SERIES ON DISCIPLESHIP - THE EIGHTH BEATITUDE Rev. Carl F. Thrun
Rolling Meadows - 1963

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 5: 10-12 Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sak for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Many people would like to believe that once they throw their hat in the ring with the cause of Christ and espouse Christianity, their life will immediatel become one unending round of happiness and pleasure forever after. Troubles will cease, and they will float along on cloud #9. But that is not what Christ says. Listen: Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. God's ideal man will not be universally popular. His life will not be one unending round of pleasure and delight. Rather, he will feel the sting of persecution.

Evidently Christ realized that we would find it hard to believe this 8th Beatitude. That is why He repeats it with emphasis. It is the only Beatitude to which He adds an explanation: Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and pe secute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Mo than that: Rejoice, and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Christ actually expects those who live His way to get into trouble. It is the hallmark of their loyalty.

At second thought, however, we ought not be surprised at this. Christ's own life loudly and clearly proclaims the truth of this Beatitude. If ever there was a man in whose life mercy and purity and an active desire for peace were continually and everywhere in evidence, that man was Christ. If ever a man deserved to be loved and respected by everyone, that man was Christ. If ever a man should have been treated with the utmost of kindness and consideration, that man was Chris Yet, look what happened to Him. The leaders of the Church, His own people, and the leaders of the State, combined their forces to torture Him and nail Him to a Cross like a hardened criminal. And the mob howled its approval. Christ saw it coming. He warned those who would walk in His way, You can expect the same kind of treatment.

In some ways the New Testament is a handbook for the persecuted. Its pages are filled with the dynamic power of God's own Spirit to give courage and strength to the followers of Christ. That is why reading the Bible is such an unreal experience for so many today. Our trouble is not with the King James Version, or with any other version. Our trouble is with us: we are too accommodating about our faith. We are tolerated rather than persecuted, and our Christianity is tame and stifled. Only too often are we ready to compromise our faith, and we settle for a jellyfish type of discipleship that has no backbone. We don't really listen to the spine tingling call of Jesus to adventure - and risk - and glorious persecution, when He says, Follow Me! The way that He leads is the hard road to the Cross, and we would rather live out our lives in non-committal comfort and ease - without conflict, taking the line of least resistance, sacrificing our faith for just about anything else that comes along: fun, pleasure, business, relatives, friends. It doesn't really matter what you believe or what you stand for. We're all trying to get to the same place; and one way is as good as another. And so we close our ears to the Voice of Scripture: Stand firm in the faith! Act like men! Be meek, be merciful - but be tough, be loyal, be faithful to Christ and His Word! St. Paul wrote to young Timothy: Take your share of hardship, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake! - for living God's way. The tragedy is that many who call themselves Christian are careful not to let the light of their Christian faith shine brightly, so that it is not even visible, and they can say contentedly, I've never been persecuted for my faith. Christ says that if we are Christian in all our doings and dealings, we can expect opposition. It may be nothing more serious than a word of ridicule or a sneer of superiority or it may be physical violence. But if nobody dislikes you, you probably have no firm convictions or at least you do not show them. A professor at the Seminary once gave this bit of advice to his students: Try to be friends with everyone in your congregation, but try even harder always to be a friend of Christ. As Christ's friend, you cannot always be friends with everybody. If you have been pastor of a congregation for five years and have no enemies, you probably have no backbone either!

Note that Christ does not say that persecution is in itself a goal to be sought after. Christians are not to go around looking for trouble. They are not deliberately to arouse opposition so that they can boast of their martyrdom. They are courageously to live like children of God and the persecution will take care o itself. Christ does not say, Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of pettiness or for the sake of meanness. He says, Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, because they live God's way.

The world will always hate Christ and His disciples. It always has and always will. This is so because Christ stands in complete contrast to unrighteous living and reproves it. Christ's enemies put Him out of the way because they coul no longer stand the glaring contrast between His holiness and love and their hypocrisy and selfishness. The forces of light and the forces of darkness cannot live together in harmony. The forces of darkness will seek to destroy the forces of light. Much of the deliberate unrighteousness in the lives of men and quite often their insistence that there is no God, is a way of persecuting Christ, an attempt to quiet the voice of Christ that says, What you are doing is not right. Those whc in faith follow Christ will find they are not welcome everywhere. They are not always good mixers. They can therefore expect some opposition in the form of ridicule and persecution. Yet, says Christ, they are "Blessed." A Christian wife and mother whose marriage and home seemed to be crumbling beneath her feet remarked, How much can one person be expected to endure? Were it not for the abiding presence of Christ in my heart and life, giving me strength and assurance, I could not bear to face another day. A missionary tells of spending a night in a tree, hiding from those who were looking for him to take his life. He heard them all night long, but he was unafraid. Never before had Christ's promise that He will not leave nor forsake those who are His meant so much to him. He said he would gladly pass through another such experience of peril that he might again enjoy the assuring and comforting presence of Christ as he did that night.

Each of us must see ourself personally involved at Calvary and all that

happened there. Christ is suffering, dying in our behalf, for our sin. Our own lives are nailed with His to the Cross. St. Paul put it this way: We are buried with Christ by baptism into death, that like as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. We are the ones who stand before Pilate and witness to the truth. We are the scorned, th slapped, the flogged, the persecuted. We lift a cross to our bleeding shoulders; we war the crown of thorns, we feel the blows of the hammer as the spikes are driv through our hands and feet. As He was in this life, so are we: dead to this world and its lust and vice and sin, that we might be alive to God through Christ our Lo

Lovers of Christ have always counted it a privilege to be allowed to suffer on His account. In the early centuries of Christianity, when Christians were relatively few in number, but unashamed to let the light of their Christian faith shine into the darkness of the heathen world, persecution often reached monstrous proportions. What an amazing lot these early followers of Christ were - proud and happy to be counted worthy to suffer with Christ, going to prison or to death with a song on their lips and in their hearts. Gradually, however, the opposition lost much of its fire and cruelty. Many of us can remember the day when we could look at a picture of Christians being thrown to the lions and say, Thank God, that can't happen any more. But it can. And it has. And it does. And it will. Christ has not withdrawn the Eighth Beatitude. The Church belongs at the Cross. That is the only place where it will ever find Victory. That is the only place where the world has ever discovered the true significance of the Gospel.

Christ says that to be persecuted for His sake can be a doorway to blessing. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Christ congratulates those who suffer for His sake. The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them. Their persecution is even here and now a badge of honor and privilege. It is a reassurance of their membership in His Kingdom. It is a mark of their membership in the great company of the martyrs. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil

against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Though the disciple finds himself with Job, stripped of everything but God, he still has great cause for rejoicing. God has noticed, and God will remember - and what we have lost for Jesus' sake will be given to us again an hundredfold - in an eternity of glory and bliss in heaven. And so, with Luther we can sing: Take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife - let these all be gone. They still have nothing won. The Kingdom ours remaineth.

Amen.