

MATTHEW 5:11-12**YOU ARE BEING FOLLOWED**

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

If you listened closely to the text, or if you have the text open in front of you on the bulletin or on the sermon sheet, which significant word comes up twice? “Persecute.” Likely you have a pretty good idea of what persecute means. “To harass someone, to seek someone’s harm persistently.” After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and return to heaven, the Jewish leaders “persecuted” the disciples and other believers who proclaimed Jesus, the Promised Savior from sin and from eternal death. The word “persecute” literally means to “follow *thoroughly*, or, *to the end*.” It’s more than just follow the leader. Have you ever been “followed,” or felt you were being “followed” by someone in menacing fashion? It’s rather unnerving. When I was a student in the seminary, I drove to Michigan one summer to help various congregations. On the way I pulled into a park to nap a little behind the wheel. After fifteen minutes when I awoke, I noticed a man sitting at a picnic bench not too far away looking at me. It was more than an inadvertent glance. I could have simply driven off, but there was a “problem.” I needed to use the “facilities” about fifty yards away. I did not like the idea of walking, so I drove. Shortly, upon exiting the restroom, guess who was about halfway there on foot? I got in the car and drove off. It was eerie and unnerving. I was being followed—“persecuted” you might say. No fun. Likewise, the devil brings persecution upon you.

In the words of our text, Jesus is talking to His disciples about this negative reception that Christians get. “Christians” are not just those who live by a certain code of ethics. “Christians” are those who trust that Jesus Christ, God and man, served as our substitute before the Father’s hand of wrath against our sins. Jesus is our Savior from Satan and hell. The

unbelieving world—the sons and daughters of Satan—will seek to persecute Christians. They harass them and attack them, so as to get them to walk away from their trust in the Savior. They offer Christians “an easier time of it” here on earth, if they deny Christ! The Old Testament believers, those waiting for the promised Savior, were persecuted. The idol-nations around them sought to harm them by force or by enticing them to join their devilish idol worship, and thus destroy their relationship with God and His Promise of the Savior. Likewise, in the New Testament the ungodly leaders crucified Jesus and then persecuted the early Christians. The Apostle Paul had been one of those persecutors—known by the name Saul at that time. Then the pagan, heathen, idol-worshiping Romans also persecuted Christians. Christians were led out into the arena to be devoured by hungry lions—a spectacle for entertainment. Physical persecution still continues today. Do you read our CLC Mission Update and Prayer List, which is frequently inserted into the bulletin? There are countries where Christianity, Christians, and Christians-in-our-fellowship are persecuted.

Jesus also says in our text, they will *revile* you. “Revile” means to speak abusively against someone. The enemies of Jesus “reviled” Jesus as He hung on the cross. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross and we will believe in you. He saved others, but Himself, He cannot save!” They mocked Him and made fun of Him. It still happens. When I was teaching at the Lutheran high school in Watertown, one of the students, a girl, wrote how her peers at her part time job disparagingly labeled her a “church girl.” It’s tough on a teen in particular, not to be accepted into the group. In this case, her church life and attendance at a church school were the cause. Are there situations in which you don’t want to bring up your church life and church affiliation for fear of the facial or verbal reaction you might get? Jesus says, *they will say all kinds of evil against you*. The mockers of the Lord and the Lord’s people will not hesitate to say anything and everything against you falsely—lies—to pull you down or to get you out of the way. Try taking a stand against abortion, same sex relationships, gender choice, and see what kind of reaction you get. Try it on open internet media and see how long it takes to get maligned. People spoke lies against Jesus at His trial; people also spoke against Stephen.

Such actions are not merely “unkind”—and people can be very unkind, just ask a teacher at school. Such actions are not merely attacks on one’s race, nationality, and skin color; or based on which side of the tracks one lives, or which professional sports team one favors. Such actions are launched against Christians “for My sake,” Jesus says. Such actions, words, and lies are fueled by hatred for Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior. Satan is behind them all. Don’t be surprised if or when it happens to you. Don’t be intimidated—“timid,” that is fearful—if or when it happens to you. Jesus has done so much for you; it is your privilege to bear scorn for Him. In Acts, after the disciples had been beaten for preaching the name of Christ, they rejoiced that *they were counted worthy to suffer for His name (Acts 5:41)*. Think about it. If someone bad-mouthed your wife or your husband, your mother or your father, your son or your daughter, would you be ashamed to stand up for them? Would you not count it an honor and a privilege to endure even physical abuse for them? Here, we are talking Jesus, our Rescuing Life-giving Savior! How many times has He bailed you out before your eternal Father’s judgment seat? Daily. And you know the price He paid, don’t you. He paid that price because He loves you—unreliable, wretched creature that you are, and that I am. He grants mercy without end—forgiveness! Blessed are you, Jesus says. Suffering persecution for Him is not a “bummer,” or a negative, or losing face! *Blessed are you*.

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. “Rejoice” means to “re - joy,” to count it a joy again and again and again! Be exceedingly glad—more than just glad! There is no shame or embarrassment in being a Christian, suffering disdain for Jesus. You can expect this kind of treatment. *For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* The Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles suffered for Jesus; they are by far honored ahead you and ahead of me. You are not so special that you should be exempt from it! Do not feeling sorry yourself, over how hard your life is, as an adopted child of God in Christ! In Luke, Jesus says, Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets (Luke 6:26). Everyone wants to be liked, and to be liked by everyone. But to be liked by *everyone* means one stands for nothing, or to say it in reverse, one stands for anything regardless of what God’s Word and says. It was the false prophets hear were very popular. They spoke what people wanted to hear. They were not servants of God or children of God. Stand with you Savior, expect persecution.

Actually, you have the upper hand and the greatest future in all this! Jesus says, *Great is your reward in heaven.* Heaven—THE SAFE HAVEN—awaits you, with peace and safety and comfort and love and holiness forever! In Jesus, no sin or death or persecution to assault ever again. He has redeemed you, His Spirit has called you to faith by the Gospel Good News, and His Spirit keeps you in faith each day. In the face of persecution, come what may, you can sing “Heaven is my home!”

Jesus is your Good Shepherd, who goes ahead of you, and also goes behind you! You can think of it in terms of Jesus being **between** you and the persecutor behind you. There, He allows only that to get through which will build up your faith and His Kingdom. Or, you can think of it in terms of Jesus **following** the one following you, from which position He sees all that is going on and can step in at any time. Do you remember the Children of Israel leaving Egypt under Moses? The Lord’s pillar of cloud led the way each day. However, when the Egyptians came from behind to trap them at the shore of the Red Sea, the Lord’s pillar of cloud went from in front of them to a position behind them, safely separating the Israelites from the Egyptians (Exodus 14:19-20). Also, when Isaiah the Prophet later spoke about Judah’s escape from a second captivity, captivity to Babylon—and was also describing the church’s, the believer’s, release from captivity to sin, this sinful world, death, and all persecution of Satan—he wrote, *The LORD will go before you; the God of Israel will be your rear guard (Isaiah 52:12)!* The believers in Christ SHALL safely reach heaven.

You are being “followed” and persecuted by Satan, but more significantly you are being “led” and “followed” by your Savior Jesus, who outmaneuvers Satan at every turn! Comfort in Christ!

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach---