

## INTRODUCTION

Two thousand years ago, Jesus went up onto a mountain and preached the most splendid sermon in the history of the world. It's called the Sermon on the Mount. He launched this magnificent message by saying, "I want to give you seven simple steps you can take to experience personal refreshing from God." These statements are called the Beatitudes, and we could say that they are "attitudes that ought to be." The eighth beatitude is different because it's not so much an attitude as it is a consequence of embracing the seven attitudes that precede it.

A lot of people try to climb the ladder of success as this world defines success, and once they get to the top of the ladder, they discover that it's leaning against the wrong wall! The beatitudes of Jesus are refreshingly different! These attitudes won't help you advance in this rat race we call this world. Instead they teach you how to live and in the Kingdom of God. Each beatitude represents a sequential step. In order to experience God's fullness of blessing, each beatitude must be embraced in the order in which Jesus gave them.

They are like steps on a ladder. Since this is the last REFRESH message, let's take a moment to review these steps. First, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." It all starts with you admitting that you are morally bankrupt without God. The essence of all sin is to swallow the lie Satan whispered to Eve when he said, "You don't need God. You can be your own god." The ladder of blessings begin when I realize that I'm not God.

For step two, Jesus said, "Blessed are those that mourn." When we really see ourselves for who we are, it breaks our heart and causes us to mourn. Like Isaiah, we'll moan, "Woe to me, for I am a man of unclean lips!" (Isaiah 6:5) When we mourn, God promises to comfort us. So for this step I must earnestly believe God exists and that I matter to Him.

Then Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek." We learned that meekness isn't weakness, it is strength under control. Meekness describes a powerful stallion that has been "broken" so that he submits to the guidance of his rider. This step is to fully submit my life and will to Christ's control.

Next, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." We learned the difference between self-righteousness and God's righteousness. Our own attempts to do right and be right are like filthy rags, but God offers to exchange our sinful character with the absolute righteousness of His Son Jesus Christ. So at this step I must receive God's righteousness as a gift of grace.

Then, for step five, Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful." Once we have received God's grace and forgiveness, we can forgive ourselves, and on that basis, forgive others. So, for this step, we extend forgiveness to those who have hurt me. The only person who can afford the luxury of unforgiveness is the person who doesn't need for God to forgive them.

Step six is to seek purity instead of perfection, based upon the words, "Blessed are the pure in heart." We learned that purity is not perfection; it means to be cleansed and to have an unmixed devotion to Christ. We can't be perfect, but we can stay clean.

Last week we discovered the pinnacle of happiness is to get to a point where we can help others find peace with God. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." At this point, helping others becomes a greater motivation than my own happiness.

Now, we've reached the top of the ladder, what's there? The top step of a ladder says, "This is not a step." In the same way, the eighth beatitude isn't a step; it's the consequence of the first seven steps. You probably won't like what you find at the top of the ladder!

A few years ago, we noticed many wasps were appearing in our house, when the doors and windows weren't open. After some investigation, I discovered the wasps built a huge nest under one of the eaves of our house, and a little of the weather stripping had worn away, so the nest actually extended into a portion of our attic. So I bought one of those cans of wasp killer and grabbed my trusty ladder. I carefully climbed up the top and proceeded to bomb those pesky wasps. They weren't very happy with me and the moment I sprayed them, a huge cloud of angry wasps started toward me. I assure you, I climbed down that ladder faster than I climbed up it! And I ran as far away from the ladder as I could get! I finally got rid of them after a couple more attempts. But as I remembered my wasp experience, I thought that there some people who, when they discover what's at the top of this beatitude ladder, may want to scamper down and run away from it! Surely when you get to the top of the ladder, you'll find serenity, peace, nirvana, or something like that, right? Not quite. You'll find persecution.

Let's see what Jesus said would be the consequences of taking these first seven steps. It's the only one of the beatitudes that He uses several sentences to explain and amplify the meaning.

Matthew 5:10-12. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

I like the way Eugene Petersen paraphrases part of that passage in *The Message*, "Count yourself blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even! For though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds." (Matthew 5:11-12) And now, for the last time, let's recite our REFRESH memory verse, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." (Acts 3:19)

These first seven beatitudes reveal to us the character of Jesus Christ. He gave up the riches of heaven to take on our poverty, He was the man of sorrows, He was meek and merciful. Get the picture? Jesus said that when your character reflects His character, you will face the same thing that He faced—persecution. There are some who are preaching a "prosperity gospel" and that message tickles people's ears. But Jesus didn't preach a prosperity gospel; He preached a "persecution gospel." Nobody likes to talk about being persecuted, and it sounds paradoxical to say, "Blessed/happy/fortunate are those who are persecuted." But if you want to *truly* experience the refreshing blessings of God, you've got to understand persecution. Let's consider four

important facets of persecution.

## **1. THE REALITY: When you live for Christ you will be persecuted**

Persecution isn't reserved for a few Christians living in China or Africa. The Bible says, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12)

When you buy a new car, it has both standard equipment and options. In the Christian life, persecution isn't an option, it is standard equipment. Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are you IF people insult you." He said, "Blessed are you WHEN you are insulted."

We all know that the early Christians suffered terrible persecution. Thousands of Christians lost their lives in the first 300 years of Christianity. For instance, there was a wonderful old Pastor in Smyrna (modern Turkey) named Polycarp, who had been the disciple of the Apostle John. In 156 A.D., he was arrested for being a Christian, and was tied to a stake to be burned to death. Since he was so old, the Roman magistrate decided to offer him mercy. He told Polycarp he would be set free if he would simply say, "*Kaisar estin kurios.*" (Caesar is Lord) But Polycarp replied with these powerful words: "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" Then the wood around him was ignited and as the fire grew, Polycarp's last words were: "Oh, Lord God Almighty, I thank You that You have graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour."

Persecution to the death isn't just an ugly episode from history. Today, Christians are still being put to death. In the Sudan, thousands of Christians have been massacred by the Muslim armies. In Indonesia, churches have been burned and Christians have been murdered.

Thankfully, Christians in America aren't suffering physical persecution because of our faith... yet. But Jesus spoke of different kinds of persecution than physical suffering. He mentioned insults, and defamation of character as a form of persecution.

The form persecution most often takes today is verbal insults and ridicule. I can remember the first time I was insulted and ridiculed for my faith. When I was in high school, I fell in love with Jesus and decided to start sharing my faith with my friends. I became a vocal witness for the Lord, even on the football field with my teammates. In my hometown, there was a hang-out where all high school students used to gather after school. It was called Ray's Grill. It was a food joint that served burgers, fries, and milk shakes. All the kids would sit in the booths and order food and talk.

One afternoon after football practice I went to Ray's Grill to hang out with some of my friends. Some of the rougher guys in our school walked in with their black leather jackets on and slicked back hair—yes, they looked exactly like Fonzie on "Happy Days." When they saw me, one of them said in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, "Look, everybody, here's the preacher! Hey, preacher, why don't you preach a sermon for us?" My first impression was to get up and punch his lights out, but I knew that wasn't very Christ-like. I couldn't think of anything cool to say, so I just shook my head and kept on eating my fries. But I can remember how that ridicule stung me. Later another guy signed my high school annual by saying, "You're a pretty good guy

for a religious fanatic."

Folks, if you stand up for Jesus there will be people in your family, or at your job, or at school who will ridicule you. Jesus predicted it would happen. We should never go out looking for persecution. But if you're living for Jesus, it will come looking for you. If you've never been persecuted for being a Christian, you might consider whether you demonstrate your faith before others. As the old bumper sticker says, "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

## **2. THE REASON: You'll be hated because you're different**

Jesus didn't fit the mold of the religious professionals of His time, so they hated Him. When we embrace these beatitudes, we'll be different than the world, and the world will hate us. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world." (John 15:18)

Some people suffer because they make poor decisions. That's not persecution, it's simply cause and effect. Other people attract persecution because they are totally obnoxious. That's not what Jesus meant here. In verse 10 He referred to being "persecuted for righteousness." In verse 11, Jesus spoke of being blessed when we are "insulted and persecuted because of me."

When the Bible speaks of "the world" it's not talking about the planet, or even the world of people. God so loved the world of people that He sent His Son to save us. The term "world" refers to the ungodly, naturalistic philosophy that is embraced by people who don't know God.

The refreshing attitudes embodied in these seven steps would never make it in the corporate boardroom or in the world of professional sports today. These Christ-like virtues would never be embraced in our hard-nosed, dog-eat-dog world. In fact, the world has its own set of beatitudes that tell you how to get ahead. J.B. Phillips calls these the "anti-beatitudes." The world says, "Happy are the arrogant: for they never see themselves. Happy are the hard-boiled: for they never let life hurt them. Happy are those who complain: for they get their own way in the end. Happy are the complacent: for they never worry over their sins. Happy are the slave drivers: for they get results. Happy are the loud-mouthed: for they make people notice them."

When you live by the teachings of Jesus, you'll be so different than the world that they will hate you for it. It's part of our fallen human nature to suspect people who are different. I know it's hard for us to imagine, but there was a man named Joseph Palmer who lived in Massachusetts in the early 1800s who decided to grow a beard. This was during a time when hardly any men displayed facial hair. Joseph Palmer was different, and because he grew a beard, he was hated. He was ordered by the local officials to shave, but he refused. As a result, he suffered ridicule and derision. His home was broken into by vandals. On one occasion some men wrestled him to the ground and tried to forcibly shave his beard. He pulled a knife to stop them and was arrested for assault, even though he had been attacked. He spent months in jail for no other reason than he wore a beard. He was hated because he was different. When he died in 1870, he had these words printed on his tombstone: JOSEPH PALMER: PERSECUTED FOR WEARING THE BEARD. The ironic thing is that by the time he died in 1870, most men in

America wore beards, as you can see from the Civil War photographs!

When you live for Jesus Christ, this world will hate you simply because you are so different from them. They curse their enemies, we pray for our enemies. When they are hit on one cheek, they strike back; we turn the other cheek. They go exactly one mile, and not a step further; we go the second mile. The reason Jesus was persecuted and finally executed was because He was so radically different in His teaching and life. When you live for Jesus you'll have more bricks thrown at you than bouquets!

### **3. THE REACTION: Make the choice to rejoice when you suffer for Jesus**

"If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." (I Peter 4:16) How many times do you suppose the word "Christian" appears in the Bible? Care to guess? Only three times. First, in Acts 11:26, the believers in Antioch were called Christians. Second, in Acts 26:28, Herod Agrippa asked Paul if he thought he could make him into a Christian. This is the only other occurrence. The word "Christian" literally means "a little Christ." It was a term first used in derision. Like, who do you think you are, a "little Christ?" Yes, that's who we are, and if we suffer because we bear the name "little Christ" the Bible says we should praise God!

What we've learned in this series is that we can't change others, we can't change our circumstances, and we don't even have the power to change ourselves. The only thing we can change is our attitude, how we react to life. Rejoicing is not a feeling—it's a choice.

Let's examine the words Jesus used in verse 12. He said, "When (not if) you are persecuted for my sake, rejoice and be glad." Those two words don't really capture the power of what Jesus meant. Those words, used together literally mean "to leap and shout for joy!"

In 1989 the Chicago Bulls were playing the Cleveland Cavaliers in the NBA playoffs. Michael Jordan was just entering his prime. It was the fifth and final game and with 3 seconds left, Cleveland led 100-99. The Bulls called time out to discuss strategy for a final shot. Everyone in the building knew that MJ would get the ball. In fact, Bulls coach Doug Collins later said he told the team, "Get the ball to Michael and the rest of you get out of his way!" Sure enough, they fed him the ball, and dribbled twice to the top of the key for a jumper. Craig Ehlo went up to block the shot, but MJ seemed to hang in the air until Ehlo's hands were below him. He nailed the shot just as the buzzer sounded. In sports history, it's simply known as "the shot," because of what Jordan did next. Knowing they had won the series, he ran a few steps and jumped up pumping his fist while shouting "YES!" That scene is one of the classic moments in professional sports.

That's exactly the meaning of the words Jesus used here. It means to jump for joy and shout with victory. So when someone insults you or ridicules you for your faith, your reaction should be a fist pump accompanied with a loud, "Yes!" If you're wondering WHY you should jump for joy, let's move on to the next point.

### **4. THE REWARD: Great is our reward in heaven!**

In verse 12 Jesus said to jump for joy and shout with victory, because great is your reward in heaven. When you have given your life to Jesus, you are awarded citizenship in heaven. The Bible says, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." (Philippians 3:20-21) The Bible says we eagerly await our Savior, who will change our bodies into a body just like His. Right now, the Holy Spirit who lives within us is changing our character to be like Jesus. Romans 8:29 says we have been predestined to be "conformed to the likeness" of Jesus Christ. That's what's happening *now*. He who began a good work in you will keep on working in you until He's finished. In addition to the transformation of our personalities, the Bible says when Jesus returns, even our bodies will be transformed to be like Him.

Remember, the title of this message is: "I'll wait for my reward." As Christians, we aren't promised that we'll receive earthly rewards for our faith. Instead, we are more likely to be the object of ridicule and persecution. But the reason we can jump for joy when we are persecuted is that this world is not the only world. There is a world to come and we will receive heavenly rewards. In one of his most-quoted statements, C.S. Lewis once wrote: "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." Our job is to be faithful here and eagerly await our reward.

## CONCLUSION

The Bible speaks of the rewards we'll receive in heaven. The greatest reward will be to just be with Jesus. At the judgment seat of Christ, Jesus will pass out crowns for our faithfulness. Whenever I talk about heavenly rewards, there are always some people who say, "I don't want any crowns in heaven, I just want my little "mansion just over the hilltop." First of all, there won't be any mansions there. John 14:2 literally says God's house has many rooms. And secondly, don't worry; you won't be wearing your crown for very long. Revelation 4:10 says we will lay our crowns at the feet of Jesus. Will you have any crowns to lay there? I love that great song that says, "We fall down, we lay our crowns, at the feet of Jesus." Seeing Jesus and being with Him is all the reward we need. As another wonderful song says, "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus."

I was looking through some of my funeral notes awhile back and I was reminded of a great lady who used to sing in our choir. Her name was Janelle Reazin, and when she sang, you could see heaven on her face. Janelle battled cancer for several years, and she had the wonderful blessing of knowing that she would die. To prepare for her death, she even recorded a song and we played it at her funeral service in 2000. It was a powerful experience for us to hear this great lady who had suffered long sing these words, "Our prayers have been answered, I finally arrived; The healing that has been delayed, has now been realized. No one is in a hurry here, there's no schedule to keep. We're all enjoying Jesus, just sitting at His feet. If you could see me now, I'm walking streets of gold. If you could see me now, I'm standing tall and bold. If you could see me now, you'd know I've seen His face. If you could see me now, you'd know the pain has been erased. You wouldn't want me ever to leave this place. If you could only see me now."

If you want to experience refreshing from God, give Him your life—all of it. He doesn't promise

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that life here will be pain-free. But He does promise a heavenly reward that is so great it is worth waiting for!

## OUTLINE

- Realize that I'm not God
- Earnestly believe that God exists and that I matter to Him
- Fully surrender my life and will to Christ's control
- Receive God's righteousness as a gift of grace
- Extend forgiveness to those who have hurt me
- Seek purity instead of perfection
- Help others find peace with God

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes