



# The Trinity Pulpit



## You are Known by the Company You Keep Matthew 5:10-12; James 1:2-4

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November 1, 2009

Have you ever wondered what happened to the disciples of Jesus? We hear so much about them but after the book of Acts, the Bible turns its attention to the gentile mission of Paul and the 11 seem to disappear from the text. What happened to the 11 who followed Jesus? History tells us that most of them went to the utter parts of their world with the gospel and most of them died a martyr's death. Andrew preached the gospel in Greece and was crucified upside down and buried there. Bartholomew preached in India and was also crucified upside down in a town in Armenia. James, son of Alpheus, was stoned to death by the Jews in Jerusalem and buried next to the temple. James, son of Zebedee, was beheaded in Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen. John lived to an old age but was exiled to the Isle of Patmos by Domitian. Peter was put to death by crucifixion upside down by Nero in Rome. Phillip preached in what is now Turkey and was crucified upside down and buried there. Thaddeus and Simon the Zealot served the church and died of old age. Thomas was killed with a spear while preaching the gospel in India. Beheaded, crucified, exiled, and ran through with a spear. That is the outcome of most of the disciples. The same ones who first heard these words as part of Jesus' teaching,

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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 the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is what we receive from this world when we are willing to follow Jesus. We are re-

minded today that the reward for following Jesus is not necessarily in this world. In fact, Jesus tells his disciples that they will join the company of the prophets who were persecuted before them, and we can assume that we too will face persecution just like the disciples. What is this persecution like? First of all it is because of Jesus. There are many times we interpret our problems or challenges in this life as somehow being a persecution for our faith. There are some who would even interpret health issues as a persecution because of righteousness. Yet, Jesus was not talking about that kind of trouble. Many of the moments we struggle in life are just life. We do not live in a perfect world, we have bodies that were not created to last forever, and we suffer the consequences of decisions of others that are beyond our control. Many things that we interpret to be persecution because of righteousness is not so. Most of what we face in life is just life. Now, that does not mean we are not to face those moments with faith – we are. We are to face those moments with faith in God who gives us strength, perseverance, comfort and the ability to place those moments into an eternal perspective.

I like what Martin Lloyd Jones says about being persecuted for righteousness. In one of his sermons he reminds us that it does not mean being persecuted for our own poor choices; it does not mean being persecuted for a cause; it does not mean being persecuted for some religious/political issue that we have created; it does not mean being persecuted for being noble or good. It is to be persecuted because we choose to be like Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

The persecution Jesus speaks of in the Ser-

mon on the Mount is the natural response of the world when we follow Jesus. Let us be reminded that Jesus has been building a sermon with these words. We discover our need for God by our poor spirit and the mourning of our faith. We desire righteousness more than anything else; therefore, we enter into a relationship with Jesus. The result is a change in our character. We show mercy, we are pure in heart, and we practice the work of peace. What do we receive for this? We think we should receive accolades. We think the world should rise up and say thank you. We think that everyone would realize how important we are to this culture. Yet, Jesus says the result is persecution and insults. That type of persecution described here is a persecution which is physical, emotional, and social. The word *persecution* has a physical connotation. To be sure, the early Christians and Christians today around the world know what it means to suffer physically because they profess Jesus as Lord.

According to an October 27 report from Compass Direct, Amina Muse Ali (45) was murdered in her home in Galkayo, Puntland region, Somalia on the evening of October 19 by three masked members of Suna Waljameca, a militant Islamic group. Ali had earlier received threats from militants for not wearing a veil to show her adherence to Islam. They had reportedly been monitoring Ali for some time as they suspected her of being a Christian. Ali, a long-time believer, had been actively involved in the underground church and the Somali Christian Brothers' Organization, a movement that has been targeted several times by Muslim militants. Reports that week in Pakistan recalled a church that was burned down and other pastors being attacked in their own church. Although we can meet with safety and without physical persecution, there are brothers and sisters in Christ who know all too well the physical suffering of following Jesus.

This persecution is emotional. Jesus says "There will be insults because of you serving me." We might not be attacked physically, but we know that there are insults because of our faith. Many of us know the feeling of not being taken seriously because of our faith. There are those who view faith in Jesus as somehow archaic, uneducated, and uninformed. We might even know the experience of being insulted personally for our faith. There may

have been a co-worker or a neighbor who has insulted us because we choose to follow Jesus.

Although some of us might know persecution physically and emotionally, I think we all have known the feeling of being persecuted socially. When Jesus says "They will be falsely accused", that is a social situation. Jesus prophesied that the believer would be singled out and treated unfairly. When we follow Jesus, there will be times when we realize that we are different. There will be moments when we feel very alone, even in a crowd. There will be moments when we feel singled out. We might be treated differently because of our faith.

Jesus tells us plainly that we will face persecution when we choose to live like Jesus. What are we to do in those moments when we face persecution? We can choose to get mad. Sometimes that is what we choose – we get defensive, we get angry, and we choose to argue or defend our self with one who is insulting us or treating us unfairly. We can choose to become a victim – that is, we can feel powerless and almost relish the feeling of being the victim. There are some people who enjoy that feeling of the victim. We can have a feeling of apathy – we can say "Well, that is the way the world is and nothing is going to change." Yet, Jesus tells us to respond in a different way. Jesus says "Rejoice and be glad."

William Barclay calls our moment of persecution for our faith "the great occasion." What does he mean? He means that in the moment of persecution whether it is slight or very obvious, there must come to our minds the reality of what is occurring and we must come to a realization that we are in a great occasion. In other words, that is a moment for consideration, reflection and action. I think that is what James meant when he said that we should consider our persecution as pure joy. The word *consider* is a word that means "continue to consider." We are to continue to look at our situation, reflect, and act. Jesus says that we should rejoice and be glad in the great occasion. The word *actually* means "leap for joy." This seems so odd to us, but when we consider what our persecution for Jesus' sake means, then we might find the ability to react in such a way.

Let me mention three things that persecution for Jesus' sake in our lives means. First, it means that we have the kingdom of heaven. If we will notice, Jesus begins and ends the beatitudes with this promise of the kingdom of Heaven. When we find our self in a moment of persecution, we must consider the great occasion and remember that we are a part of the kingdom of heaven. What does this kingdom look like? I like what Max Lucado writes in his book about this claim. He suggests that the kingdom of heaven is a place where there is forgiveness, eternity and where the rejected are received. Let's think about that last one. When we are persecuted in this life we remember that we are part of a kingdom where those rejected here are received by God. The kingdom of heaven is a place where you and I are accepted not because of what we do but because of God's love.

Lucado tells the story about a sweater hanging in his closet. He describes it as something that he never wears and that he rarely looks at. So, there is no reason to keep the sweater. It really does not fit anymore and he could use the room in his closet, but love will not let him throw it away. It is treasured not because it is expensive or a certain name brand but because it was created by his mother. It is an item of love. He cherishes it because of his relationship to it. He cannot throw it out because of his love for it.<sup>2</sup>

In the same way, although we might be rejected here and we might have insults and injustice, in the kingdom of God we are accepted. They are not cast aside but received. They are not forgotten but remembered. The kingdom of God is a place where we are included and it is not because of what we have done but because we are loved. It is because of relationship to Jesus that those who are overlooked in this world are remembered in the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom where we are remembered and received. When persecution comes our way we consider it joy because we are remembered and included in the kingdom of heaven.

In our moment of persecution we consider it joy because of the promise of heaven. "Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven." Although we do not enjoy persecution, when we are persecuted for the sake of Christ there is, in es-

sence, a moment when we realize who we are and where we are going. If we find our self suffering for the sake of Christ, it is a reminder that we, like Jesus, do not belong to this world. In the same way we are reminded that we are on our way to somewhere else.

Let's admit it that this is hard for us to do. It sounds so good to talk about heaven but we live here and now. The joy and the sorrow that we experience are here and now. It is in this world and in this place. Yet, Jesus says that in our great occasion we must remember that we are not home. Our reward and our home is in heaven and not here.

When I was young I can remember my older relatives say things at funerals of family members like "there are more of us there than here now." They would speak of being reunited with loved ones who had passed on and gone on to be with the Lord. I can remember being young and thinking "I don't want to think like that. How can you say something like that? How can you look at life this way? I want to live, I want to experience life, I want to cherish relationships, I want to watch my children grow old; I want to build deep relationships with old friends and experience the joy of making new friends." I like this life and the joy we can have. Yet, every now and then the sentiments of my relatives make sense to me. Every now and then when we stand and sing "When we all get to heaven what a day of rejoicing that will be. When we all see Jesus we'll sing and shout the victory." Every now and then I find in my heart a strange longing, a mysterious feeling that this is not home. Oh, don't get me wrong I want to embrace life and live the life God gives me with joy and hope, but in our moment of persecution we must consider that great is our reward in heaven.

Paul would write "I am convinced that our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

The third gift in persecution is our inclusion with the people of God. Jesus reminds us that when we experience persecution, we should gain hope in knowing that the prophets and others were treated the same way. Jesus is giving us strength by helping us to realize that those who have served God in

the past also experienced persecution; the fact that we are persecuted for our faith is just another reminder that we belong to Christ, and we have been included with the people of God.

In earlier periods of history, art was seen as a community endeavor and not as an exercise in self-expression. In the Middle Ages, art work was customarily anonymous. Medieval artists typically did not sign their work. Cennino Cennini's essay of 1400, *Il Libro dell' Arte*, announced the artist's intention to break with this tradition, and the book is usually regarded as a turning point, marking the end of the craft tradition and the call for modern artistic creativity which bears a personal signature and style.

We all face trials and difficulties. Being human means being part of the human condition, and the human condition includes suffering, hurting, grieving and challenges. There are those in our world who face persecution because of their political or ethnic background. There are many reasons why we face difficulty. In most cases we can say that it is simply being human. However, for the Christian, persecution for the sake of Christ, because we choose to be like Christ, becomes a moment of identity. In our moment of persecution, we consider it joy because we identify with those who have suffered before us. We have been included with the people of God.

The people of God are described in detail in Hebrews 11. The writer writes:

*<sup>32</sup>And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, <sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was prom-*

*ised; who shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. <sup>35</sup>Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned<sup>[1]</sup>; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— <sup>38</sup>the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.*

*<sup>39</sup>These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. <sup>40</sup>God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

What a description of the people of God who endured persecution for the sake of Christ. They say you are known by the company you keep. When we are persecuted, we are reminded that we have been included with these saints of old. We are included in their company and they have become our identity.

Blessed are you and me when we face persecution for the sake of Christ. It is the reminder that we are part of a kingdom where those who are rejected here are received by God. It is a reminder that we are heading toward an eternal home. It is a reminder that we have been included with the people of God. Rejoice, be glad, jump for joy and consider your moment of persecution a moment of joy, for those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness will receive the kingdom of heaven. ✨

<sup>1</sup>D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies In the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) 128-137.

<sup>2</sup>Max Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1990) 171.

