The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION NINE — Blessed Are the Persecuted

Part One: The Blessings of the Kingdom (concluded) · Texts: Matthew 5:10–12; Luke 6:22–23, 26

The Texts

> **Matthew 5:10–12** *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven… Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*
>
> **Luke 6:22–23** *Blessed are you when people hate you… on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy… for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.*
>
> **Luke 6:26** *Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

The Blessing That Bites

We have come to the last of the blessings, and it bites. After the poor, the grieving, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers — after all of that — Jesus ends his list of blessings in the most unlikely place of all. "Blessed are those who are persecuted." Blessed are the hated. The hounded. The ones who get hurt for doing the right thing.

It is a strange place to stop, and Jesus stops there on purpose. Because he is being honest with us about what happens when you actually live the seven blessings that came before. A world arranged for the comfortable does not applaud people who bless the poor, refuse to dominate, hunger for justice, and make costly peace. It pushes back. So before he says another word about how Kingdom people live, Jesus tells them the truth about the cost — and then, astonishingly, calls it blessed.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

Full Circle — the Kingdom Is Already Theirs

Notice first where this blessing lands us: right back where we started. Think back to Session Two, the very first blessing — "blessed are the poor, for theirs *is* the kingdom." Present tense. We said then that only the first and the last Beatitudes use that present tense, and here is the last one, closing the circle: "blessed are those who are persecuted, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven." The whole list is bracketed, first and last, by the same breathtaking claim — not "will be," not "someday," but *is*. The Kingdom already belongs to the poor, and it already belongs to

the persecuted. Everyone in between — the mourning, the meek, the hungry — lives inside that bracket, held on both sides by a Kingdom that is already, right now, theirs.[1]

And do you see who the bracket holds? It opens with the poor and closes with the persecuted — the ones the world casts out at the bottom, and the ones the world drives out for doing right. The whole vision of blessing is fenced, on both ends, by the rejected. That is not an accident. That is the Kingdom of God telling you exactly whose side it is on.[2]

For Righteousness' Sake — Not for Being Awful

Now we must be careful, because this is the most easily abused blessing in the entire Sermon. It is dangerously easy to hear "blessed are the persecuted" and quietly award ourselves a medal every time someone is annoyed with us. But look closely at the fine print, in both Gospels. Matthew says persecuted "for righteousness' sake." Luke says hated "on account of the Son of Man." For justice, and for Jesus. That is the only persecution Jesus blesses.[3]

Which means: being disliked because we are self-righteous, or abrasive, or cruel, or obnoxious, is not this blessing. Being opposed because we picked a fight for our own ego is not this blessing. Peter had to say it plainly to the early church — make sure, when you suffer, that you are not suffering as a wrongdoer or even as a common busybody. There is a persecution complex that mistakes its own bad behavior for holiness, and it has done enormous damage — loud people insisting they are martyrs when really they are just being resisted for causing harm. Hear it clearly: the blessing is not on being hated. It is on being hated for love, for justice, for Jesus. That is a very different thing, and the difference matters enormously.

Luke's Mirror — the Woe of Applause

Luke sharpens it with a woe that should unsettle every one of us who likes to be liked: "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." Sit with that. Universal approval — everyone speaking well of you — is not the goal; it is a warning sign. Because the false prophets, the ones who told the powerful exactly what they wanted to

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[1]Only the first and last Beatitudes—"blessed are the poor" (5:3) and "blessed are those persecuted for righteousness' sake" (5:10)—use the present tense, "theirs IS the kingdom of heaven," bracketing the list like two arms. The kingdom already belongs to these people, now. See Session Two on this present-tense bracket; and N.T. Wright and George Eldon Ladd on the inaugurated "already."

[2]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. Matthew gives the blessing (5:10) and then expands it directly to the hearers (5:11–12); Luke's parallel is the blessing on those hated "on account of the Son of Man" (6:22–23), with its matching woe (6:26).

[3]The blessing is "for righteousness' sake" (5:10) and, in Luke, "on account of the Son of Man" (6:22)—that is, for justice and for Jesus, not for being abrasive, self-righteous, or cruel. This guards against a persecution complex: being disliked for our own failures is not the blessing. "Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker" (1 Peter 4:15–16).

hear, were beloved. It was the true prophets — the ones who told the truth — who got run out of town. So if you have arranged your life so that no one is ever troubled by your witness, so that the comfortable are never made uncomfortable by your love of justice, Luke gently asks: are you sure you are following Jesus, or just being agreeable?[4]

"Rejoice and Be Glad"

And then — the most surprising turn of all. Jesus does not tell the persecuted to grit their teeth and endure. He tells them to *rejoice*. "Rejoice and be glad," says Matthew. "Leap for joy," says Luke. Not because suffering is good — it is not, and the God who wept does not pretend it is — but because of the company it puts you in: "in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." To be opposed for righteousness is to be handed a place in the long, honorable line of everyone who ever loved this world enough to tell it the truth. You are not alone, and you are not crazy. You are in the family line of the prophets — and the Kingdom, remember, is already yours.[5]

A word of pastoral honesty, though: this beatitude has been misused to tell suffering people to smile through real harm, to "rejoice" their way past abuse or injustice. That is not what Jesus is doing. He is not blessing the harm; he is refusing to let the harm have the last word. The joy is not denial of the pain — it is defiance of it, the deep gladness of knowing that the Kingdom cannot be taken from you no matter what they take. And if you are being crushed, the faithful thing may not be to rejoice alone but to let the family around you carry you until you can.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread, one last time in this opening list. This blessing is what freedom-for-others costs when the world pushes back. To bless the poor, to make peace, to hunger for justice — to spend yourself for others' freedom — will sometimes cost you your comfort, your standing, your reputation, even your safety. Jesus does not hide that. He names it, and blesses it, and promises that the Kingdom is worth it. So ask with me: whose freedom, whose dignity, whose justice am I willing to stand for even when it costs me the approval I love so much? *Freedom for others may cost us the world's good opinion — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

[4]Luke's woe, "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets" (6:26), is the mirror image of the blessing: universal approval is a warning sign, since the false prophets were the ones everyone praised while the true prophets were run out of town.

[5]"Rejoice and be glad" (5:12): the persecuted stand in the line of the prophets, and the promise is not grim endurance but joy — the kingdom is already theirs. On suffering love that refuses to return harm, compare Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "unearned suffering is redemptive."

- The Beatitudes open with the poor and close with the persecuted — both present tense, "theirs is the kingdom." What does it tell you that the whole list is bracketed by the rejected?
- Jesus blesses persecution "for righteousness' sake" — not for being awful. How do we tell the difference between suffering for love and suffering for our own ego?
- Luke says, "woe to you when all speak well of you." Where has your desire to be liked kept you from a costly witness?
- Jesus says rejoice — not because suffering is good, but because of the company it puts you in. How is that different from being told to smile through harm?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. Whose justice would you stand for even if it cost you approval?

This Week — A Practice

Two movements. First, take one costly stand. Somewhere this week, let your love of justice cost you a little approval — speak the true word in the room where everyone had agreed to keep quiet, stand visibly with someone the crowd has written off. Notice the pushback, and notice that you are in good company. Second, examine the applause. Ask honestly where you have traded a faithful witness for being well-liked — where you have softened the truth to keep everyone speaking well of you — and take one step back toward courage. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead — the End of Part One

With this blessing, Part One — the Blessings of the Kingdom — comes to a close. We have walked the whole portrait: the poor, the grieving, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and now the persecuted — the strange, upside-down face of a Kingdom that blesses everyone the world overlooks. Next session we step into Part Two, and the images turn active: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Jesus turns from who the Kingdom's people are to what they are for — and sends them, at last, out the door and into the world.

Benediction

So go this week and live the blessings all the way — far enough that the world notices, far enough that it might even push back. And when it does, do not be surprised, and do not be silenced. Check your heart, make sure it is love and justice you are suffering for and not your own ego — and then stand, and even rejoice, because you are in the line of every prophet who

ever loved this world enough to tell it the truth. The Kingdom is already yours. They cannot take it. Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness' sake — for theirs, right now, is the Kingdom of heaven.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION NINE

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still.]

Welcome back to the table. Today we come to the last of the blessings — and it bites. After the poor, the grieving, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers — after all of that — Jesus ends his list in the most unlikely place there is. "Blessed are those who are persecuted." Blessed are the hated. The hounded. The ones who get hurt for doing the right thing.

It's a strange place to stop — and he stops there on purpose. Because he's being honest about what happens when you actually live those first seven blessings. A world built for the comfortable does not applaud people who bless the poor, refuse to dominate, hunger for justice, and make costly peace. It pushes back. So before he says one more word, Jesus tells his people the truth about the cost — and then, astonishingly, calls it blessed.

[Full circle — the bracket.]

Notice first where this lands us — right back where we started. Remember the very first blessing? "Blessed are the poor, for theirs IS the kingdom." Present tense. And only the first and the last blessing use that present tense. Here's the last one: "blessed are those who are persecuted, for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven." The whole list is bracketed, first and last, by the same claim — not "will be," not "someday," but IS. Already. And look who the bracket holds — it opens with the poor and closes with the persecuted. The ones cast out at the bottom, and the ones driven out for doing right. The whole vision of blessing is fenced, on both ends, by the rejected. That's not an accident. That's the Kingdom telling you whose side it's on.

[Careful — the fine print.]

Now we have to be careful, because this is the most easily abused blessing in the whole Sermon. It's dangerously easy to hear "blessed are the persecuted" and hand ourselves a medal every time somebody's annoyed with us. So read the fine print, in both Gospels.

Matthew: persecuted "for righteousness' sake." Luke: hated "on account of the Son of Man." For justice, and for Jesus. That's the only persecution he blesses.

Which means — being disliked because we're self-righteous, or abrasive, or cruel, is not this blessing. Peter had to spell it out for the early church: make sure, when you suffer, you're not suffering as a wrongdoer — or even as a common busybody. There's a persecution complex that mistakes its own bad behavior for holiness, and it's done enormous damage — loud people calling themselves martyrs when really they're just being resisted for causing harm. Hear it clearly: the blessing isn't on being hated. It's on being hated for love, for justice, for Jesus. Very different thing.

[Luke's woe.]

And Luke sharpens it with a woe that should unsettle all of us who like to be liked: "Woe to you when all speak well of you — for that's what their ancestors did to the false prophets." Sit with that. Everybody approving of you isn't the goal — it's a warning sign. Because the false prophets, the ones who told the powerful what they wanted to hear, were beloved. It was the true prophets, the truth-tellers, who got run out of town. So if you've arranged your life so no one is ever troubled by your witness — Luke gently asks — are you following Jesus, or just being agreeable?

[Rejoice — and a pastoral word.]

And then the most surprising turn of all. Jesus doesn't tell the persecuted to grit their teeth and endure. He tells them to rejoice. "Leap for joy," Luke says. Not because suffering is good — it isn't, and the God who wept doesn't pretend it is — but because of the company it puts you in: "in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you." You're in the family line of everyone who ever loved this world enough to tell it the truth. You're not alone, and you're not crazy — and the Kingdom is already yours.

But hear a word of honesty: this beatitude has been misused to tell suffering people to smile through real harm — to "rejoice" their way past abuse. That is not what Jesus is doing. He's not blessing the harm; he's refusing to let it have the last word. The joy isn't denial of the pain — it's defiance of it. And if you're the one being crushed, the faithful thing may not be to rejoice alone, but to let the people around you carry you until you can.

[The thread and the practice.]

So here's our question this week — freedom for others, one last time in this list: whose freedom, whose dignity, whose justice am I willing to stand for, even when it costs me the approval I love so much?

Two things to practice. First, take one costly stand — let your love of justice cost you a little approval this week: say the true word in the room where everyone agreed to stay quiet, stand

visibly with someone the crowd has written off. Second, examine the applause — ask honestly where you've softened the truth just to keep everyone speaking well of you, and take one step back toward courage.

And with this, Part One closes — the whole portrait of Kingdom blessing, from the poor to the persecuted. Next time the images turn active: "you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world." Jesus turns from who we are to what we're for — and sends us out the door.

[Slow. Land it.]

For now, go and live the blessings all the way — far enough that the world notices, maybe far enough that it pushes back. And when it does, don't be surprised, and don't be silenced. Check your heart — make sure it's love and justice you're suffering for, not your own ego — and then stand, and even rejoice, because you're in the line of every prophet who ever told this world the truth. The Kingdom is already yours. They cannot take it.

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