FCCOE; 2/5/23; Matt. 5:10-12; Rev. T. Ziegenhals

“Rejoice…Really?”

Introduction: Back in October we began to dip our toes into that great body of teaching by Jesus identified as the Sermon on the Mount. We did so in order to begin reflecting on what it looks like to live as citizens of the kingdom of God, to consider how Jesus seeks to guide our character and conduct so that his light might shine beautifully and effectively in us and through us. We noted how Jesus introduces his teaching with 8 beatitudes or blessings, not as a list of what we need to do to find favor with God, but as signs of new life that will begin to emerge in us as the grace of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, gets more and more of us.

You may remember that we looked at the first seven of these blessings and then pushed “pause” at Christmas. Today we’ll hit “play” and pick up with the last one which, as we will hear in a moment, is a bit of a surprising and uncomfortable one, having to do with being blessed, Jesus says, because we are being persecuted! Even more, Jesus wants us to rejoice and be glad…really?

What I’ll offer to you is that Jesus doesn’t want us to be surprised when we face opposition for living out our faith, and he also wants to help us understand how to persevere through it.

Let’s read into the text, beginning at 4:23 with Matthew’s summary statement as to what the opening months of Jesus’ ministry looked like. [READ]

I. The Reality of Persecution

A. This word about being persecuted kind of hits the reader right between the eyes. We’ve been hearing about those who know their spiritual bankruptcy and need for God, who mourn their own sin as well as that of the world, who express their desire to be used by God, whose appetites are being changed toward wanting the things of God, who seek to offer mercy, whose hearts begin to tune in to the light of God’s love, and who try to bring reconciliation into all aspects of their life . . . and suddenly we’re told that all of this goodness will meet with opposition! As Scottish pastor and writer, Sinclair Ferguson puts it, “Isn’t this the reverse of what we would expect? . . . would such people not be welcomed with open arms? After all, these are the very men and women the world needs!” Well, that may be true, but unfortunately, much of the world doesn’t seem to know it.

B. What Jesus wants us to know is this, as he shared with his followers as they were sitting around what would be their last meal together: “Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (Jn. 15:20).

Paul speaks to this reality as well, in a letter he wrote to a church leader named Timothy, after sharing with Timothy his own multiple experiences of being flogged and imprisoned, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12).

Illustration: Such persecution takes many forms, largely based on where we live. Here in America, it may likely involve just being discriminated against, or ridiculed, or ignored in some way. I say “just” because in a country like India, the consequences of being a Christian are far worse. Speaking about this with Jim Pocock last week, who has spent significant time working with Christians in India, he spoke of Hindus being arrested and imprisoned if they convert to Christianity, violence being perpetrated against Christians, including killing and maiming, and the burning of houses and churches, all as the government and police look the other way. No wonder baptisms there begin by asking the questions, “Are you prepared to suffer for Jesus? Are you willing to die for Jesus?”

II. Some Reasons for Persecution

A. Why, we certainly want to know, does this happen? In his repetition of this beatitude, repeated probably because after the first time his listeners likely did a “wait, what?” kind of response, and Jesus didn’t want them/us to miss it. But also repeated because Jesus spelled out a few specifics in the repeat. So, we hear that persecution isn’t limited to physical torture but includes insult and slander, and we hear that our problem is really Jesus! We face opposition hostility, Jesus says, “because of me.”

Illustration: Taking a cue from a lecture on plate tectonics in a college geology course, as Christians we find ourselves living on a plot of ground that is being scrunched by the movement of the tectonic plates of the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. We find ourselves in the midst of two irreconcilable value systems. We find that living by seeking to follow Jesus creates friction in the hearts of those that wish Jesus would simply be quiet and go away. And if they can’t silence him, they’ll try to silence his followers.

B. So what’s the problem, it might be helpful to ask, with this nice guy named Jesus? What got him into such hot water that might get us in there with him?! I can think of at least three things about him that can rub people the wrong way.

1. Jesus challenges our perception of ourselves as basically good and righteous people. That is, we can have this view that puts the human race on a scale. The murderers, thieves, and rapists are at the bottom. Somewhere in the middle is the average citizen. Near the top are the star performers, the really good people. Way at the top is God. Rarely would we put ourselves at the bottom. But even if near the top, we still need Jesus, for righteousness, teaches Jesus, is like perfection. There is no scale. One cannot be partly perfect, nor partly righteous. We don’t like to think of ourselves as not being good enough. It hurts our pride, and our sense that we can shape ourselves up by ourselves.

2. Jesus reveals our prejudices. Throughout the course of his life, he hung out with and even ate and partied with all the wrong kinds of people, at least as far as the religious establishment was concerned – tax collectors, prostitutes, fishermen, even gentiles. He had come for all, regardless of creed, color, or conviction. And he had come to call them home before worrying about them shaping up; that would follow in due time, and that kind of openness and inclusion causes many to feel uncomfortable.

3. On the other side of things, Jesus tweaks our ideas of tolerance. To the discomfort of many, Jesus declared in both word and deed that he was the sole, personal revealer of the person and glory of God, and that no one would be able to come home to God except through him. As Peter put it to the Sanhedrin, after the healing of the lame beggar: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Ac. 4:12). It is the “scandal of particularity,” as theologians call it. Jesus is the gate for the sheep, the vine for the branches, the way, the truth, the life. Jesus has come for all and all must come through him. Both truths fill many with fury!

B. Importantly, Jesus was never persecuted for being a jerk. He wasn’t crucified for being mean or judgmental. He wasn’t opposed for being obnoxious or tactless or culturally insensitive, all, things, unfortunately, that have characterized Christians from time to time and negatively impact our witness. Watching him work his way through life in a kind and compassionate manner, even though he said and called people to many challenging things, is probably part of what led Peter to write:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, it if is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. (1 Pet. 3:15-17)

In other words, if you’re gonna be persecuted, make sure it’s for the right things!

III. Our Response to Persecution

A. Given, then, the reality of persecution, in whatever uncomfortable form it may take, how might we respond? Well, we could try to retaliate, to get even in some way with those who oppose us. But that just escalates the hostility, and is certainly not the way of the cross. Or, we could run, seeking to live our life away from and separate from the kingdom of this world. But that ignores the missional engagement Jesus calls us to have with the world. Instead of retaliating, and instead of running, Jesus calls us to rejoice! How is that helpful? Why would we do that? For two reasons, Jesus says.

1. First, we rejoice and are glad because persecution is actually a sign of genuine faith. It reveals and affirms that we are part of the family, that we, like God’s messengers the prophets who’ve gone before us, belong to a long line of people who have sought to tell and to live the truth about God and God’s ways so that others might come to know his love. Persecution is kind of like a paternity test, revealing who your true father, and your true family is. Alternatively, Luke records Jesus as adding: “Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets” (Lk. 6:26). In other words, if you have never faced opposition or hostility for sharing or living out your faith, it might be a good idea to wonder what faith you are proclaiming.

2. Second, we rejoice and are glad because Jesus is saying to us, “yes, *and.*” Yes to all the hard things we experience when persecuted in some way for our faith – Jesus doesn’t seek to minimize or ignore that reality. But, *and,* know that the kingdom of God is already yours, that even as you look at your circumstances that seem to communicate a different truth, there is reason to rejoice because in Jesus the future has begun to break into the present and we get both tastes of that future (cf. 4:23-25), and the promise that one day the family of which we are a part will experience a world in which death and mourning and crying and pain will be gone for good and forever. As he promises (going back to our plate tectonics illustration): “When the earth and all its people quake it is I who hold its pillars firm” (Ps. 75:3).

Let us go to the table together where Jesus invites us to take and eat—to taste—the goodness he has prepared for us through his death and resurrection. May it help us to rejoice, and be glad.