

Be happy, even when you're persecuted

Message for Sunday, November 24, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 5:10-16

Children's Message: from Philippians 1:12-14. Did anything bad happen this past week? *Listen for answers.* Sometimes bad things happen to us, even though we haven't done anything wrong. Like getting sick.

We read in the Bible about a man named Paul. He was put in prison. *Wrap chains around my legs as a symbol of being in prison,* and get one of the children to click the padlock, so I'm locked in place. But Paul hadn't done anything bad! It was just because people didn't like him. Was that fair? (*Children learn very early what is fair and isn't fair!*)

But Paul, instead of getting angry and upset, used the bad situation to do good. He told everyone else in prison about Jesus, both the other prisoners and the guards. He was such a positive person, even in a bad situation! Other people wanted to know what made the difference in his life, and he told them: Jesus!

When something bad happens to you and me, I hope we will turn it into something good. Let's pray about that...

After prayer: Now, will you please unlock the chain and let me out? *Please!*

Message: "Be happy, even when you're persecuted"

During the communist era in the former Soviet Union, Christians were a target. The regime correctly perceived that they could not control citizens who gave their allegiance to Jesus, and so they sought to stamp out the Christian faith. The result was that many churches went into hiding, meeting in secret in people's homes. When the KGB (the secret police) learned of a house church, they sent a team of thugs to raid the place, beat up everyone, and arrest the leaders. The leaders were convicted of crimes against the state and sent to prisons and labour camps, where the conditions were unbearable.

Vasili Kozlov was also in prison during that time, although as a convicted criminal. This is what he wrote about what he saw there.

Among prisoners, I happened to see other people who did have good morals and high ideals in life. These were Christians, believers.

They had been sentenced and put among criminals for their living faith in God.

I confessed that I was being punished deservedly: for theft, robbery and violence. But these people had been given far greater sentences of twenty or twenty-five years' imprisonment for their faith.

Among the general despair, while prisoners like myself were cursing ourselves, cursing the camp, the authorities and everything in the world, while we were slitting open our veins and stomachs or hanging ourselves, the Christians did not despair.

Life in the camp in these harsh conditions did not dismay them. They were shining with a spiritual beauty. Their pure, upright life, their deep faith and devotion to God, their gentleness and their wonderful manliness became a shining example of real life for many thousands of prisoners. One could see Christ reflected in their faces. ¹

What a testimony! This story shows the power of a life which is surrendered to Jesus, so that his glory can shine through, even in the darkest conditions.

This story introduces today's theme: persecution. Let's read in the Bible where Jesus talks about this.

1) Follow God's way, even if it means trouble

Matthew 5:10, Good News Bible:

"Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!"

But how does that connect with us? I cannot remember the last time someone tried to kill me or beat me up because I am a Christian; the truth is, it has *never* happened. It is completely foreign to my experience, and I suspect the same is true for most

¹ Leaflet by Kozlov: "A Criminal becomes a Christian in a

Russian Prison."

of us here in this room. What I *do* encounter when I talk about Jesus with non-Christians is mostly a lack of interest and joking. This indicates that people are not offended by the gospel, but indifferent or even amused. John Stott, a leader of the church in England, once said, “Wherever [the apostle] Paul went, there was a riot. Wherever I go, they serve tea.”

So, if we are not afraid of being attacked for our faith, what do we fear? Being perceived as being weird or fanatics. So we try to look respectable. We shun the excesses and extremes of churches where people get excited about Jesus. (Remember: a fanatic is just someone who loves Jesus more than you do.)

Here is a fascinating quote from, of all people, the person who was once the head of computer giant IBM, Tom Watson, Jr.

Strangely, the expounders of many of the great new ideas of history were frequently considered on the lunatic fringe for some or all of their lives. If one stands up and is counted, from time to time one may get knocked down. But remember this: a man flattened by an opponent can get up again. A man flattened by conformity stays down for good.

The lesson here: don't be afraid of being different, of standing up for justice, of being apart from the crowd, of being enthusiastic about your faith, of being excited about Jesus, of telling others the difference Jesus makes in your life. As Nike would say, “Just do it.”

2) The joy of suffering for Jesus

Let's continue reading what Jesus says about persecution.

Matthew 5:11-12, Good News Bible:

“Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven. This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted.”

Let's say that you're going on a journey through some territory that is unfamiliar to you. The person who is sending you out warns you that you will

encounter washed out bridges, dangerous animals, robbers, and various other problems. As you travel, those exact things happen to you. When that happens, you will not be surprised and dismayed; rather, you will be glad because they reassure you that you're on the right trail.

Here's an example of what that might look like. John Wesley was one of the founders of the Methodist Church. He was riding along the road one day when he realized that three whole days had passed without him being persecuted. No one had thrown a brick or an egg at him for three days! He was alarmed, and he stopped his horse. He thought, “Can it be that I have sinned and have backslidden?” He got on his knees and prayed to God to show him where he had failed.

A rough fellow on the other side of the hedge heard the prayer and recognized Wesley. He said, “I'll fix that Methodist preacher,” and threw a brick at Wesley's head. The brick missed Wesley. He leaped to his feet joyfully and said, “Thank God, it's all right, I still have his presence.”

What are some of the privileges and benefits which come as a result of following Jesus?

- living with Jesus every day
- the Holy Spirit dwelling in us
- a home in heaven
- meaningful life in serving others
- being persecuted; suffering for Jesus

Whoa! *Suffering* for Jesus?! That is a benefit? A privilege? Yes, that's what Jesus says.

Let's be clear about this: this is *not* about suffering when it's because of illness, or the loss of a loved one, or financial hardship, or getting mugged for your money, or being the victim of abuse, or any number of things. God *does* indeed care for his children, and there are many places in the Bible which talk about how God helps us in our suffering. But that is not the point of this passage of Scripture. This is specifically about suffering because of our faith in Jesus.

Some people think they are being persecuted for their faith, but actually their behaviour annoys people so much they bring it upon themselves. They are not being persecuted; they are just being a jerk.

A few years ago, a woman in Tennessee declared that she was being persecuted for her faith; she was arrested for playing hymns on her stereo on Sunday mornings. Then the rest of the story came out. She was indeed playing hymns... on her 1,000 watt stereo at maximum volume, with all the windows and doors open, so the entire neighbourhood had to listen to it. Neighbours and the police had repeatedly asked her to turn it down—not turn it off, just turn it down—but she ignored them. That’s not persecution; that’s just being selfish.

I could tell you stories of people still today being persecuted for their faith, but I’m not going to, because that’s not the situation we face here in Canada today. If you’d like to learn about what’s happening around the world, “Voice of the Martyrs” has this website:

www.icommittoprayer.com/requests.

When Jesus says, “Follow me,” he’s asking us to put our faith in him. Yes, it means we believe some doctrines about Jesus. But the most important thing is that we entrust our lives to him. We will do what he says, go where he sends, love and serve those around us in his name. And suffer also, if it comes to that.

There is a price to pay for believing in Jesus. Some pay with their lives as martyrs. The rest of us pay with our daily lives, day by day striving to live and love in his name and by his power at work within us.

3) Live so that your life is a testimony to Jesus

Matthew 5:16, Good News Bible:

“Your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.”

The reason we live a good and godly life is not to earn God’s favour and win our ticket to heaven. No, the reason to be Christlike in our behaviour is *because* we are citizens of the kingdom of God. Our lifestyle should be the kind which will attract people to Jesus.

It’s sad when that doesn’t happen. Mahatma Gandhi was the spiritual leader of India during its move to gain independence from Britain. Unlike most

revolutions, he insisted on using non-violent methods to gain their goal. Where did he get the idea? From Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount.

Stanley Jones was a missionary in India at the time, and during a meeting with Gandhi asked him, “Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?”

Gandhi replied, “Oh, I don’t reject Christ. I love Christ. It’s just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ.” He added, “If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian today.”

You and I are walking, talking advertisements for Jesus. Let us live in such a way that it brings honour to his name.

Next Steps:

- Pray: “How will I answer Jesus’ call to love and serve?” A teenager taped a card to her bathroom mirror with these words: “I am God’s servant. What will he have me do today?”
- Who are you afraid of? Maybe not physically afraid, but fearful of what they might think of you. Anytime you fear someone, they control you, and that means Jesus is no longer first in your life.
- How have you suffered because of Jesus? Can you see how your faith grew deeper as a result? Can you find joy in the blessing?