

Sermon Notes

Practical Lessons for Understanding the Word of God



Persecuted

KEY PASSAGE: Matthew 5:8-12 | **SUPPORTING SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 5:14, 44; 10:22-23 | Romans 8:35, 37-39
Ephesians 6:10 | Philippians 1:12-13 | 2 Timothy 3:12 | 1 Peter 4:12-13

SUMMARY

Christianity has proven itself unstoppable.

Despite mistreatment, persecution, and even martyrdom, the church continues to grow. Even today around the world, thousands of believers are killed every year. Others have their property confiscated, and some are being tortured and raped. It's amazing that in the face of such heartache and pain, Christianity is actually stronger in these parts of the world than in areas which allow religious freedom.

As difficult as persecution is, the Bible offers hope to those who stand strong and faithfully endure. Jesus said believers who are persecuted, insulted, and falsely accused are blessed because their reward in heaven is great (Matt. 5:10-12). Although Christianity has been under attack throughout history, it will survive until Jesus comes to take His followers out of this evil world.

SERMON POINTS

Why does Christianity elicit such a negative reaction?

Jesus identified the cause when He said, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness" (Matt. 5:10). A righteous life is a threat to a dark world. Christians who live in obedience to God are lights who expose the darkness of sinful practices. The apostle Paul pointed out the connection between holiness and persecution: "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12).

Mistreatment comes in various forms and degrees. In some parts of the world, being a Christian is not only dangerous; it could result in death. For those

living in freer societies, harassment comes in the form of insults, criticism, discrimination, or exclusion. Whenever persecution comes, no matter how severe or mild, every believer must decide whether to compromise in order to avoid trouble or to stand firm and endure. Compromising may bring immediate relief, but those who choose to live righteously despite the consequences gain so much more—a fruitful life that fulfills God's purpose, a positive influence on other people's lives, and an awesome witness to unbelievers.

The purpose of persecution

Although persecution is meant to hurt and silence Christians, God uses it to accomplish His good purposes by the way it:

- **Allows us to share in the sufferings of Christ** (1 Pet. 4:13). He was abused and killed for us, and when we are persecuted, our suffering is counted as His.
- **Tests our loyalty.** The evidence of our faithfulness to Christ is not found in what we say but in what we do when fiery ordeals come our way. That's when we either stay true to God, or we seek the world's acceptance.
- **Furtheres the gospel** (Phil. 1:12). The Lord uses persecution to spread His message. Prison was the last place Paul expected to have an effective ministry, but he not only had a captive audience with the guards who were chained to him, he also had enough time to write the books of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.
- **Enables us to encourage others undergoing persecution.** When we've been mistreated and yet have experienced God's help and strength to endure, we're able to encourage others who are presently walking that same road of suffering.

What the Lord did for us, He'll do for them.

- **Demonstrates our loyalty to Christ.** If Jesus has first place in our lives, we'll be willing to adhere to a godly lifestyle even if it results in harassment and ridicule.
- **Demonstrates our faith in God's Word.** When we truly believe the Scriptures, we'll willingly suffer persecution knowing that God will make us adequate for every situation.
- **Encourages us to anticipate a reward.** The Lord never forgets a single act of obedience or righteousness. In fact, He promises us a very great reward in heaven, even for simply taking the time to help someone in need.

The proper response to persecution

The most natural reaction is to run from persecution, and sometimes that is exactly what we should do. When the apostle Paul experienced harsh treatment and could no longer be effective in ministry, he often moved on to the next city. His goal was to spread the message of Jesus to people who would hear and respond, not to keep preaching to those who refused to listen.

However, there were also times when Paul stayed in a city despite mistreatment. Jesus accurately predicted that His followers would be hated, yet they would stay and endure if it meant being true to Christ (Matt. 10:22). No matter how bad opposition becomes, we have a promise that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, not even persecution (Rom. 8:35-39). When the Lord calls us to stay in a difficult situation, we can respond properly by:

- **Standing strong.** The strength to withstand persecution comes from the Lord. We stand strong in Him, based on everything He's said in His Word (Eph. 6:10).
- **Enduring opposition.** This means we abide under the persecution. Or in today's language, we hang in there and rely on God's strength until He moves us out of the situation.

- **Loving and praying for our enemies.** This is perhaps the most difficult assignment, yet it's what Christ commands (Matt. 5:44). We're to pray that Jesus might be made known to our enemies through our responses to mistreatment. Unbelievers can't understand why Christians exhibit strength, love, and forgiveness in the midst of ill treatment. Wherever the church has endured persecution, it has grown because people see how believers respond, and want that kind of life as well.

The worst way to react to persecution is to stop talking about Jesus for fear of upsetting people. However, we need to unsettle them by courageously and clearly sharing the truth because without Christ, they're on their way to everlasting separation from God. One day all their enjoyments and pursuits will vanish, and they'll have to stand before a holy, righteous God. We want them to know the only One who can change their lives—both now and for all eternity.

God's promise to the persecuted

Jesus told His followers, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great" (Matt 5:12). We all have our ideas of what "great" could be, but God's "great" is beyond our imagination. All the other things we have pursued in life will be nothing compared to what He will give us.

RESPONSE

- How would recognizing God's purposes in your times of mistreatment change your thoughts, feelings, and responses toward others?
- How does rejoicing in the faithfulness of the Lord change your perspective on persecution?
- Have you ever loved and prayed for someone who mistreated you? What effect did it have on you, on that person, and on your situation?

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