted blessed?

First of all, we should rejoice because we are in good company. Jesus says in v. 12 that they did the same thing to the prophets before us. What is this, misery loves company? No! The idea is that by being treated like the prophets were treated we have proof that we belong to God as they did. During the Watergate scandal, President Nixon had an enemies list. There came a time when people on that list felt highly complimented. It was an honor to know that the President hated you. Jesus says it's an honor to know that the world hates you. Look at some of the other names on the list: Abel, Moses, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel. That's a pretty elite circle. Then add Jesus to the list. Jesus says you should jump for joy if you are being harassed for your faith, because

you're on that list.

The second reason we should rejoice is because we have a great reward. Jesus says, "your reward in heaven is great." It's important to see that Jesus did not say to rejoice because he would deliver you from whatever you are having to endure. There are times he does deliver us, but there are times when our deliverance comes through death and resurrection. Jesus points us to a heavenly reward.

Some people are bothered by that. They say, "You should be good just because it's right, not because of some reward." That may be true, but when you are in the lion's den, it's good to know there is hope. As a matter of fact, Scripture says of Jesus that **"for the joy set before him, he endured the cross"** (Heb. 12:2). I'm sure Jesus would have obeyed the Father no matter what, but looking for his reward helped get him through, and it will help get us through.

Others object to this because it sounds like it focuses us on works rather than grace. It sounds like we are on some kind of merit system. But some rewards aren't like that. If I say to one of my children, "I want you to get your chores done and when you're finished, I'll take you out for an ice cream," he will do his chores because it's his duty, but it will help that he has the ice cream to look forward to. He's not earning the ice cream. The ice cream is a promise that comes out of my own love and grace and desire to be with my son.

Out of God's great love for his suffering children, he holds out for us his promise of a very great reward. The greatest part of the reward is simply being with him. As we live this Beatitude, we rejoice that when it's over we will be with him. The challenge for us is to be that heavenly minded. I actually believe this is one of the great benefits of persecution. It causes us to look heavenward. It weans us off the pleasures of this life and causes us to look to the next one.

CONCLUSION

An old missionary couple had been working in Africa for years, and they were returning to New York City to retire. They had no pension; their health was gone; they were a bit defeated, discouraged and afraid. When they got on the ship, they discovered they were on the same ship as President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from one of his renowned big game hunting expeditions.

No one knew who they were. They watched the fanfare that accompanied the President's entourage. Passengers fought just to get a glimpse of the man.

As the ship moved across the ocean, the old missionary

said to his wife, "Something is wrong with all of this. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service to God in Africa all these many years and have no one care a thing about us? Here this man comes home from a hunting trip and everybody makes him out to be a god, but no one gives a hoot about us."

His wife said, "Dear, you shouldn't feel that way."

"I can't help it," he said. "It just doesn't seem right."

When the ship docked in New York, a band was there to greet the President. The mayor and other officials were there. The newspapers reported on the President's arrival, but no one noticed this old missionary couple coming home. They slipped off the ship and found a cheap apartment on the East side, hoping the next day to see what kind of work they could find in the city to help them get by.

That night the man just broke. He said to his wife, "I can't take this. God is not treating us fairly."

His wife replied, "You need to go into your bedroom and tell that to the Lord."

A short time later he came out of his bedroom, but his face was filled with joy. His wife asked him, "Dear, what is it?"

He said, "The Lord settled it with me. I told him how bitter I was that the President got this great homecoming, when no one even met us when we got home. And when I finished it seemed as though the Lord put his hand on my shoulder and simply said, "But you're not home yet."

Why can we rejoice when, through persecution or neglect, life just doesn't seem to treat us fairly? It's because we are in good company, an elite circle, and because we have a great reward in heaven. When we go home, we will be with Jesus, and it doesn't get any greater than that.

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