

6.30.24 How Should Christians Respond to Persecution Matthew 5:11-12, 43-45, 2 Timothy 3:10-13 Acts 5:12-42

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When I was in Green Lake, Wisconsin earlier this month I went for a walk every morning. One of the places I visited was the Hopevale Memorial Cathedral in the Glen. It's a replica of the woodland chapel built in 1942 for daily worship by eleven American Baptist missionaries at Hopevale in the Philippines in the Pacific. One of the eleven was Jennie Clare Adams, who was a medical missionary. Jennie wrote poems during the dangerous and weary twenty months she and the other missionaries spent hiding from Japanese troops operating on the Island of Panay during World War Two from April 17, 1942, until their martyrdom on December 20, 1943. Excerpts of Jennie's poems are posted along the trail at Green Lake. Here's part of her poem, *Let Me Live Bravely*, written on March 31, 1943. *"Let me live bravely,
For life has many battle fields Where valor must be shown,
Many darkened corners, Where pain and fear are known.
Life calls for sacrifice, To share the highest good,
To serve courageously, Sometimes to give life's blood.
As others lived and gave, Let me be brave."*

As followers of Jesus, we're called to live bravely no matter what our circumstances. Jennie and the other missionaries with her faced genuine hardship because of their faith and were killed because they were Christians. When you become a follower of Jesus, you may be pleasantly surprised by the mercy, forgiveness, love, grace, and power for living that are shared with you in Christ. In the United States, compared with many other nations in the world, we enjoy these blessings without much hardship, but that's not always the case. There are countries where Christians are persecuted. Persecution is when someone is beaten, imprisoned, loses their job, has their property confiscated, can't worship freely and openly without fear, is driven out of their country, or killed. Life can change quickly because a person is seeking to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, and there's opposition, resistance, hostility, or **persecution**. This is especially true in places like Myanmar where our Christian sisters and brothers

for years now have been driven from their homes, imprisoned, and killed. Jesus warns his followers in Matthew 5:11-12 and many other times that they'll face **persecution**. In 2 Corinthians 6:4-5, Paul describes the harsh reality of his experience as a servant of God as he endured *"afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger."* New Testament scholar and author NT Wright observed, *"Everywhere Paul went there was a riot; everywhere I go they serve tea!"* Being a follower of Christ may be tougher than you initially thought. We can focus on the verses of blessing in the Bible and miss or ignore the more challenging ones.

Persecution of those following Christ is a subject Jesus and Paul are crystal clear about. Jesus is not vague or ambiguous. We don't know what Jesus thought about artificial intelligence or social media, but we don't have to wonder what Jesus, or the early church thought about persecution because they tell us and show us. **First, persecution happens so it shouldn't be a surprise.** Christians have faced persecution from the beginning and throughout history. Some Christians act shocked that it occurs, and we shouldn't be. We should expect it. There are many verses in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament that speak to the reality of persecution **and how Christians are to respond.** The verses are clear, **but not easy to live and do.**

You can ask yourself; would I respond to persecution the way Jesus tells us to and how the apostles did? One example of how Paul addresses suffering and persecution is in **2 Timothy**. In 2 Timothy 1:8, Paul's invites Timothy to join with him in **suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God.** Paul spent time in prison, so persecution was not some hypothetical possibility in the future for him. It was part of his experience since the risen Christ changed his life on the road to Damascus and Paul went from being **a persecutor** of those following Christ to one who was **persecuted** for being a proclaimer and teacher of the good news of Jesus.

Our scripture today is **2 Timothy 3:10-13** where Paul says to Timothy, *"10 Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, 11 my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. 12 Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in*

Christ Jesus will be persecuted. 13 But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived.

How should Christians respond to persecution? We should expect it and not be surprised by it. ***“All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”*** Jesus and Paul suffered and faced **persecution and they don’t want you to be surprised by it.** Let’s begin with Jesus, who spoke about persecution during his ministry and until his terrible death on a cross. I’m going to share **three examples** of Jesus teaching his disciples that following him is hard and could lead to persecution.

In the parable of the Sower in **Matthew 13:21**, Jesus uses the image of seed sown on rocky ground to represent the person who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ***“yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.”*** In this foundational parable that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus says trouble and persecution are going to arise on account of the word and that’s when some people will quit and stop following him because they haven’t put their roots down deep in Christ.

In **Matthew 24:9-13**, Jesus says, ***“Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”*** (See also Matthew 10:23; Luke 21:12). You can understand why hearing this would cause many people to question if they wanted to or could follow Jesus even through such terrible persecution.

In **Mark 10:28-30**, the apostle Peter, wants to know what’s in it for him and the first disciples for following Jesus. Mark 10:28, Peter began to say to him, ***“Look, we have left everything and followed you.”*** 29 Jesus said, ***“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.”*** Even in assuring Peter of blessings

in this life with being part of the larger family of God and in the age to come of eternal life, Jesus says in this life there will be persecutions. In **John 15:20**, Jesus warns his followers, *“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.”*

Paul wrote frequently about the persecution he experienced. In **2 Timothy 3:11** he mentions three examples from his time in **Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra**. **Antioch** is mentioned in **Acts 11:19-30**, where the followers of Jesus are first called **Christians**. In **Acts 13:13-52** we learn about the conflict between Paul and his opponents in Antioch. Paul’s message is about forgiveness in Jesus (**Acts 13:38–39**), *“Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; 39 by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”* This led to trouble as did Paul and Barnabas sharing the message with Gentiles. Paul’s opponents were so angry they (**Acts 13:50**), *“stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region.”*

The same pattern repeats itself at **Iconium** which you can read about in **Acts 14:1-7**. Then some of those opponents from Antioch and Iconium followed Paul to **Lystra** (see **Acts 14:8-23**) and there they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city and left him for dead. But Paul was so tough and determined, he got up went to Derbe and kept on preaching. **Acts 14:22** declares, *“There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, ‘It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.’”*

This is the third statement in the New Testament on **entering the kingdom of God**. The first, **Matthew 18:3**, I shared about two weeks ago, when Jesus says, *“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

The second is in **John 3:5** where Jesus says to Nicodemus, *“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”* This emphasizes the necessity of spiritual rebirth in one’s relationship with God.

The third is connected to today’s theme which acknowledges that when we commit ourselves to following Jesus, **it will be hard**; there will days of difficulty that are

part of that journey. Entering the kingdom of heaven requires the willingness to change, to be humble and trusting like a child; it requires a spiritual birth; and it requires endurance, resilience, love, and courage in the face of persecution.

How should Christians respond to persecution? **Don't Be Surprised and Don't Be Deceived.** Paul warns Timothy, **don't be deceived**. There are all kinds of people who seek to take advantage of and use people in the church. Paul warns in 2 Timothy 3:13, *"But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived."* Both inside and outside the church, there are wicked people, imposters, charlatans, posers, fakes, con artists, scammers, and people who use faith or Jesus to make themselves rich, to abuse others, to gain and wield power, and to lead many astray. Don't be deceived, don't be fooled, don't get duped. **Just because someone** holds a Bible, doesn't mean they know what's in it or that they're seeking to do what it says. **Just because someone** says they believe in God, doesn't mean they're an authentic follower of Christ, that's why **James 2:19** says sarcastically, *"You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder."* Demons believe in and fear God; but they're not obeying God. **Just because someone** can quote the Bible word for word, it doesn't mean they're a Christian. The devil quotes scripture word for word to Jesus during his time of testing in the wilderness. **Don't be deceived.** Jesus died to take away your sins, not your mind, use it to think well and critically. The proof of whether anyone has a transforming relationship with God in Christ is revealed in their character; in how they live, speak, act, and treat others.

Don't be surprised, don't be deceived, and choose wisely whom you follow. Follow Jesus and mature Christians in whom you can clearly see the fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-Control. If someone doesn't demonstrate these virtues, why would you want to follow him or her or to give them your support, loyalty, or allegiance?

How are we to respond when persecuted? We follow the example of godly leaders. Do we quit the faith, or whine and complain about how everyone is against us? Not at all. We **follow the example of Jesus** who taught us to **pray for our enemies**. We follow the example of Paul who told the church in Rome (**Romans 12:14**), *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."* To the church in Corinth

Paul wrote (1 Cor. 4:12-13), ***“When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly.”*** Is that what people experience from me, and you, and Christians in America? How much of our speaking and behavior might need to change to do what Paul says?

A great examples of how Christians should respond to persecution is in Acts 5:12-42 which describes the second arrest of the apostles including Peter and John. Here’s the end of the incident in Acts 5:40-42 *“when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. As they left the council, **they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.** And every day in the temple and at home **they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.**”*

We want to respond to persecution like the apostles did. They rejoiced, they didn’t whine or complain or act like they were being picked on. They considered it an honor. And most importantly, it didn’t stop them from teaching and preaching that Jesus is the Messiah in their place of worship and from house to house.

In the beginning of the Book of Revelation (1:9), John writes, ***“I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance.”*** John is saying, God is with us in times of hardship and persecution and, we’re all in this together. **As Christians we respond to persecution with unity.** It helps in a crisis to be part of a larger community like the apostles were, like Paul and his ministry team, or like this church and to have people who care about us who we know, trust, and respect, reminding us of what is true.

In conclusion, you’re not being persecuted because interest rates are higher or because it’s hard to make a left turn on Cape Cod in the summer. Persecution involves being imprisoned, beaten, tortured, exiled, and killed because of faith in Christ. Most of us don’t have any idea what that’s like, but Jesus, Paul, John, and Jennie Clare Adams did. In her poem, *Let Me Live Bravely*, with which I began, she wrote,
*“Let me die heroically, Steadfast in faith and calm, When that great day is near,
 Knowing no hour of dread, fearing no anxious fear;
 For death is but a door, Closed tight on pain and strife,*

A door that opens up That we may enter life.

As heroes die still brave and true Let me die too.

Like, those who've gone before us, you're called to be a faithful witness to what you've seen and heard about Jesus. You're to endure and share in hardship and suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ as Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 2:3).

Choose wisely whom you follow. Don't be deceived. Be a sign of the kingdom of love and light as you live out the gospel in our time, in the hopeful expectation that one day the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our God, and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and forever. While I don't relish being persecuted, I don't fear it and I'm not worried about it. Our calling is to live out our faith as best we can. If living as a faithful, devoted, kind, and loving Christian leads to persecution as it did for the apostles, then we take solace in Jesus' words, in **John 16:33**, ***"In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"*** Onward we go in the name of Jesus and the power of the Spirit in love, faith, hope, peace, and courage, not fearing anyone, or anything.

Prayer - Almighty, Most Holy God, faithful through the ages, we thank you for being with us in all our beginnings and in all our endings and everywhere in between, in times of happiness and heartache, in suffering and persecution and joy and blessing, even to the end of our life help us to remember you are with us and give us the faith and courage to follow you and to do what you ask us to do - we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

Blessing: Romans 8:35-39. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, **or persecution**, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why do you think Jesus, Paul, Peter, and other people in the New Testament talked so frequently about persecution and suffering?
2. What sort of behavior or actions constitutes persecution and suffering in the New Testament?
3. As followers of Jesus, how does understanding that persecution and suffering are to be expected and not a surprise, help us to face them?
4. How are we to respond to persecution and enemies (see Matthew 5, Acts 5, Romans 12, and some of the other passages referenced in the sermon and service). What are some of things we're told to do?
5. In 2 Timothy 3:10-13, there's a contrast between the leadership qualities and character seen in Paul, and the leadership of "wicked people and impostors," who, "will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived." What differences are described? What can we do to make sure we're not deceived by wicked people and imposters?
6. Where do we find the strength and capacity to respond to suffering as Jesus, Paul, and the apostles did – with prayer, blessing, fortitude, and grace?