

The Most Neglected Mark of a True Christian in America

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The Way to Grace: The Sermon on the Mount Series

Matthew 5:10-12

Last week, I talked about being a peacemaker, being really fierce about maintaining the unity of the church, making every effort to try to reconcile broken relationships, choosing to be the one who initiates the end to conflict, choosing to be the first to pursue healing and peace. I find it interesting that the Beatitudes that we are going to look at today follows right after being a peacemaker. Here is what Jesus says:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

He is speaking in the third person. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” And then Jesus switches to the second person to underline and punch home what he just said when he goes on in v. 11 to say, “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.”

The reason I think it is interesting that this double Beatitude on persecution follows after peacemaking is because Jesus is very realistically telling us that in this fallen world all of our attempts at peacemaking won't necessarily be successful. Jesus was the most truthful person who ever lived. He had no illusions at all about the goodness of all people or the desire of every one we meet. Peacemaking won't always be successful.

And, indeed, there is no place that the gulf between the promise of successful living in this world and the promise of successful living for the committed Christian is starker than in this very last Beatitude, “Blessed are you when you are persecuted.”

Have you ever heard counsel like this? We would say, “Blessed are you when you are thought well of by everyone. When people say incredibly nice things about you and when they don't misrepresent you. When everyone is a fan. When you are cheered by adoring crowds and carried on their shoulders and people throw flowers at your feet. Blessed are you.”

But it is at this point that the fork in the road grows the widest. Let me read The Message's version of these two verses:

“You are blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. Not only that, count yourselves 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. For though they don't like it, I do. And all heaven applauds. Know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

Blessed are you when you are put down or thrown out or have lies spoken about you because of your loyalty to Jesus.

A number of years ago, one of my all time favorite Christian authors, Frances Schaeffer, who I believe was the most prophetically gifted man of this last quarter of the

20th Century, wrote a little tract called, “The Mark of a Christian.” And in this little essay, Schaeffer wrote a little meditation on Jesus’ words on the 13th chapter where Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” Schaeffer says, here is the mark of a true Christian, that we love each other over against what we see in so much of the church—splitting hairs regarding fine points of doctrine. Over against the behavioral signs that many churches emphasize regarding who is in or who is out of the church. Do you smoke or not? Do you have an occasional glass of wine or not? Schaeffer said here is the mark of the true Christian according to Jesus: Do you love?

“By this all men will know that you are my disciples. If you love one another.” John 13:35.

I would like to spring board off of Frances Schaeffer idea, “The Mark of a True Christian” and say that from a New Testament perspective there is another mark, one that is even more neglected in modern American than the mark of love, that throughout the New Testament constitutes the great evidence that someone is a committed Christian, that is that they are persecuted and suffer for the sake of Christ.

Those of you who have been here throughout this series, have heard me say on a number of occasions that the Beatitudes apply to all Christians, not just special Christians—missionaries and great saints. The Beatitudes were written for all Christians. And all of the Beatitudes were for all Christians. It is not as if we get to choose. Well, I will be a peacemaker, but I really don’t want to mourn or be persecuted for my faith. I really like this idea of showing mercy. Meekness, I don’t really like that. All of the Beatitudes are for all Christians.

And this last Beatitude, this one about being blessed when you are persecuted communicates to me, at least, the most neglected mark of the Christian in America. Let me just share this idea with you. If you go through your New Testament with a highlighter and underline all of the passages in the New Testament that speak to Christians about the necessity of suffering and being persecuted for the sake of Jesus, I tell you that at the end of your marking, you will find yellow highlighter on every single page.

We read verses like this from the book of John. John 15:18, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belong to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you. No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. They will treat you this way because of my name.”

Then in chapter 16: “All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue. In fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you all of this so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you.”

Consider how often in the Acts of the Apostles that we read about persecution. For example, Acts 8:1, “On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church of Jerusalem and all, except the apostles, were scattered through Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him, but Saul began to destroy the

church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”

Or how about this from 2 Thess. “Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering.”

Or this well-known verse in 2 Timothy 3:12, “In fact, [Paul writes] everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

And so you don’t think that I am just selectively picking out verses on persecution from only a few New Testament books, in the general epistles (and I will just site 1 Peter as an example) we read this in 1 Peter 4:12, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, about 500 years ago said that suffering is the mark of the true Christian. If that is the case, if persecution and suffering for the sake of Christ are the mark of the true Christian, and if we read this every where in the New Testament and Jesus ends his Beatitudes on this, then I would say that it is the most neglected mark of the true Christian in America in the 90’s. We almost never hear about persecution as being one of those unique things that mark us out as truly belonging to Jesus Christ. We hear about true Christians having to hold certain political perspectives and true Christians having to hold certain doctrinal perspectives but almost never do we hear about persecution as part of the true Christian.

And so, I chose perhaps the longest title I think I have ever used for today’s message—“The Most Neglected Mark of a True Christian in America.” Let’s pray.

The notion of being persecuted is the most neglected mark, in my opinion, of a true Christian, at least in America these days. But I think these verses in the Beatitudes are among the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. I want you to note what Jesus does not say. Jesus does not say, “Blessed are those who are persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Note that he doesn’t say, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you.” He says, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”

The point is that persecution by itself is not the mark of a true Christian. Persecution for righteousness, persecution because of Christ, because of the name of Christ, is the mark of a true Christian. There are so many folks who try to claim the promise of blessing from these verses because they are “being persecuted,” but they don’t meet the condition for the promise. Remember most Bible promises have a condition attached to them. There are lots of bad reasons why some Christians are persecuted. Some Christians are persecuted because they are a nuisance or because their manner, their style and their whole approach, to the public, is offensive and weird.

Back in the 60’s a guy by the name of Joseph Bailey wrote a spoof called The Gospel Blimp. In this spoof, in this satire, these Christians hire a blimp to fly over the town that they live in to advertise the gospel the way that Goodyear advertises tires. So

they have messages from John 3:16 on the side of the blimp. The town's people take it in stride. "Well those Christians, they are just trying to proclaim their religion and they have their little blimp."

Then the Christians feel like they need to get more active in proclaiming Christianity, so they start dropping tracts, they call it Gospel Bombing. They start dropping tracts from the Gospel Blimp onto the townspeople below. They are still accepted even though people are getting pelted with gospel tracts. But they push the town over the line when they add sound equipment to the blimp and begin to broadcast gospel services from the air. At this point, the persecution begins.

The town newspaper prints an editorial that reads this way: For some weeks now our metropolis has been treated to the spectacle of a blimp with an advertising sign attached to the rear. This sign doesn't plug cigarettes or a bottled beverage, but the religious beliefs of a particular group in our midst. The people of our city are notably broad-minded and they have good-naturedly submitted to this attempt to proselytize. But last night a new refinement was introduced. We refer, of course, to the airborne sound truck, the invader of our privacy, that raucous destroyer of communal peace.

So some of the townspeople go after the blimp and destroy the sound equipment. The Christians huddle in a church and talk about how they are being persecuted for their faith.

Well, that is not persecution fitting into Matthew 5:10 and that is what Bailey's point in this Gospel Blimp was. People who are snubbed or screamed at because they are offensive, because they invade someone else's space, do not fit into the promises here at the end of the Beatitudes.

I can bring this home personally for myself. In the fall and spring of every year, for the last 7-8 years, I have gone down to the oval at OSU to preach the gospel on the oval. Some people don't like it, but, hey, Christians have first amendment rights to speak too. So I have no difficulty with the notion that Christians proclaim their message along with everyone else. But let me tell you how I got started doing that.

When I was teaching at OSU I used to walk across the campus and see crowds of students surround a preacher who preached the most offensive, hateful, bitter diatribe against the students, against the students at the campus, all supposedly in the name of Christ. But his entire message had not a drop of gospel to it. There was no good news. It was all bad news and condemnation. And the students would just scream at this preacher. As the preacher railed at them, calling them names that I can't repeat from the pulpit, the students would rail back. And it would take on a circus-like, carnival-like atmosphere. I would watch this thing all supposedly done in the name of Christ. It would both incense me and grieve me.

One day I was watching this scene, this back and forth screaming of the preacher and the students, and I just said to God, "This is so wrong. What is going on here is so wicked." I felt the gentle nudge of the Holy Spirit in my spirit saying to me, "Well, Rich, if you don't like what is going on, then why don't you get out here and do better. You think you can do better, then go ahead."

You know, when God does that to you, it is really unfair. Here you are complaining, "Someone ought to do something."

"The church ought to meet the needs of so-and-so."

And then you feel the gentle nudge of the Holy Spirit. Well, if you are really so upset about how this child is being handled in the Middle School Group or the lack of effective ministry to single mothers, why don't you do something about it?

"Oh no. I didn't mean me. I meant I just wanted to complain. I just want to gripe."

When I heard that from God, it cut me and I thought, "OK. I do think I can do better." So for the last 7-8 years in the fall and spring, I have gone out and tried to present Christianity in a reasonable way, in an attractive way, communicating to people that God does not hate them. That all Christians are not fools. That God loves people and that is why he sent his son, Jesus, to die for us so that we could have an eternal relationship with God.

There are bad reasons for being persecuted. Being a nuisance, being offensive, or just being weird. Some Christians believe that weirdness is the same thing as spirituality. That if you wear really large buttons, or drag a cross into your classroom, or shout "Praise the Lord" at the top of your voice you are spiritual. If people relate to you strangely because you are so weird, you are being persecuted. Bringing suffering on ourselves for being a nuisance or being weird or for wrong-doing, spending too much time on the job counseling someone and stealing the employer's money instead of working hard for your employer, having someone get upset with you because you haven't paid your bills on time—suffering for wrong doing is not what Jesus is referring to.

There are two conditions for being blessed in the midst of persecution according to Matt. 5:10-12. You must be being persecuted for righteousness sake (v. 10) and you must be persecuted because of your loyalty to Christ (v. 11). For me. Not for wrong doing or even a political cause. For righteousness, for the sake of Christ.

What are we talking about being persecuted for righteousness sake and for the sake of Christ? Well, for righteousness sake simply means being persecuted for being like Jesus. Being persecuted because you have the qualities enunciated here in the Beatitudes. For being a peacemaker. For being merciful. For being pure. The idea is that some times just because of who you are and how you live, the light in you will expose the darkness, the hypocrisy, the lying, the selfishness of the environment that you are in. The truth just gets too close for comfort. You refuse to lie for your husband any longer. You refuse to compromise on service that your boss wants you to compromise on. You refuse to go along with friends of yours from the past in terms of partying, at least in their style. And you don't do it in a self-righteous, haughty way, I am better than you. It is just that your values have changed. You are a different person and have different commitments and different priorities. And people get upset by you.

Someone who never cuts corners, someone who won't gossip, someone who can't be bought off is not a comfortable person to be around.

Maybe is it just because of your Christianity you have chosen to prioritize church or family over your work. And so you get passed over for promotion in a company that demands all for the job and people question your commitments. In a lot of firms, in a lot of corporations, in a lot of hospitals, all of the senior management, all of the top executives are divorced, they all own 300-400,000 homes. But they are all divorced and working on destroying their second and third marriages. Many of the folks don't have good relationships with their children. And you are going to stand out if you have a different value system. If you say it's not worth it to me to lose my marriage or kids in

the process. You are going to pay a price for your righteous commitments. And some of you know that you have paid a price in business because of what God has done in your life, in changing you and giving you a different standard of success.

The promise of blessing also applies for suffering for the sake of Christ, for the sake of his name. When Jesus talks about suffering “because of me,” or “for my name,” a large part of what that means is suffering to see the name of Christ promoted and honored. To watch people come to praise Jesus Christ as much as you praise him. That other people would recognize, along with you, how great your Lord is. We are talking about suffering so that the gospel would be extended.

See, I believe that the greatest issue that presently exists regarding the extension of the gospel here in central Ohio as well as around the world, the single issue regarding the extension of the gospel is the individual Christian’s willingness to suffer. More than training, more than church structure, more than gifting, more than renewal, what I would place in first priority regarding the extension of the gospel is individual Christian’s willingness to suffer.

We know that nothing great can ever be achieved without suffering and deprivation. You can’t be a great football player without going through rigorous training and deprivation, weight work, running in the rain and the cold, being battered around in practice. You can’t be a great pianist if you just want to go out and hang with your friends. You have to discipline yourself and sit for hours at the piano practicing scales and working on your style and deprive yourself regarding relationships. You can’t be a physician in this country without going through years of schooling and long internships where you stay up night after night. You can’t do anything really great and make a mark on this world without paying a price.

And people will not be gathered to Christ without someone paying a price. Without, at least, someone saying, “I will give some money for that.” “I will pay for this.” “I will give up social standing with my nice well-groomed clients. With my nice well-groomed neighbors. With my nice well-groomed family. I am willing to undergo some level of personal embarrassment and risk not being thought well of. I will leave my house, my home, my family, my land to go across the world to bring this message.”

The issue regarding the extension of the gospel is the willingness on the part of committed Christians to suffer. And this is the law of the harvest that Jesus laid out in John 12. Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it stands alone. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it. But the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

This is the law of the harvest. To have many seeds one must die. You want many seeds in your family, you must die. You want many seeds in your school, you have been praying that kids at school would get converted, that some students would become Christians, then you need to die. You have to die to embarrassment.

You want someone to be converted at your job? Well, then, you have to die. You have been praying for your neighbor, some grain of wheat has to fall to earth. There is no other way. Unless someone says, “I will pay the price. I will pick up the bill.” Unless churches like the Vineyard collectively say, “For Jesus we will do it,” Christianity is a declining enterprise. Just a club for the already converted.

See, I think frankly the reason why we Christians in America face such limited persecution, and it really is limited. I realize that you could cite me examples of kids in

school that are being harassed by their teachers for reading religious books. I know there are peaceful loving sidewalk counselors hoping to persuade women to not get abortions who are being fire hosed and maligned, spit at. I know during the civil rights era that there were peaceful loving non-violent Christians who were set upon by dogs and policemen with clubs and national guardsmen.

But by and large most of us in America, most of the time, endure very little persecution. I don't think that it is because all America has become Christian or lives according to Christian principles. Rather, I think it is because we Christians have gotten so very well camouflaged that we blend in to the covering and the environment around us. If the single issue for the gospel being extended in America and worldwide is a willingness of Christians to suffer, then the single hindrance is the desire of Christians to camouflage themselves and to blend into their environment. To not be noticed. To in no way stand out. To in no way be exceptional.

I have told you this story before. Some years ago I did a little coffee for some professors at OSU about being a Christian faculty member at the university. One of the Christian faculty members in all sincerity, with all the naïve innocence of a child said to me, "Rich, how can you be a Christian and faithfully bear witness to the gospel and not have it in any way threaten the tenure review process that you will be going through?" He was an assistant professor and he was going to come up for his tenure alert.

"How can I witness and not pay a price?"

I said to him, "You can't. What made you ever think you could?"

Back in the 3rd Century, the church father Tertullian was asked a similar question. A man said, "I want to serve Christ. My business is pulling me away from him. I feel divided. But you know, a man has to live." Tertullian's question to the man was, "Who said? Who said you had to live?"

If we begin to pay a price for righteousness, if we pay a price because we are seeking to extend the influence of Christ, we are lied about and slandered, if we are persecuted, there are some very bad strategies with coping with suffering. Let me quickly list for you some bad strategies.

It is always a bad strategy in the midst of suffering to try to fully understand what God is doing. Let me repeat that so you don't miss it. It is always a bad strategy in the midst of suffering to try to fully understand what God is doing. Job tried to figure God out. In fact, he demanded an explanation for God's ways. Many people think, "Well, if only I could just understand." People in America love to gain a sense of control through information, through understanding.

2 Corinthians 4 Paul said that when he went through his persecutions and sufferings he was perplexed. He was confused. Do not try to figure out why you got cancer and someone else didn't. Why you lost a husband and someone else didn't. Why you are being maligned and slandered. It is a dead-end strategy for dealing with suffering and persecution. God owes us no explanation and very often, but not always, doesn't offer any explanation.

It is always a bad strategy to try to defend God. Many Christians as they go through suffering or persecution, particularly when they counsel someone who is going through suffering, feel the need to defend God's actions and to make God look good. To make God appear fair. Especially as you befriend someone who is going through persecution or suffering, do not try to defend God. Job's friends tried that and God rebuked them for

it. Most often we state what God is trying to do in a situation. But bottom line, God needs no defense from us about his ways.

I have discovered something about God. He is very big. And he is very competent. And he is very smart. And he is a marvelous arguer and doesn't need us to form a protective line in front of him to protect him from the insults of the world or the insults of the church. In the main, God wants us to get behind him and let him run the interference.

Finally, in terms of bad strategies when you are being persecuted or have suffered, don't try to manipulate God. You don't have to cling to your healing as if to admit that you are sick and maybe dying is a lack of faith. You don't have to pretend to enjoy being slandered or to work up some kind of emotion before God so that God will be put in the right mood to show you grace.

Think about it. If God is good, fundamentally good, fundamentally honest and honorable, do you think that he likes to be manipulated by the likes of us? Do good people enjoy it when someone thinks they have to coerce them into being good.

Let me share with you good strategies for dealing with persecution and suffering. When you are going through pain, you don't rely on your feelings in the moment. Feelings are all over the place. You don't rely on circumstances changing on your understanding of the situation. There are just simply some things that you must know. Not feel, not understand, just know. See, what makes suffering so difficult and persecution so hard is its meaninglessness.

Victor Frankel, the great psychiatrist, who suffered in a German concentration camp, said that the worst aspect of being in a concentration camp was not suffering, it was the meaninglessness of it all. The pointlessness. Persecution and suffering to the Christian have a point. There is something you need to know to be willing to pay a price.

I must know, first of all, who I am. Let's say someone slanders you for righteousness sake. Let's say you pay a price, in terms of a blown relationship or a blown contract, or a blown employment opportunity, or a blown promotion because it gets known that you are a Christian or you share your faith or you are unwilling to do something, to compromise in some way because of your commitment to Christ. How do you cope with it? You must know who you are in order to endure persecution.

One of the wonderful things about persecution for Christ or for righteousness is that it proves to you that you really are a Christian. Jesus said in John 15:19, "If you belong to the world it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world. But I have chosen you out of the world, that is why the world hates you." Do you understand that persecution is your badge? It is your mark that you really do belong to Christ.

William Booth, the great founder of the Salvation Army, used to endure extraordinary persecution at the hands of angry mobs as he tried to rescue drunk women off the streets, care for children, and feed the most impoverished members of the alleys in the darkened factory districts of the Victorian England. One day, he and some Salvation Army people were playing their little music and preaching the gospel. This angry mob came up and one of the men spit in the face of a young Salvation Army girl. She began to cry. She was going to wipe the spit off her face when William Booth spoke to her and said, "Don't wipe it off. That is your badge. That is your proof that you belong to Jesus."

Deidrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was ultimately murdered at the orders of Heinrich Himmler, the head of the Gestapo, a few days before the world war ended wrote a little poem called "Who Am I?" Here is how it goes:

"Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my cell confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me I would talk to my warders freely and friendly and clearly as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me I would bear the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly like one accustomed to win.

Am I really then all which other men tell of or am I only what I know of myself. Restless and longing and sick like a bird in a cage. Struggling for breath as though hands were compressing my throat. Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness, trembling with anger at desperatism and petty humiliation, tossing in expectation of great event. Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance. Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making. Faint and ready to say, 'Farewell to it all.'

Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today and tomorrow another? Am I both at once a hypocrite before others and before myself a contemptibly woe-begone weakling? Or is something within me still like a beaten army fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

When you are persecuted, you say who am I? This mass of confusion, this weak wavering, compromised shifting person, that because of my persecution I know that I know now, I belong to Christ.

And I must know where I am going. Jesus says, "Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven." It is a false and dead-end strategy in the midst of persecution and suffering to say to your self, "I know that it is all going to work out for me here and now in this life, in this world. It is all going to work out. I am going to be healed. Suffering will stop." That is not always true. Outwardly, Christians don't do any better than anyone else. And often they do worse. Inwardly we may feel tossed and conflicted, perplexed and hypocritical, just like Deidrich Bonhoeffer did in prison.

You must know who you are, friends, and you must know where you are going to be able to endure persecution or to be able to pay any price.

In the 1930's Jack Vinson, who was a Presbyterian missionary, was taken captive by some Chinese bandits who beat him and threatened to kill him for his faith. One of Pastor Vinson's friends listened in on a conversation between Vinson and this bandit where the bandit would scream at him, "Aren't you afraid of me? Don't you know that I can kill you?"

Right before Vinson was martyred for his faith, he looked up at the bandit and said, "You can kill me if you want. But I know that I am going straight to God." And so his friend wrote a little poem that was a source of inspiration for hundreds of Christians in the years after who had to endure persecution. He wrote this poem in Vincent's honor. It is called, "Afraid of What?" Here is how it goes:

"Afraid? Of what?

To feel the spirit's glad release,

To pass from pain to perfect peace?
The strife and strain of life to cease?
Afraid of that?

Afraid? Of what?
Afraid to see the Savior's face
To hear his welcome and to trace
The glory gleam from wounds of grace?
Afraid of that?

Afraid? Of what?
A flash, a crash, a pierced heart
Darkness light, O heaven's art
A wound of his,
A counterpart.
Afraid of that?

Afraid? Of what?
To do by death what life could not
Baptized with blood a stony plot
Till souls shall blossom from the spot
Afraid of that?

What are you afraid of? To see the Savior's face? To achieve through death what life could never bring you?

We must know who we are. We must know where we are going. We must know how we are going to get there.

You know, I love 1 Peter 4:12 that says, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you."

Do you understand that there is a plan of God at work in your life to prepare you for heaven—good, bad and otherwise? That God's plan for you is different than God's plan for another. That you can't compare your situation with another. But that God does have a plan for your life to fit you for heaven.

I read a story about a man who lost his business during the depression and had one of his children die. He was walking by a church that was being constructed in his town and watched as a man chiseling away at a stone, shaping this piece of stone. He asked the man what he was doing.

He said, "Do you see that little open space on the top of that pinnacle way up on the church? I am shaping this stone to place on the top of that pinnacle."

Then he heard the voice of the Spirit nudging his spirit. God was saying, "That is what I am doing with you."

Let me bring this point home and then I will finish up. Let me just take the common occurrence not of persecution, but of suffering with a sickness or disease and two different Christian approaches. You are ill. You find yourself in a hospital bed. You could resent every minute of it. You could try to cling to the belief that you are, indeed, going to be healed. No doubts. No fears. You just hang on and hang on.

Or you could pray for healing and yet see all that was happening to you within the context of the plan of God for your life, good and evil, and receive this thing, too, as from the hand of your Father. Perhaps providing you with the opportunity to share your faith with some nurses or hospital techs. Giving you some time to reflect on the meaning of your life. Helping you to order your priorities or getting you ready for heaven.

If you could simply fit the pressure in your life into a view that it is, indeed, according to the plan of God, that persecution or suffering doesn't mean that life is going contrary to the plan of God, that suffering is not the abandonment of you by God, or the loss of God for you—that often suffering is exactly what God has intended. And, indeed, in the context of persecution, the church has gone roaring ahead in times of trial and persecution.

When the Communists took over China after the second World War, there was about 1½ million Christians in the country. After 40 years of painful persecution the church grew to, some estimate, as many as 75 million Christians.

A dear friend was telling me the other day that the church in Iran has grown faster than it ever grew in its history, once the Ayatollah and Islamic fundamentalists took over. If we could just see that we haven't been abandoned, but that it is all part of the plan of God.

And finally, the great encouragement that Jesus gives us is that along with knowing who you are, and where you are going, and how you are going to get there, you can say to yourself, "I know that I am in great company." Matthew 5:12, "Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven. For in the same way, they persecuted the prophets before you."

Friends, if you suffer for righteousness sake, for the sake of Jesus, know that you are in great company. One of the major reasons why we Christians have so little encouragement in our lives is because we have such an ignorance of Christian history. We know nothing of God's dealing with people in the past. Nothing of their struggles, nothing of their spiritual journeys, nothing of their sufferings for the sake of Christ. It is difficult to suffer when it is meaningless. It is difficult to suffer when you feel like you are all alone. But if you suffer for the sake of Christ, you are in a great company. You are marching in step with Moses and Daniel, Jeremiah, and Elijah, Peter and James, Stephen and Paul, the Lord Jesus himself.

Think about it, friends. We often say to ourselves, "Ah, we are such nothings. Our Christianity couldn't fill a thimble. We are such spiritual midgets." But to be persecuted for the sake of Christ, to get that badge put on you, what an honor. You can understand why the apostles rejoiced in heaven that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name.

"You mean, guys like us get to be included in the company of the committed?"

"You mean, like I can walk in step with Moses? Is it possible, Lord Jesus Christ, that you would consider me worthy of that?"

In the 3rd Century, I will finish with this, there was a woman named Perpetua. She was a married woman who had a father, mother, two brothers and an infant son. She was 22 years old and a recent Christian convert. She was getting ready to be baptized when she, along with a number of other Christians, were taken prisoner by the Romans.

It was demanded that she offer sacrifices on behalf of the Emperor. Her father begged her, saying, "Have pity on me, my daughter. Have pity on your father. Have regard for your brothers. Have regard for your mother and your aunt. Have regard for your son who will not be able to live without you. Lay aside your courage. Please turn from Christ. Just do this one thing. Offer a sacrifice to the Emperor."

Then her father came up to her with her infant son. He held out her infant son and implored her saying, "If not for me, do it for your baby boy. Spare your baby boy."

She replied, "I can't. I am a Christian."

She, along with several other young Christians were dragged out into the stadium. She was stripped naked and run through with a sword.

Such stories in the church's history could be multiplied by the tens of thousands. To walk in that company? To be linked in spirit to people like that? That is why Jesus said, "Rejoice and be glad."

Persecution on behalf of Christ is your badge of honor. It is the mark of the true Christian.

Let's pray.