

**Isaiah 45:22-25, Romans 10:1-9, Matthew 5:3-12**

**Right Relatedness in God's Kingdom**

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What happens when a person turns around to Jesus and embraces his gospel message that the Kingdom of heaven is near? What happens when followers of Jesus keep turning to Jesus and going deeper in faith? There are several things that happen. Among them we become blessed people. When we turn to Jesus and welcome and embrace the Kingdom of God in our lives, the Holy Spirit changes us so that we turn into the kind of person that Jesus describes in the Beatitudes. We become blessed.

Now when I was younger and considered the Beatitudes, I approached them somewhat like a list of who I could become if I just tried a little harder and prayed a little more. And I think my top three Beatitudes that I wanted to make myself become were merciful, pure in heart, and a peacemaker. Next on my list of who I wanted to be was to long for righteousness, then become meek and poor or humble in spirit. Being someone who mourned didn't seem very happy or joyful nor someone who was persecuted for righteousness' sake, so those were down on my list. After all, I thought blessed meant being happy. And surely someone who mourns or is persecuted and insulted isn't happy.

I approached the Beatitudes wrongly in many ways. When the Beatitudes are placed in the wider context of Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching and healing; of announcing the good news of his gospel message: Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near; then our understanding of the Beatitudes changes. The Beatitudes, and all of the Sermon on the Mount, needs to be understood as a message of grace, in light of who Jesus is and what his gospel message is about.

As I suggested a few weeks ago, the Holy Spirit turns us into blessed people after we have turned to Jesus (repented) and welcomed the Kingdom of God. Becoming a blessed person does not mean we become happy people in the way the world understands happiness. Happiness, I explained, has to do with a subjective feeling that can come and go. Blessedness – the Greek word *makarios* – has to do with God’s pronouncement of us. God determines our blessed state irrespective of how I might feel in a situation. This is why Jesus can say “*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.*” Jesus doesn’t say “happy are those who are persecuted” but “Blessed”.

As a young person, I was wrong about needing to become a Beatitude person before inheriting God’s Kingdom. I was wrong about me needing to change myself into a Beatitude person. I was wrong about blessed meaning happy. I was wrong about a lot of things. I was also wrong about my interpretation that I could merely pick and choose which Beatitudes I want to become.

You see, in the Beatitudes, Jesus describes for us eight qualities of a born again Christian, eight qualities of a Spirit-filled person, eight qualities of a disciple of Jesus, eight qualities of someone who has turned around – repented – and welcomed God’s Kingdom. Jesus does not describe for us eight different qualities of eight different people. No, instead these eight qualities are all part of each Kingdom of God dweller. So I can’t simply pick and choose which ones I want to be. I can’t say yes – I want to be a peacemaker and no – I don’t want to be persecuted. These eight qualities are part of the experience of every believer who keeps turning around to Jesus and embracing the Kingdom in deeper ways.

Remember that the Beatitudes are bookmarked by “for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”. This is our clue that the Beatitudes describe Kingdom of God people. The grammatical structure of the Beatitudes is intentional and important. Another way to phrase the Beatitudes to make my point clearer is this: Because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven, they are humble in spirit and blessed. First comes the Kingdom of God, then comes all eight qualities being described. First comes the Kingdom of God then we become blessed people.

Because these are Kingdom of God qualities that happen after we turn to Jesus and the Holy Spirit changes us, it also means these are divine attributes. They are not natural human qualities but divine qualities of God’s Kingdom which happen when God comes into our lives, transforming us. As Bryce reminded us last week, these are the upside down Kingdom of God qualities which, Bryce pointed out, are actually right side up. Thus, we do not become blessed people by focusing on each of the qualities; by focusing on poverty of spirit or being meek or merciful or pure in heart or peacemakers or praying to be persecuted. We become blessed people by turning to Jesus and being included in His body.

So we see that the Beatitudes are a result of welcoming Jesus and His gospel message; the Beatitudes are divine attributes which describe each Kingdom of God believer. This is the new humanity that happens when light breaks into darkness. Now I want to show you that the order that we find these Beatitudes is important. Each blessed quality leads us to the next; culminating in the most difficult of all: *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.*

When we turn to Jesus, and keep turning to Jesus every day, we realize our complete and utter dependence on Him. Our poverty of spirit becomes apparent. *Blessed are the poor – or humble – in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Our understanding of our need for Jesus opens our eyes to seeing how our broken world needs Jesus. We are confronted with injustice, pain, suffering, and brokenness all around us. We begin to mourn and lament all the ways that sin has impacted the world; we mourn our own brokenness and the brokenness around us. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

Seeing the brokenness and hurt around us results in gentleness, compassion, empathy, in meekness. We don't become weak but strong. *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.* Notice that it does not say blessed are those who are righteous. But blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are those who know they are unrighteous and are hungry for righteousness. Meekness, mourning, and poverty of spirit leads us to long for right relatedness, for shalom.

Our longing for righteousness leads us to mercy. When we first encounter the gospel message; when we first encounter Jesus; we always first experience mercy. We are treated with kindness that isn't deserved. And we desire to extend this same mercy to others. *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.* The pure in heart are those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful. The pure in heart are not those who are perfect or who have everything figured out. The pure in heart are those who recognize and understand and know their own poverty of spirit and complete dependence on God. The pure in heart are not independent.

As God keeps turning us into Blessed people, into ones who are in continuous relationship with Jesus, seeking the ways of God, we are also changed into people who do what Jesus does. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. He is the one who brings peace; who makes peace. We, like Jesus, are called to be peacemakers. It doesn't say seek peace, pursue peace, desire peace, keep peace, or love peace. The call is to be peacemakers. To be a peacemaker happens through the first six Beatitudes: through poverty of spirit, through mourning, through meekness, through longing for righteousness, through showing mercy, through pureness of heart. *Blessed are the peacemakers they will be called children of God.*

But peacemakers are regarded either with thankfulness or with disgust and persecution. And that leads us to the last Beatitude; the one which I sometimes wish didn't exist. *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.*

Why is persecution because of righteousness something Jesus blesses and why is it last among all the Beatitudes? To help us think about that, we need to look a bit more closely at a few things in this text. First, notice with me what specifically Jesus blesses: He says "*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness*". It does not say "blessed are those who are persecuted when they are angry or obnoxious or get themselves in trouble". But blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Righteousness. What is righteousness?

It isn't something that suddenly appears in the gospel of Matthew. Righteousness pops up in just about every book of the Bible. From Genesis and the Pentateuch to the Old Testament writings to the Psalms to the prophets, righteousness is a main theme. If I were to ask you what righteousness means, what would you say? Many Christians understand righteousness to be about rules, about behaviour, about lists, about doing what's right. A common example of righteousness is the Ten Commandments.

But when we look closer at the Ten Commandments, we notice that it all starts with a declaration from God about our relationship with him; it starts with language of covenant. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”. The Ten Commandments begins not with a rule but with a declaration of a relationship between Yahweh God and His people. Then the 10 Commandments goes on to outline and describe how to live faithfully within that relationship. It describes for us God’s standard for being in relationship. Arguably, the Sermon on the Mount does the same.

Righteousness is not about rules or lists or commands. It has more to do with relationships; it has more to do with our being in right relatedness than doing right things. This is, after all, why disobeying the 10 Commandments is regarded as a serious offense. It isn’t because of moral or ethical failure; it isn’t because someone has not followed the rules. It is such a serious offence to disobey the 10 Commandments because the relationship between humanity and God has not been taken seriously. Righteousness – being in right relatedness – has gone astray.

You see, a person can follow the law and rules but not be righteous. A person can conform to the moral expectations of the culture, things that we see externally but not be righteous in their heart. A person can behave well and proper but not be righteous. Just because something is culturally acceptable and encouraged does not mean that it is righteous. Something that is legal does not make it righteous.

Righteousness has to do with relational integrity and wholeness. And it encompasses all of life. From Genesis 1 and 2, we notice 4 basic relationships for which we were created: First, a relationship with the earth. We live in a material world and are physical beings. Secondly, we were created to be in relationship with other people. We are social creatures and need to be in communion and fellowship with one another. Thirdly, we were created to be in relationship with our self. We are psychological and emotional beings. Fourthly and most importantly, we were created to be in relationship with the living God. We are spiritual. This relationship holds all of them together. Without this relationship, we will never be in right relatedness with the earth, with others, or with oneself.

So righteousness is upholding God's standard of our relationship with God, with other humans, with animals and with our natural environment.

Turning to Jesus and embracing the gospel message of the Kingdom of God means that, as the fourth Beatitude describes, we hunger and thirst for righteousness. We long to be in right relationship with God, with oneself, with others, and with the earth. After all, God's Kingdom is marked by right relatedness, by righteousness. Righteousness is about things being put to right, it's about shalom; it's about right relatedness.

So why do all the Beatitudes lead us to this: *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, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Simply stated, it's because of Jesus. Here's what I mean. Notice with me the first 7 Beatitudes follow a structure like this: blessed are the \_\_\_\_\_ followed by an adjective, for they or theirs followed by a promise. Verse 10 follows that same structure: blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Now notice with me what Jesus says in verse 11. He is restating the Beatitude of verse 10 but with two significant changes to the structure. In verse 11, Jesus changes it and says "Blessed are you". It isn't blessed are those or they. Jesus gets personal here and says Blessed are you; the plural form of you, implying all of you. And then he adds something that we don't find in any of the previous Beatitudes. Jesus says "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely – and here's where there's an addition – "on account of me". Jesus, for the first time in the Beatitudes, inserts himself explicitly into the conversation. And he does this because Jesus is saying I'm the problem – I'm the reason why you will be persecuted. Our experience of persecution for righteousness' sake is because of Jesus.

The Beatitudes are a result of the gospel getting hold of us and suddenly the gospel message seems a lot more difficult to embrace and welcome.

Well, we don't need to look far in our Bible to read about the reason for persecution. John 15:18 reminds us of Jesus' words: "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you." When Jesus speaks of the world, Jesus is referring to human society that does not have God in the centre. If our society, a society that chooses to ignore God, cannot and does not welcome the King, what would we expect of the world in relation to the King's servants? Persecution seems inevitable for those who follow the one who was persecuted.

Perhaps our starting point isn't why is persecution blessed by Jesus but rather we have to ask why was Jesus persecuted? For in understanding Jesus' persecution, we will hopefully better understand the blessedness of persecution described in the Beatitudes.

Jesus is the bringer of the gospel, he is the bearer of good news, he is the Prince of Peace, the healer, the one who welcomes, restores, frees, redeems. Jesus brings the message that God's Kingdom has come. It is the message that light is invading darkness. That a whole new world order, built on righteousness – being in right relatedness – is here. That freedom and restoration and redemption is breaking through injustice and slavery and oppression. That shalom and wholeness is removing the chaos. Jesus is persecuted because of his message; because of his ministry; because of righteousness. Jesus is not persecuted for being insensitive or cruel or obnoxious or rude. He is persecuted because He is the righteousness One.

So why does this message of good news, His righteousness, His acts of healing, freedom, restoration result in Jesus being persecuted? And, hence, our own experience of persecution? Well, when perfect righteousness – Jesus - meets unrighteousness, there is always a call and invitation to change. Righteousness is holiness, which means to be set apart, to be different. When righteousness and unrighteousness meet, there is an invitation to change. So there are two responses: to welcome righteousness or not. But righteousness is often perceived as a threat; it is against a person's way of being, of doing, of understanding the world. Righteousness goes against the cultural motto of "do whatever you want to make yourself happy". Righteousness is opposite of "you can make yourself whoever you want to be". Righteousness contradicts the voice that says "life is all about you". And suddenly righteousness is a threat. When threats are perceived, it often results in insult, scorn, persecution, harassment, rejection.

Jesus was persecuted because he is perfect righteousness embodied. He was persecuted for speaking righteously. Jesus was persecuted for acting righteously. He set things right by healing, by freeing people of demon possession, by restoring right relatedness. But consider the reaction when he healed people on the Sabbath. He was not welcome. He was turned away. He brought the message of good news and it was rejected.

So if Jesus, who is perfectly righteous, was persecuted, we can understand why when we live in right relatedness to God, others, ourselves, and the earth; the response is often persecution.

All the Beatitudes lead us to this most challenging declaration of blessedness. Our experience of persecution because of righteousness happens when we are poor in spirit, mourning, meek, thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart and peacemakers. These are the divine attributes of God's Kingdom, often not welcome in a world that rejects God. When these divine attributes meet unrighteousness, persecution happens.

Each beatitude comes with a promise. And the promise Jesus gives us is that God's Kingdom is ours. Notice the verb tense: is. The Kingdom of God is ours presently.

*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.*