

Matt. 5:11-12

I. Those persecuted for Christ's sake are blessed (11-12c)

This is an elaboration of the last of the Beatitudes (5:10). Jesus continued by repeating the pronouncement of blessing, but elaborated on the reasons for the blessing and how His hearers should respond.

A. You are blessed when people persecute you for my sake (11)

1. You are blessed (11a)

This proposition uses the same word “blessed” as Jesus used in the Beatitudes of vv. 3-10. But in this proposition, it is more pointedly personal. Instead of saying a more generally aimed “blessed are those who...” Jesus said “blessed are you,” addressing it directly to His hearers. However, like the Beatitudes, this was not a blanket blessing, but only applied to certain people in certain situations, as described in the following propositions.

2. The occasions when you are blessed (11b-e)

a When they insult you (11b)

This blessing is applicable, Jesus said, when people insult you. The word “when” makes the blessing conditional on the situation Jesus was describing. But this is a positive promise – whenever people insult us in this way, we can expect to receive blessing from God. “Insult” means to speak disparagingly of someone. This word usually has the connotation of saying something that is untrue (which Jesus will highlight in 11e). But this word may also mean to say something that is technically true, but to say it in a way intended to mock and/or shame someone. In this context, Jesus was not promising blessing for any kind of insult whatsoever. But, as shown in 11d, He was talking about insults that come as a result of connection with Christ and following His way and lifestyle.

b And they persecute [you] (11c)

This proposition is a continuation of the condition when, Jesus said, His hearers were blessed. We are blessed when people persecute us. The word “persecute” covers a variety of actions intended to harass, inconvenience and somehow inflict harm. It is usually used to describe actions done because of someone’s different beliefs or lifestyle, or inclusion in a group seen as undesirable because of beliefs and/or lifestyle. In this context (see 11d), the blessing for being persecuted is limited to persecution caused by being connected with Christ. If we are persecuted for being obnoxious, or for our bad behavior, we cannot claim the blessing which Jesus promised in this verse.

c And they falsely slander you because of me (11d-e)

This section is a continuation of the condition when Jesus promised blessing on His hearers. It is one main idea communicated using two propositions. The main idea is of saying evil things against people because of Christ (11d). And Jesus clarified that this is done falsely, by saying things that are not true (11e).

1) And they say all kinds of evil things against you because of me (11d)

This is a continuation and expansion of the previous propositions. Here Jesus pronounced blessing when people say evil things against us. He used the word “all” to signify all manner of evil things said against us. And the phrase “say evil things” is generic for all kinds of wicked, hateful, untrue, worthless speech. This makes it a blanket statement that covers the insult mentioned above, but also things like slander, gossip, lies, etc. All kinds of genuinely harmful and hateful speech are covered by this term.

However, as an aside, this is not the same as the concept of “hate speech” often used in current culture. The concept of hate speech is a useless and harmful concept unless it is clearly and carefully defined according to objective standards, which is almost never is. Therefore, if the boundaries of what constitutes hate speech are not clearly defined, it quickly devolves into a weapon used to manipulate someone with whom one disagrees, whether or not their statement was genuinely intended to be hateful or harmful, and even if it is true. Of course, Jesus is against hateful speech and clearly labeled it as evil. But He would only allow it to be defined as evil by His objective standards of right and wrong, in conformity with His divine character and holiness, and especially His truth. Many of Jesus’s own statements have been labeled as “hate speech” by people who are judging by twisted standards completely opposed to His. And there is no evidence that Jesus would approve of suppressing this kind of speech. He directly and publicly corrected His opponents when they said untrue and harmful things, but He never tried to deny them an opportunity to speak.

And in this proposition, Jesus was talking about a specific kind of evil speech. This is seen by His use of two modifying phrases. The first is “against you.” This is the kind of harmful speech aimed directly against His disciples. They were promised blessing if they were the direct targets of the slanderous and harmful attack. And the second modifying phrase is “because of me” or “on my account.” This specifies that these verbal attacks were because of someone’s connection to Christ. As Jesus said elsewhere (see John 15:18-21) people will hate and attack His followers only because they hated and attacked Him first. Therefore, we are not promised blessing when people insult us because we have been acting in a way that invites insult. We are not blessed when people attack us personally for our personal attributes and actions separate from Christ. But when we are spoken evil of because we are followers of Christ and trying to live in conformity with His character, we are promised blessing.

2) By lying (11e)

This proposition is the final modifying explanation of the kind of evil speech which Jesus was addressing in this section. He clarified that it was being the subject of *false* speech which is the occasion of the blessing of His hearers. He was talking about false accusation, false gossip, false slander, and insults that are not true. Jesus was not promising blessing when people accuse you of things that are true about you, only false accusations. And like the other propositions in this section, this is directly linked to our relationship with Christ, not necessarily concerning lies told about us separate from our Christian faith and lifestyle.

B. Respond with Joy (12a-c)

This section is the response which Jesus was teaching His followers to have whenever they experience this kind of persecution. This response may seem counter-intuitive at first until Jesus explains the reason for this response, which He did at the end of this section.

1. Be happy about it (12a-b)

a Rejoice (12a)

Jesus suggested that we respond to persecution suffered for His sake by rejoicing. We are to be glad when we suffer for Christ. This does not make sense until we connect this with the reason for rejoicing which Jesus will give in 12c. But because of Christ and His truth and promises, we actually can be happy in difficult times. This is because the blessedness we experience in Christ is eternal and therefore it transcends our temporary circumstances, both good and bad.

b And be glad (12b)

This proposition is parallel to the previous one. The terms “rejoice” and “be glad” are basically synonymous. If there is any difference in meaning, “rejoice” is more of an inner attitude, and “be glad” is more of an outward action and demonstration of our gladness. But both terms include the inward attitude and outward response. So, in this passage they are basically interchangeable. Jesus did not repeat His thought with a synonymous term to say something different or to add information. He repeated Himself for emphasis, to highlight the magnitude of the joy which we should experience when we are persecuted for His sake. Again, this does not make sense until it is connected with the reason that Jesus gave in the next proposition.

2. Reason: Because your reward is great in heaven (12c)

The reason why we should rejoice when persecuted for Christ’s sake is that God will reward us. And the reward He has stored up for us in Heaven is great, according to Jesus. It is an excessive reward that far surpasses the experience of suffering. In other words, we will get far more good from God as a reward than we will suffer bad in the persecution. God’s reward will be greater because God is both just and generous. He will pay us back for the harm we suffered, and He will give much more because of His love and grace. This multiplied reward will totally overshadow anything we suffered, and make us forget the persecution in light of the joy of our reward. And this reward is guaranteed because God is completely faithful to His promises.

II. Reason: Because, they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way (12d)

This proposition brings out the reason which is implicit in Jesus’s earlier promise of reward (12c), and which underlies all of this passage. It is the reason why we are blessed when we are persecuted for Christ’s sake, and the reason we can expect a reward. It is that we are on proven to be on God’s side, like the earlier prophets, who were likewise persecuted for standing firm in godliness and challenging their ungodly society. The Old Testament prophets were persecuted because the evil people could not put up with their righteous message from God, which showed their own sin.

In the same way, when we are persecuted for Christ’s sake (and not for our own sinfulness or stupidity), we find assurance that we are actually God’s people, and that we genuinely are a part of the Kingdom of God, and that we are guaranteed the full experience of His Kingdom when it is consummated. It is evidence that we are no longer of this world. As Jesus said in John 15:19, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” This is the reason the Apostles rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41). Martin Luther once said, “The only way we can avoid offending guilty people is by our silence or by their patience. We cannot be silent because of the command of God, and they cannot be patient because of their guilt” (paraphrased). In other words, if no one in the wider, ungodly society is somehow put off by your Christian lifestyle and speech, then there is reason to question whether you are adequately applying Christ to the way you live and speak. But if you receive resistance for your faith (again, not for your rudeness or personality), you can find assurance and joy that you are Christ’s to the extent that the people around you notice the difference. You share in the kind of persecution the prophets experienced, and you will share in their reward.