

A VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

# *The Beatitudes*

*by Rev. A. T. Vergunst*



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Lecture 10

*Blessed Are They Which Are  
Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake*

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**The John Knox Institute**  
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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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# *The Beatitudes*

10 Lectures

*by Rev. A. T. Vergunst*

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# *The Beatitudes*

*by Rev. A. T. Vergunst*

*Lecture #10*

## **Blessed Are They Which Are Persecuted for Righteousness' Sake**

Dear fellow students—I'll call us that together—I welcome you to our last combined session of the study of the Beatitudes. Yet I hope that this will not be the end of your personal study of these opening words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There's always much more gold to be found in prayerful meditation on the Scriptures, especially if you compare it with other Scriptures, and passages that are related to this. So please continue to study these words of Jesus, also the entire Sermon on the Mount, which, of course, we haven't covered. In this section today, we will focus our thoughts on verses 10, 11 and 12, which close the Beatitudes' section.

Now, let me first place these verses in the context again, and in the connection to the previous seven verses. In the Beatitudes, the Master Teacher has given us the portrait of every citizen of His vast Kingdom and a deep and great variety of His people in them. Now that shows an exceeding great wisdom, for the variety among Jesus' citizens of His Kingdom at least are huge. There are young and old believers. There are educated and illiterate believers. There are rich and poor. There are some that are on a high social level of influence, and others who are very low on the social ladder. Yet Jesus was able to draw a unified picture in all that diversity of His people, and to me, that is one of the unsurpassed beauties of the Beatitudes, that He accomplished that in seven statements.

Now before we step away from the portrait of this born-again soul, and see how the world reacts on it, let me illustrate once more how *Christ-centered* the Beatitudes are, as all of the Scripture really is. In Beatitudes 1, 2 and 3, we read of a man or woman who says, "I need the Savior Jesus Christ because I am poor and needy." Beatitude 4 is the expression of "I embrace the Lord Jesus Christ as my hope, my righteousness, my salvation," and Beatitude 5, 6 and 7 is the expression of one who says, "I will follow the Lord Jesus Christ." So as we now look at the concluding Beatitudes which are in essence one, the Lord touches upon one of the greatest ironies that is found in this fallen world. It's an irony that involves both the Master—the King, the Lord Jesus—and that follows His most faithful followers. Friends, there's never been a person in the history of mankind who has loved more, served more, gave more, reached out to more, accepted more and sacrificed more than Jesus Christ did in His very short-lived life on earth. You read His biography, written by four credible authors, and He was the best ever. He went about doing good. He showed endless acts of kindness to the most unkind people. He ministered to every need that was placed before Him. He denied His own comforts all the time. He sacrificed His strength and His sleep to help needy people over and over. He even opened Himself up to the vilest slander by eating with the outcasts, rebels, among the Jews. He stood up for the vulnerable and enslaved women and

children, and lovingly He warned and preached the truth as genuine and as compassionate as none ever did. And what was the end result? He was hated, haunted, forsaken, slandered and finally innocently condemned to death. He was slaughtered as if one of the vilest fellows who ever lived on earth.

Well, Jesus has never hidden the fine print of being His disciple. He warned repeatedly throughout His teaching as He's leading His disciples, about suffering, about bearing a cross, His cross, about sharing in His rejection. So Jesus warned that if you would resemble Him in godliness, you will be disliked, you'll be sidelined, slandered, set aside. You may face solitary confinement. You may even be killed or slaughtered. Here are a few verses to illustrate it. Matthew 10:16: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves;" or John 15:20–21: "Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for My name's sake, because" (here it is), "they know not Him" (My Father), "that sent me." They misunderstand, they're ignorant, they're in darkness. In John 16:33, He adds, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." So clearly, Jesus taught and never hid it, the content of a small but sweet saying—salvation is free, but discipleship is costly.

Now on the basis of these Beatitudes and the concluding part of it, Martin Luther taught that every true church and every genuine Christian will be known by the level of persecution they endure. Therefore, this last Beatitude or these two last Beatitudes, are both searching as well as comforting. How is it searching? Well friends, if I never experience any level of persecution by the unregenerate surroundings, we need to ask ourselves, "Am I a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ?" Or am I kind of like a chameleon Christian—I adapt to my surroundings, to blend in with the principles and the manners of life so that I avoid confrontation or rejection or whatever level of persecution we may receive. On the other hand, it's also extremely comforting, especially for those who experience any level of persecution, as Jesus here points out in these Beatitudes. Now it is this second aspect, the comfort, that was Jesus' main intention in these closing Beatitudes. So let's again hear the Savior, He declares you blessed if you are persecuted for His name's sake or reviled falsely. So let's consider, what does Jesus mean with persecution? Secondly, why would you call such people blessed and to rejoice? So what does Jesus mean with persecution?

Now with persecution, the Lord means any level of opposition or rejection or oppression, subjection or harassment, or maltreatment, or discrimination, or finally, even torture or death. That's what all is included in the word *persecution*. There are indeed many Christians today who suffer in prisons, who are enslaved, who are separated from their loved ones involuntarily, or banished out of their country. Many others, [in] much milder form of persecution, may suffer in denial of a promotion in a business, or lose the position altogether, or miss out on a beautiful business opportunity because of their faithfulness to Jesus' holy, perfect will. Again, others may endure slander or a sneer or a comment or just really despising smile or an outright reviling by neighbors as a form of persecution, or yes, some of them are even abandoned and ostracized by their family. I mean, look at what they did to Jesus—they called Him all kinds of names. They called Him a drunk, a winebibber, they called Him a friend of sinners. They called Him a rabble rouser. You look at the Apostle Paul. He was accused of being a troublemaker, and [enemies] repeatedly attempted to kill him. The blind man healed by Jesus in John 9, when he was confessing Christ, what happened to him? Cast out by his religious community, forbidden ever to come in the temple again. So Jesus touches with His word, *persecution*, any physical, emotional, social, economic, and spiritual suffering.

Yet notice that the Lord conditions the persecution with two important qualifiers we must never omit. He says, "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake" and "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of things against you

falsely, for My sake.” Those two core clarifications, we need to keep in mind. Let it be clear that not all suffering Christians are included in this Beatitude. Anyone who as a Christian suffers for his own wrongdoing is in vain claiming the comfort of Jesus’ words. Peter touches upon that truth in 1 Peter 4:15. He says, “Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters.” So obviously, any Christian who is imprisoned because he’s a murderer or a thief or an adulterer or an abuser cannot claim the comfort from this Beatitude. Even if you are going around in this world as a judgmental Christian, as an arrogant Christian, as a disdainful-of-other-people Christian, an unkind Christian, oppressive or overzealous or over righteous or, in short, if you go around as a Christian *unlike* Jesus Christ, you will suffer. Such behaviors will invite pushback, sidelining, rejection, persecution; but forget not, these do not fall under Jesus’ Beatitude.

So keeping these Beatitudes in the *context* of Matthew 5 means then that those people who live the Beatitude life, who live as this Beatitude person, the more you may live like that, the more you *will* experience some level of the world’s opposition, persecution, rejection, reviling for His name’s sake or for righteousness’ sake. Friends, be prepared. When you live in harmony with God’s holy will, when you practice true godliness, when you act like the salt of the earth and the light of the world, if you live more and more like the Master, the King, then be ready to experience what the Master Himself experienced. Think of godly Daniel, what he experienced. Though every statesman around him recognized his wisdom, his incredible integrity, his faithfulness and commitment to his king, his honesty in all his business dealings and government guidance, yet he ended up plotted against to be killed by his colleagues. Why? Not because he acted evil. They *hated* the Beatitude character in his life.

So Matthew, Mark, [and] Luke all record Jesus’ call to discipleship. Let me read it to you. “He said to them all, If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Now to come after Jesus Christ, to be His follower, that means to be His disciple, that means to be His imitator, His learner. To be a disciple is to live like Him in love, in holiness, in meekness, in reaching out to the needy. That includes, friends, that we deny ourselves, and that means we take up sometimes the painful cross of being associated with our Lord, as we follow Him in the battles of His Kingdom, doing His will. For some, that means to distance themselves from the loved ones who refuse to honor Jesus’ Kingship over all aspects of life, and so many indeed face that very sore reality. For others of Jesus’ disciples, that may mean they have to give up a prestigious position or a very profitable business deal because they’re asked to violate God’s laws of honesty and purity and integrity.

So therefore, count on it—don’t be surprised when you will be persecuted for righteousness’s sake, when you act like a good Samaritan, showing your mercy and pouring yourself into the life of a total stranger who is found along your life’s path. Or when you acted like the father of that son who just totally screwed everything up in his life, and you embraced him and forgave him and reinstated him even though you’re hurt so badly. Some can’t understand that. Or when you feed your enemy who seeks to kill you or destroy your business, and you go out of your way to minister to him or to her. Or when you reach out to the reject and to those who seek your help, who are left by others. Now, especially if you are Christ’s faithful preacher, you are to expect this experience of the force of darkness.

If you notice in verse 11, there’s a slight change of person. Jesus directed verse 11 particularly to His disciples standing around Him, while verse 10 is more general. The last part of verse 11 supports that, this is really directed to the preachers, for He says they “shall say all manner of evil against you falsely...for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” So He’s speaking to the prophets that stand around Him, that will be His teachers. So, brethren in the ministry, those of you who are teaching, let us take instruction and comfort of Jesus’ Beatitude. If you are faithful to your calling and if you preach God’s truth as Christ preached it, without adding,

without twisting it, without minimizing it, without darkening one part or favoring another part above some other aspect of the truth, if you preach whole counsel of God and if you back it up with a ministry life like Jesus lived, then expect what Jesus says. They shall revile you, they shall persecute you, they shall say all manner of evil against you falsely. They will drag you into courts with false accusations. Instead of groaning and moaning about that, what does the Captain ask you to do? He says, “rejoice, and be exceeding glad.”

So that leads us to our second thought: why are such persecuted Christians blessed and called to rejoice or to be glad? Well, our Lord’s teachings in these verses again must have caused a shock wave of astonishment, as they did in many other places, for to the Jews, if you were suffering, that always means, in their thinking, that God is displeased with you—you suffer because you’re a bad boy, bad girl, you’re a sinner. To the worldly leaders, they look at this as an utterly ridiculous statement, it makes no sense. You’re blessed when you’re valued, when you’re praised, when you’re promoted, when you’re flattered, when you’re honored, not when you are persecuted. So let me then share five reasons why persecuted Christ-like people are blessed and have reasons to rejoice.

First, this type of persecution—for righteousness’ sake, for His name’s sake—indicates genuine character of faith. Satan, friends, is not bothered with the half-hearted. The compromising Christians to him [are] no threat, he leaves them alone, lets them go.

Secondly, because persecutions like this improve or promote the growth of godly character. In 1 Peter 1:6–7, Peter compares persecutions and trials to the fire that cleans up the gold—they are like the fire that purifies the gold. Therefore James adds, for example, James 1:2–3, he says, “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.” Of course, it works other things, but that’s just the benefit of it.

Thirdly, these persecutions and trials are also blessed because they keep your heart focused on the hereafter. We all face a great spiritual struggle as we are rooted into this ground of this earth and the life we live here, even though it’s not to stay. To be unrooted is one way by which God accomplishes that, through persecution. We are to remain pilgrims on a journey to another world. We are to remain looking out for Jesus Christ, and with Paul, share the longings of his life as he wrote, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Why gain? Because it will be all of Christ that he couldn’t have here. So persecution is God’s aid to make us more ready to depart to be with Christ.

Now fourthly, why are you blessed? Because persecution happens to be one of the best ways to evangelize God’s truth to others. History has proven over and over that the blood and the sufferings of the martyrs always is the seed of the church. How many prison guards, how many fellow prisoners, as well as observers, have come to Christ through the sufferings of believers, and seeing them suffer with such a fortitude and joy? “What is it?” they ask.

Lastly, they are blessed because, “Great is their reward which is in Heaven,” Jesus says in verse 12. Jesus reaffirmed, “theirs is the kingdom of Heaven,” as He already has said in the first Beatitude, He repeats here again in verse 10. The glories of eternal life with God are the reward of Heaven. The communion with Him and the fellowship with all saints on a new earth, where there is only righteousness, is the reward He speaks about. In Matthew 19:28–29, Jesus encourages all His people who suffer for His Kingdom’s sake. “Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory” that is, when He returns, He shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, “and every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for My name’s sake,” (and some of them indeed, I know who have done that) “shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.”

Therefore, rejoice and be exceeding glad, my friends. Therefore, followers of the Master, or fellow sufferers for the King, you who are persecuted for righteousness’s sake, instead of self-pity,

instead of retaliation or resentment, no, rejoice and be exceedingly glad, be filled with an unrestrained gladness, that means. How's that possible? How can you do that? That's only possible when we keep solid faith in Jesus' promises. Remember the promise, "In the world, ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Therefore the Apostle Paul, who had gone through incredible sufferings for Jesus, could triumph despite the sufferings he endured. Romans 8:17–18, he says, "And if children" (the Beatitude men) "then heirs; heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together." Then he concludes, "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Then he continues in verse 28, I am sure a statement of his own faith, he says, "And we *know* that all things" (even the hard things, the painful things) "work together for good to them that love God, and to them who are called according to His purpose." Finally, he triumphs in verses 37–39, and what a reason to rejoice, "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present," (persecution) "nor things to come," (more persecution maybe) "nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature," (or any other event) "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Well, that brings us to our conclusion, friends. We've studied a curious group of people, God's Kingdom people, and how opposite most of them are to those our society esteems or reveres and honors. Christ-like people don't receive many rewards in this life or recognition or Nobel prizes or gold medals. No. However, they receive something far more exceedingly beautiful. What? They are declared *blessed* by the King, by Jesus. Once we see the glory of all what the promises Jesus gives to His Beatitude people in this portion and in the rest of the Scripture, we will join Paul's doxology in Ephesians 1:3, and there we use the word *blessed* in a different way—"Blessed" (which means worthy of all praise) "be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." So may God bless these messages on the Beatitudes to His glory and to your comfort. Thank you, and God bless.