

Day 43 A City on a Hill

Matthew 5:1-12 (NIV) Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, **2** and he began to teach them. He said: **3** “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **4** Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. **5** Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. **6** Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. **7** Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. **8** Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. **9** Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. **10** **Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”**

Everything that we have heard from Jesus has brought us to this moment: the eighth beatitude. Jesus has taken us on a journey of maturity; a journey that starts with recognizing where we are, acknowledging our total dependence on Him, and then building our lives on the way of the Kingdom, the way of the cross. Each action, each attitude, encouraging us to embrace God’s way and rejecting the culture; leaning into the truth and allowing the Holy Spirit to build within us the characteristics, qualities and nature of Christ until we all reflect our Father, emulate Jesus and become mature sons of God! Now what? Do we finally get the prize? As we are working towards, looking and acting like Jesus, what do we get? What do we get for being meek? What do we receive, as we continue to hunger and thirst for righteousness? Surely our enemies will give us the same mercy that we give them, won’t they? Now that our hearts are being purified and our motives become a reflection of pure love, we will get the same from others, right? Then our maturity leads us to become peacemakers, so surely we will have peace with other; people are going to love us.

People are going to see that we are truthful, humble, righteous, merciful, pure in heart and peaceful. We are going to get a lot of love, right, Jesus? Lean in and listen to what Jesus says: **“When you are reviled and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers—wonderful! 12 Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a tremendous reward awaits you up in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted too.” (Matthew 5:11-12 TLB)**

First and foremost, Jesus said “if we are being persecuted for righteousness,” not for unrighteousness. You cannot live spiritually irresponsible and say you are being persecuted. You cannot lie, steal, cheat and act immorally and say that people are persecuting you because of your faith. You cannot be lazy and do things that are contrary to the character of Christ and call it persecution. Just because someone disagrees with you does not mean they persecute you. Why the persecution? If we are loving and even blessing our enemy, why would they want to persecute us? We are called to walk in love and truth, just like Jesus was full of grace and truth. **“Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father.” (John 1:14 NCV)** People don’t mind the grace; it is the truth that upsets them!

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the gospel of peace, but it is also the gospel of truth. The truth of the gospel has a way of going against the grain of the culture. Truth challenges and confronts. Truth challenges the corruption of the human heart and confronts the propensity of evil within us. Truth will disturb the peace because truth is a sword that separates good and evil. Truth produces a conflict between righteousness and unrighteousness. People will bristle against the truth because it challenges them with

change. So, we either deny the truth by stating it is a lie or we attempt to change the truth by saying it doesn't apply. People say things like: "There's no such thing as absolute truth; there is only your truth and my truth." Yet, that is an absolute statement that they just made. So is that true or not? Jesus cannot be true for some; He is either true for all or for none! His claims were too radical and uncompromising for it to fit in convenience and comfort. The truth of Jesus will make you very uncomfortable before it comforts you. You cannot be comforted by Jesus unless you accept Him as the Way, Truth and Life. Jesus says there is no other way to the Father. There is only one Way, one Door, and if you are unwilling to go through the Door, which is Christ, it is impossible to get to the Father.

That is not a politically correct message from Jesus: nevertheless, it is His message. This message will cause millions and millions of people to protest; yet it is clear from what Jesus said, there is no in between, none! Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or He is Who He said He is. So He tells us that we will face persecution because we follow Him. Jesus, the Master communicator, understands that everybody wants to be blessed. We all want to live lives of meaning, purpose and satisfaction. We want our lives to matter and have value; we want the blessed life. So Jesus shows us how to build. The Kingdom of God is not the kingdom of this world. Jesus shows us a different way of living and life, and He encourages us to build His way. If we don't, we are building on sand and not the Rock. God's way might not make natural sense, but it is the wisest way of building, and the result is a truly blessed life. Isaiah declares: ***"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine."*** (Isaiah 55:8 NLT)

A blessed life is a life of maturity that leads us to the willingness to suffer for the Name of Christ, and even rejoice because we suffer persecution, as followers of Jesus. Being a loving, kind person is not a guarantee that we will not face persecution. Jesus is love personified. There is not a more loving being that has ever walked the face of the earth than Jesus. What did the world do to Him? They crucified Love! As the Father sent Jesus, Jesus now sends us. Living out the way of the cross, living by the principles of the beatitudes, leads to the willingness of laying down our lives and taking up His. As each of us build our lives on the principles of the Kingdom, we become what God intends for us to become. We become salt and light. We become the city on the hilltop that cannot be hidden.

"You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. 14 "You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. 15 No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your Heavenly Father." (Matthew 5:13-16 NLT)

We live lives of humility that pursue righteousness; we are dispensers of mercy from a pure heart that is motivated by love and we make peace. So we add flavor to a lost world that is in desperate need of the cleansing and preserving nature of salt. We don't hide the fact of Who we follow because as we follow Jesus' example, we give light to a dark world. Salt can also cause pain when it is rubbed on a wound, and light can produce a reaction because it exposes what happens in the dark.

Are you willing to let your light shine? Are you willing to stay salty? If you are, rejoice even when you face persecution because you are part of God's city on the hilltop.

Reflection and Prayer:

- This week we are going to focus on our brothers and sisters that are facing the toughest persecution in the world. Let's take a moment and remember their suffering and their pain and pray for them. (Source: opendoorsusa.org)

1 - NORTH KOREA:

Being discovered as a Christian is a death sentence in North Korea. If you aren't killed instantly, you will be taken to a labor camp as a political criminal. These inhumane prisons have horrific conditions, and few believers make it out alive. Everyone in your family will share the same punishment. Kim Jong-un is reported to have expanded the system of prison camps, in which an estimated 50,000-70,000 Christians are currently imprisoned.

- **SOURCE OF PERSECUTION - Communist and post-communist oppression**
- **LEADER - Kim Jong-un**
- **TOTAL POPULATION - 25,841,000**
- **CHRISTIAN POPULATION - 400,000 (1.5%)**
- **MAIN RELIGION - Agnosticism**

PRAYER POINTS:

- Pray for North Korea's secret believers that God will continue to strengthen them, provide for their needs and keep them safe.
- Pray for the believers who are imprisoned.
- Despite the risks, we have heard stories of believers sharing the gospel with others, even in North Korean prison camps. Pray that North Korean believers will shine as lights in the darkest places on earth.

Hee-Yol's Story:

In the 1990s, a famine devastated North Korea, so "Hee-Yol" fled to China for food and money. While there, she visited church and heard the gospel for the first time. She gave her life to Jesus.

A few years later, she was caught by Chinese police, who sent her back to North Korea. Her church mates in China tried to help her, but they couldn't do much. She wondered why God would let her be caught.

Hee-Yol faced a trial and was sentenced to a four-year imprisonment. "I went inside the prison cell and cried with all my voice to God. I was blaming God before, but I started to plead to God, 'Please save me from here!'" The prison was worse than she expected. "About two prisoners died from starvation every day. Starvation in prison cannot be described with any words," Hee-Yol says. "I was malnourished then. It was a hard time." After two years, she was released. Hee-Yol waited a few more years, and then escaped once more to China—and then eventually to South Korea. Looking back on her life, Hee-Yol says, "In the most difficult time in my life, I found God through the suffering. I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy compared with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18) I praise and worship our God who will reveal Himself in suffering." She asks for our continuing prayers. "I ask those who have been praying for North Korea from all around the world, to pray for North Korea to be able to come to the gospel. The North Korean citizens are like slaves. With the light of the Lord, they would be freed."

2 - AFGHANISTAN:

For the last three years, Afghanistan has almost tied with North Korea for the No. 1 spot on the World Watch List.

- **SOURCE OF PERSECUTION - Clan oppression**
- **LEADER - President Ashraf Ghani**
- **TOTAL POPULATION - 38,055,000**
- **CHRISTIAN POPULATION - A small number**
- **MAIN RELIGION - Islam**

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR CHRISTIANS IN AFGHANISTAN?

In Afghanistan, living openly as a Christian is impossible. Christian converts face dire consequences if their new faith is discovered. Essentially, converts have two options: flee the country or risk being killed. If their family discovers their conversion, the family, clan or tribe must save its “honor” by disowning the believer, or even killing them. Christians from a Muslim background can also be sent to a psychiatric hospital, because leaving Islam is considered a sign of insanity.

PRAYER POINTS:

- Pray for protection for the small percentage of Afghani believers. Pray that anyone who might be hunting down secret Afghan Christians would not discover them.
- Pray that despite their isolation, Afghan believers would be strengthened in their faith and that they would find safe ways to access God’s Word and communicate with other believers.
- Pray that God would be at work in the hearts of Islamic extremists—such as the Taliban and ISIS.

3 - SOMALIA:

In Somalia, Christians are a “high-value target” for the Islamic terrorist group al-Shabab, known for its deadly insurgency.

- **SOURCE OF PERSECUTION - Clan oppression**
- **LEADER - President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed**
- **TOTAL POPULATION - 16,105,000**
- **CHRISTIAN POPULATION - Hundreds**
- **MAIN RELIGION - Islam**

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR CHRISTIANS IN SOMALIA?

In Somalia, Islam is considered a crucial part of Somali identity. Just being suspected of converting to Christianity is a death warrant. Members of a believer’s family, clan or community will harass, intimidate or even kill them. Female converts are at high risk for rape and forced marriage. And if a Christian man is killed or abducted, he leaves his whole family unprotected and “marked” by his conversion.

PRAYER POINTS:

- Pray for the families of believers who have been murdered for their faith—pray for God’s comfort and that they would be healed from any bitterness.
- Pray for a strong church to grow among Somali people, relying on Jesus and with a hunger and thirst for the Word of God.
- Pray that those who have killed Christians will see the Truth and be convicted.

4 - LIBYA:

- **SOURCE OF PERSECUTION - Islamic oppression**

- **LEADER - Prime Minister Fayed Sarraj**
- **TOTAL POPULATION - 6,662,000**
- **CHRISTIAN POPULATION - 34,500 (0.5%)**
- **MAIN RELIGION - Islam**

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR CHRISTIANS IN LIBYA?

In Libya, there's no freedom of speech, no freedom of religion and very limited possibility of public church life. Christians from a Muslim background face violent pressure from their family and community to renounce their faith. They—as well as foreign Christians—are also vulnerable to abduction or murder by Islamic militants and crime groups. Sharing your faith publicly is illegal; those who do try, risk violent opposition and arrest.

PRAYER POINTS:

- Pray for Libyan believers under immense pressure, particularly those in jail because of their faith. Pray for protection and release.
- Pray for peace and stability. Years of anarchy and power struggles have taken many lives and eroded hope. Christians and other minorities have become very vulnerable in such a situation of lawlessness.
- Pray for new converts who have been baptized. Rejoice that they have found Jesus, and pray they will find a group of believers.

Pray also for the following nations:

- **48 Kuwait** - In Kuwait, expatriate Christians are relatively free to worship informally. However, the existing places registered for worship are very small for the number of people gathering. Local converts from Islam face the most extreme persecution, as they face pressure from both family members and the local community to recant their faith. These believers risk discrimination, harassment, monitoring of their activities by the police, and even intimidation by vigilante groups.
- **49 Kenya** - In Kenya, Christianity is the majority religion, but that hasn't stopped the spread of persecution. Particularly, Christians with a Muslim background in the northeast and coastal regions live under constant threat of attack. Christians were attacked and forced to flee their villages, and Islamic extremist group al-Shabab has infiltrated the local population to monitor Christians in those areas. Additionally, church and community life are very difficult. Organized crime is also a serious problem.
- **50 Comoros** - Christians in Comoros are not able to share their faith freely in public. If they do, they face legal consequences. In some parts of the country, extremist groups threaten Christians with violence. Converts from a Muslim background face the most severe difficulties. They are often pressured to keep their faith private— leaving them no option but to live out their faith in secret.