

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:10

A little boy was celebrating his birthday so his father took him to the one place he wanted to go most – the pet store to get a puppy.

Carefully the boy looked over all the dogs in their kennels, and he finally announced, “Daddy, I want that one!”

“Which one?” his father asked.

Pointing to a little puppy whose tail was wagging like crazy he said, “The one with the happy ending!”

We come to the eighth and last beatitude, and we end the study on a note of joy! The central theme of this beatitude comes with the words of Jesus:

“Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad.” 5:12

Though Kingdom living is no easy thing, neither is it meant to be a sour faced, sad life. In spite of hardships, the Christian can cultivate the habit of happiness by seeing the ups and downs in their true perspective. Paul the Apostle would write:

“<sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup> So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

To Christians who were facing insult and persecution for Christ’s sake, Jesus said, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad” (Matthew 5:12), or as it has sometimes been translated, “Rejoice and leap for joy!” Yes, even when we are misunderstood, misrepresented, and mistreated!

On sunny days Lise and I love to walk. As we put on our coats and runners, our puppy, Toby, used to get all excited. He started to bark, and run circles around us, run to the door and wane. He seemed so excited ... leaping for joy ... **because he was going somewhere.**

As Christians today maybe we could learn a lesson from Toby. We should live with a sense of excitement and joy as well because we are going someplace. We may have to endure suffering, persecution, troubles, but we can still leap for joy, because we know this is only temporary – and we are headed somewhere!

We are going home to be with Jesus someday soon, and so we live with these words of Jesus ringing in our hearts, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.”

Note that Jesus says the rejoicing is to start here on earth, now, and we are not to wait until we have arrived at home in heaven. So, with a spirit of joy, while we are on earth, we will practice the other seven beatitudes - being the poor in spirit, mourning sin, being meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, showing mercy, being pure in heart, and peacemakers, and naturally, everyone will love us, accept us and applaud our values. Right?

What does our passage say?

**<sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

What happened? I thought we were doing the right thing – the God honouring thing. So why are we now likely to face persecution and insults and false accusations? What happened to prosperity and health and happiness? And why would Jesus say rejoice – leap for joy – in all of this?

### **1. Leap for Joy because God’s people are Different**

<sup>5</sup> Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. (Romans 8:5)

Christians and non-Christians do think differently – have different values and live differently. As one writer said, “Many people admire Jesus from a distance, but they never come to know him personally.” If they did, they would likely be like many of the men of Jesus day who ended up hating him. They are not ready to yield themselves to follow him and let him live through them.

Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote, “If you try to imitate Christ the world will praise you; if you become Christ-like it will hate you.” If one is truly Christ-like he will not receive the applause of men, but rejection – even as Jesus did. Jesus said:

<sup>20</sup> Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. (John 15:20)

Why is persecution inevitable? Bible scholar William Barclay puts it this way:

“It is inevitable because the church, when it is really the church, is bound to be the conscience of the nation and the conscience of society. Where there is good the church must praise, where there is evil the church must condemn – and inevitably men will try to silence the voice of conscience.”

We need not preach at people, we simply live the life Jesus has called us to live and we will be in trouble with the world.

I talked to a Christian who was in trouble with the neighbours. Why? A contractor had been called in to do some work and had left behind some equipment. The neighbours felt they could use it, and since it had been many days since the contractor left, they felt possession was 9/10 of the law – it was theirs. But the Christian said this was wrong and that a call would be going to the contractor that day so they could come and pick up the equipment. The neighbours wanted the contractor’s equipment, and are still mad at the Christian.

The child of God can leap for joy because he or she is different from the self-serving, morally bankrupt world!

## **2. Leap for Joy Even though the Christian Will face Suffering**

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness...Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”

F.B. Meyer said, “It is impossible to follow the Lord closely and not be splattered by the mud that was cast at him.” (Sermon on the Mount, p.21)

Leap for joy when you are recognized as a follower of Jesus and people throw on you the same ill-treatment that was thrown on Jesus. Most here will never be called upon to be a martyr for Christ, but certainly there will be the scorn of some – maybe many – even in our city. As William Barclay says,

“It is not likely that death awaits us because of our loyalty to the Christian faith. But insult awaits the man who insists on Christian honour. Mockery awaits the man who practices Christian love and forgiveness. Actual persecution may well await the Christian in industry who insists on doing an honest day’s work. Christ still needs those who are prepared, not so much to die for him, but to live for him.” DSB, p. 118

Why should we leap for joy when we are persecuted?

- a) We may make the way easier for those who follow us because we were willing to suffer.
- b) Persecution is a compliment, for it means someone recognizes you stand for something. The wishy-washy who stand for nothing will not be persecuted, but what will their lives count for?
- c) We are in good company, for as Jesus reminds us, the prophets before us were also persecuted (Matthew 5:12).
- d) We have an opportunity to demonstrate loyalty to Jesus. Judson was tortured in the prisons of Burma for his Christian faith. After his release he asked the king for permission to preach in a certain Burmese city. The king said, "I am willing for a dozen preachers to go into that city, but not you. Not with those hands. My people are not fools enough to listen to and follow your words, but they will not be able to resist those scarred hands." The scars on Judson's hands proved his loyalty to Jesus was more than words – and people will listen to the man or woman who is willing to suffer for what they believe in.

### **3. Leap for Joy Because We Have a Great Future**

"Rejoice and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven."  
Matthew 5:12

What we see now is not all there is. For the Christian the future is far better than this world could ever be. The Christian will put up with persecution knowing that in the end God will balance the scales. If this is the path God has for us now, there is purpose and glory for Jesus in it. So we keep looking forward with hope and joy.

In Columbia a Christian farmer worked his fields during the week and witnessed for Christ whenever he could. On the weekend he preached in the little village. One day 20 men kidnapped him and took him to the local cemetery. There they buried him up to his neck in one of the graves. He was commanded to do two things:

- one, switch political parties
- two, renounce his evangelical faith.

The political issue was not that important to him so he agreed to switch parties. But though they threatened to murder him, he would not give up his faith. In the face of their hatred he prayed, "God, You have called me to preach the Gospel. If I can win more souls by dying than living, then I am ready to die, Lord."

In a fit of rage one of the men shot the pastor and killed him. But that was not the end of the story, for these men had witnessed a fearless faith in Christ, and within a month 15 of the 20 men had joined the evangelical congregation, confessing their sins, and giving their life to Jesus. The courage of one man led many to Christ.

From the world's perspective the farmer lost the confrontation. From faith's perspective he was more than a conquer, and listen to what Jesus says to him: "Great is your reward in heaven."

Many years ago a ship pulled into New York harbour. Brass bands and crowds were on hand to welcome President Teddy Roosevelt back from an African hunting expedition. Unnoticed by the cheering crowds a missionary and his wife were returning after many years of sacrificial service. No one was there to welcome the weary missionary couple, and they walked alone back to the cheap hotel.

The contrast seemed to gnaw at the missionary's heart, so that night the discouragement and bitterness spilled out into his prayers. "Lord, it isn't right. A big parade to greet the politician, but no one to welcome us – servants of God. Lord, no one seems to care. We've worked so hard for thee all our lives, and when we come home..."

God seemed to interrupt him at his point, "But my child, you are not home yet...!"

Children of God are going somewhere. We seek a better land than this. Leap for joy for some day we will be going home! And it will be worth it all when we see Christ!

#### 4. Leap for Joy Because God's Blessings Endure

"Blessed are they that are persecuted ... Blessed are you when people insult you ... Rejoice and be exceedingly glad." (Matthew 5:10-12)

Suffering cannot destroy the blessing of God. Persecution cannot stamp out the inner joy. "**Persecution is not essential to blessedness, but it is compatible with it.**" (Rev. Randal Denny)

The word Jesus uses for rejoice literally means "Keep on rejoicing". Christian joy is not a one time thing – a camp meeting experience or a revival meeting – it is an ongoing way of life! As we walk with Christ – despite what the outward circumstances are – we can rejoice. "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Our joy in the Lord does not depend on how others treat us, or how good circumstances are, or what our state is at the time. It comes because we are God's blessed people – despite persecution or trials.

When Nero was emperor of Rome, there was a group of soldiers known as the Emperor's Wrestlers. These men were handpicked fighters, the strongest

and the bravest of them all. These were the emperor's champions both in the coliseum, and on the battlefield. Before the athletic contest the soldiers would stand in the arena and chant,

“We, the wrestlers, wrestling for thee, O Emperor,  
to win for thee the victory,  
and from thee the victor's crown.”

It became necessary to send the Roman army to Gaul for battle, along with these wrestlers who were the most loyal men in Nero's army. However, word had come to Nero that many of the Emperor's Wrestlers had become Christians, and Nero was bent on exterminating all Christians.

Nero sent a decree to Vespasian, the commander of this brave band of men which said, “If there be any among the soldiers who cling to the faith of the Christians, he must die.”

Vespasian and his men got this order from the emperor in the cold months of winter as they camped by a frozen lake. Vespasian was broken hearted to have to carry out such a decree on the men who fought so bravely at his side, and endured such great hardship with him. But if there is one word a Roman soldier knew it was DUTY!

Vespasian called his men together and asked, “Are there any among you who cling to the Christian faith? If so, step forward.”

Instantly 40 soldiers stepped forward and saluted, standing at attention. Vespasian had not expected so many, but duty was duty, so he announced to them, “The Emperor has decreed that any who hold to the Christian faith must be put to death. For the sake of your empire, your comrades, your families, renounce this false faith.”

Not one of them stepped back. Vespasian said they had till sundown to make their decision. At sundown he asked again if there were any who followed the Christian faith. Immediately 40 men stepped forward. Vespasian pleaded with them, but they would not deny Christ.

Finally he said, “The decree of the Emperor must be obeyed, but I am not willing that your blood be on your comrades. I order you to march out onto the ice and let the elements take your lives. However, there will always be a warm fire you may come back to if you decide to renounce the Christian teaching.”

The soldiers were stripped of all their clothes and ordered to march out onto the ice in the freezing cold. They marched in columns and as they moved out into the cold night, they chanted the old song from the arena, only with one word changed:

Forty wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ,  
To win for thee the victory  
And from thee the victor's crown!

Throughout the long, cold night, Vespasian waited by the fire, hearing in the distance the chant of the men, though it grew fainter as the night wore on.

As morning approached, Vespasian saw one lone figure groping his way towards the campfire – in his suffering he had renounced Christ. But from the darkness came the song:

Thirty-nine wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ,  
To win for thee the victory  
And from thee the victor's crown!

Vespasian looked at the man coming towards the fire, and then out into the darkness towards the song of faith. Suddenly he jerked off his helmet and threw down his shield and he ran out onto the ice shouting:

Forty wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ,  
To win for thee the victory  
And from thee the victor's crown!

What would make you jump up and down with joy? Can you say with these men, and millions throughout the ages, from all nations,

“My joy is in serving Jesus – be the way hard or easy, I will be true? I know Jesus' words to be true, and no matter what, I will stand true for Jesus today, tomorrow and every day until he comes or he takes me home:

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