

Feeling Persecuted? Be Happy!

Big Idea: When we feel persecuted for being like Jesus, it's reassuring to know we are in good company. Knowing that God is pleased with us should more than compensate for feeling rejected by others.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:10-12).

Most people don't realize that we can choose how we feel. They think that circumstances determine our attitude (bad day = bad mood), but Jesus is teaching us through the Beatitudes ("be"-attitudes) that our attitude determines our circumstances. He promises happiness beyond our circumstances and rewards beyond this life on earth if we keep our hearts and minds dependent on Him.

1. Persecution for Wrong Reasons – Not so Happy!

There are conditions to this promise – this state of happiness on earth and these rewards in heaven are only for those who are persecuted for the "right" reasons: *for righteousness' sake, falsely, and on my account.* This does not include mistreatment because of our own flawed attitudes and actions: feeling superior to others ("holier than thou"), judging them, living like a hypocrite, acting weird, being aloof, and behaving in unloving ways. If people don't like us because we are unlikable, let's face it - we have no real reason to be happy. Our rejection is justifiable and we should regret our circumstances.

2. Persecution for "Right" Reasons – Happy!

It's unlikely we will face much persecution, at least in free nations like Canada, when we genuinely love others. But if we do experience unjustified persecution, we are suddenly in very good company. Jesus hung on the cross while loving and forgiving His crucifiers. Thinking about His love for us and His promises to us can actually replace the pain of being marginalized, maimed, and even martyred. When the first church martyr was being pummeled by stones, he was suddenly filled with joy as he saw Jesus giving Him a standing ovation, welcoming him into heaven (Acts 7:54-60).

It really is possible to select our thoughts and attitudes, even during the most trying situations. Paul, who experienced more persecution than we can imagine (2 Corinthians 11:23-30), showed us how to adjust our thinking in order to rejoice at all times and experience peace that *surpasses all understanding* (Philippians 4:4-9).

3. The Rewards are Out of this World

James, the pastor of the First Church of Jerusalem, encouraged the Christians who were running for their lives from their Roman oppressors with these strange words: *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).* A right response to persecution for the right reasons actually makes us more mature, more complete, because through it we become more reliant on Jesus. Just like Jesus said, we can also look forward to rewards in the life to come: *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him (James 1:12).* It's these exemplary attitudes and actions that become the fuel that lights up our lives and points to the "Light of the World" (Matthew 5:14-16). In what ways will you adjust your thoughts and attitudes today?