

Title: What did you expect?
Text: Matthew 5.10-12
Theme: Expecting persecution
Series: Matthew #20
Prop Stmtnt: Persecution is the expectation for believers now and the means for great joy later.

Read Text:

A couple of years ago, the automotive industry was really hurting. Chrysler desperately needed to change their image. The Super Bowl ad featuring Eminem, that introduced the phrase, "Imported from Detroit" looked as if it was just what the doctor ordered. While the rest of the nation thought it was pretty good, we loved it. But, here was the problem. Behind the scenes, someone in the marketing company had come up with that phrase. But Chrysler was building so many cars elsewhere, that it was very difficult for them to actually find a car that was built in Detroit. The minivan is made in Windsor. The 300 is built in Canada, Austria and China. The Charger is built in Canada as well. In fact, the closest that Chrysler could find, was the 200 model being built in Sterling Heights. Imported from Sterling Heights, or Imported from Auburn Hills doesn't quite have the same grit and grab that imported from Detroit. So, despite not having a car that is actually made in Detroit, from a company that is no longer headquartered in Detroit, Chrysler pulled off a great marketing coup. My point being, they were able to project an image in such a powerful and convincing way that people began to think differently about the company. The irony is, there is now a line of clothing called "imported from Detroit" that, from what I have read, is not even made in Detroit. But, to some, that does not matter because there is this rule in media: Perception is reality. But, you know what? Perception is not reality. Perception is only your impression about reality. No advertisement can actually make a car better or worse. But, a good marketing campaign can certainly raise the expectations and the assumptions for many people. And expectations and assumptions are powerful forces within us.

Consider, for example Julie and Joe. Julie and Joe are getting married. At their wedding the guests are treated to a slide show that portrays Julie throughout her life. Every picture shows her happy, cute, smiling and enjoying a number of childhood experiences to young adulthood from vacations to Christmas'. Joe's pictures show the same. Then come the pictures of them together, engaged and now the wedding. And at the wedding, everything is staged, set and orchestrated; the colors, the dresses, the tuxes, the ceremony, the program and then the reception. There, you listen to the best man and maid of honor (by the way, why is the maid of honor always so much better prepared than the best man?) give their speeches where Julie sounds like Mother Theresa and Joe sounds like Billy Graham. Julie and Joe appear like saints. Everyone is happy. Everyone is smiling. The couple is blessed and will undoubtedly live happily ever after. After all, that is the image. Hopefully, Julie and Joe do not believe everything that is said about them. But, it is tempting. It is tempting to assume that perception is reality. But happy pictures do not make people actually happy; any more than the carefully staged pictures of the food in a menu is going to look anything like the food that is actually served. So often, there is an

enormous gap between perception and reality, or between our expectations and reality. If Julie and Joe assume that life with another sinner is going to be easy, then they will be unprepared to deal with the astounding amount of self-centeredness that both of them bring to the marriage. What Julie and Joe need is people who will tell them over and over and over, that their greatest struggle is going to be their own sin, and not how romantic and easy life is. If Julie's greatest concern is Joe making her dreams come true, she is in for a rude awakening. If Joe's greatest concern is Julie being a goddess who is perpetually appreciative, perky and full of adoring respect for the sheer fact that he exists and is willing to share a house with her, he is in for a major reality check. However, if Julie and Joe's greatest concern is their own self-centeredness, then Julie and Joe are in a great position to have a wonderful marriage. Now, you can tell Julie and Joe that over and over until you are blue in the face, but Julie and Joe have to set aside their assumptions about themselves and their image about marriage and be willing to listen to you.

Today, we have come to the end of the introduction to the first recorded full-length sermon that Jesus preached. It is the greatest sermon ever preached. This is the sermon where Jesus is introducing what life in his kingdom is all about. But notice what is going on. He does not paint an attractive picture of ease, comfort and power. Jesus would not make a good used car salesman or advertising executive. Christ gives us the reality check up front. The people who are in my kingdom are those who are humble. They recognize the truth about themselves. They are broken people who know that they cannot please God. They mourn over their sin. They do not laugh about it, make excuses for it, or cover it up. These people make others a little uncomfortable because most people do not think that sin is a big deal – at all. People who mourn over their sin must have a psychological condition. It just isn't right. The result is, these people are meek. They do not throw their weight around or intimidate others with their words or accomplishments. They hunger and thirst for righteousness and therefore are merciful. They are easy to take advantage of. They are easy to mock and ridicule. They don't laugh at the jokes that everyone else tells. They insist in telling the truth. There is a purity that marks their lives that makes everyone else feel guilty. When conflict arises, they do not take sides, but instead attempt to help others resolve it. They are the board members who insist that everything be done right, according to the book. They are the accountants who will not fudge the numbers. They are the workers who will not punch the time clock for another person or make excuses. In fact, they so sufficiently irritate others by their honesty and consistency that they are constantly ridiculed and in many cases are deeply resented.

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He is putting all of the cards on the table. Here is what you can expect if you become part of my kingdom. Humility, mourning, meekness, desperateness for God, mercy-showing, holiness, conflict resolving and being persecuted. You will be laughed at, taken advantage of, rejected, reviled, stepped on, and scorned. Who wants to sign up? There is no "come now while the choir sings" or "operators are standing by to take your order" or "if you sign up in the next 30 minutes I will give you a free copy of my best-seller 'Feeding 5,000 for the price of a lunch.'" It is as if Christ is trying to talk people out of this. "Do not follow me unless you are serious!" This is not a game, gimmick, fad, hobby or trend. This is life.

When we read this, we think that he could not possibly mean this – could he? No one would go for this. Is he serious? Did Jesus really mean this? Was he just trying to shock people? As we go through the rest of the sermon, and the rest of the book of Matthew, we will see that he was serious. Many people want to water down what Jesus said. When Jesus talks about anger, lust, retaliation, and how to treat your enemies, he speaks very clearly. There is no mistaking his point. But notice this. Even though Jesus was very clear, right at the beginning of his ministry about the nature of his kingdom and what it would mean to be his follower, most of the people, including the twelve disciples did not believe him. They filtered his words through their view of what the Messiah was supposed to do for them. He said humility, and they heard pride. He said weakness and they heard power. He said purity and they heard prestige. He said forgiveness and serving and they heard authority and reputation. Eventually he said dying and sacrifice and they heard fame and glory. We can see why people say that perception is reality. For the disciples, the perception of what Jesus was here to do twisted his words or redacted the ones that did not fit their preconceived narrative.

It happens all of the time, even now. People love to hear that Jesus exists to give you the best life right now. This is the hermeneutic of personalities like Joel Osteen and Joyce Meier. They use the words of Jesus, but they twist them and re-form them into message that often is not what Jesus said. If you preach a gospel of health and wealth, it will attract people because that is what we want to hear. It is what we assume the message to be: God exists to make much of me. Jesus is here as my ticket to a successful life. This is what the disciples assumed. This is what the people believed. This is what they demanded. And when he did not make much of them, but instead, started to walk down a road of suffering, the disciples all ran, and the crowd turned on him and demanded his suffering, even his death.

I cannot promise that if you follow Jesus that you will get a better job, better car, better golf score, better grades, more money and better health. I cannot promise you that your wife will love you more, that your kids will respect you, that your basement won't leak and that you will succeed in your career. I can only tell you what Jesus said. He said...

1. **Expect Persecution.** – (10-12)

Now, hold the phone for a minute. Consider the audience that Jesus is speaking to. They are under the authority of the Roman Empire. Their pretend King (Herod) is a jerk (and to call Herod a jerk is insulting to jerks). They already know a little bit about persecution. They want relief from it. They want a ruler, a king, a leader who will defeat their enemy and here Jesus is saying that if you follow him, you can expect persecution. Not only is this stunning to his audience but this beatitude brings with it a double blessing (10, 11). The very thing that we want to avoid is the very thing that Christ says will bring you blessing upon blessing. This ought to be a very clear sign that Jesus is the king of a very different type of kingdom. Church, we must take notice. If you want a comfortable religion, that is, if you want a religion that will coddle you, pamper you, ask very little of you, condone your sin, cover-up your hypocrisy, pretend that everyone is going to heaven, tell you what you want to hear, then you do not want genuine Christianity. There

are plenty of knock-off brands of Christianity that water it down, make it palatable, soft-sell the message, round-off the edges and give you a little weekend talk, feel-good chat and positive vibe. It is not Christianity, but it uses some of the same words. So for the low-information church-attender, for those who do not want to think or study on their own, they assume that this is what following Jesus is about. He's a nice guy who gives us all a good feeling and a good example to aspire to. And when we do, we feel better about ourselves and make others feel good to. Isn't that what life is about? So, when they read (if they read it), "blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" they do not know what to do with that. Like the audience that Jesus was speaking to, including his disciples there is no category in their brain that has persecution and blessing in the same file. Jesus is saying to expect persecution. And for most of us, I dare say, we thought we signed up to follow Jesus so that things would go well for us in life, not so that we would experience persecution. What is this? Which, I am thinking that if the disciples were really listening to what Jesus said, they were asking the same thing. You see, according to Jesus...

a. Persecution is not if, it is when.

v.11 "Blessed are you WHEN others revile you..."

Now, we need to be clear that Jesus is not saying that persecution itself is a blessing, but is speaking of being persecuted for righteousness sake. If you are acting like a self-centered jerk who drives everyone crazy because you are demanding, insulting, demeaning, arrogant, manipulative and tacky, you can't rightfully use this verse to gain some comfort. Jesus is saying that if you are going to follow him, then you need to look carefully at his life and look at how people reacted to him. Expect the same. If they resented and executed the leader, then what should the followers expect?

Have you ever been persecuted for righteousness sake? Have you ever spoken up or stood up for the truth and it cost you something? It will. Some of you work for companies who, in the name of diversity and tolerance are demanding that you support sinful lifestyles and beliefs. What will you do, when someone in your department asks you to put a rainbow flag on your desk to show that you support gay pride, knowing that if you do not, your next review, your next raise, your next promotion will be jeopardized? When you become a follower of Christ, you need to know that you will be singled out. You will be targeted for persecution. In fact, Jesus is so clear about this that in verse 11 he not only repeats it, he emphasizes it and personalizes it.

b. Persecution is personal.

Look at how the grammar changes from verse 10-11. Jesus transitions from the 3rd person to the 2nd person. It is not just those, but it is you. Which, in view of the context, I take this to mean that Jesus is speaking directly to his disciples now. Others are going to revile YOU and persecute YOU and utter all kinds of evil against YOU falsely. They are going to make up things about you and attempt to destroy your reputation. Why? "On my account." It is personal, but it is not ultimately against you, it is against me, Jesus is

saying. This is exactly what happened in Acts 7 when Stephen is being executed for publicly declaring that Jesus is the Messiah. Stephen said that he saw Jesus “standing at the right hand of God.” When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were so enraged that they rushed him and took him outside of the city and stoned him to death. Saul, who became Paul, was part of his execution. And not only his, but from that day forward, he spearheaded a search and destroy mission on Christians. When on his way to Damascus to find and kill the Christians there, Jesus hijacked his life. In confronting him, Jesus said, “Why are you persecuting me?” Saul said, “Who are you, Lord?” And Jesus said, “I AM Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” When we are persecuted, Jesus takes it personal because it is personal. It is ultimately against him, and we get to share in it!

This statement by Christ is a wonderful gift to us, because it helps us understand what our goals are in following Christ. If you are looking at these words and saying to yourself, “this is not what I signed up for” then it may be a good indication that you really do not understand the gospel and do not understand what it means to follow Christ. If that is the case, then this is good because at least you know where you stand. One of my major concerns is standing before God and giving an account of how I preached his Word. I do not want to give to any of you a false assurance because I was not honest with the text. If you reading these words and they are sobering to you and you find yourself taking a deep breath and saying, “God, if this is what you call me to endure, then I will seek to persevere by faith in your promises.” When you respond like that, it is not only evidence that you understand what following Christ is about but you are putting Christ on display.

c. Persecution puts Christ on display.

When you are called to suffer for his name, that is, you are being persecuted because you are reflecting what Jesus said or did, you get an opportunity to represent Jesus. When you are faithful under fire, you give such encouragement to others.

During W.W.II the federal government rationed many things like tires, copper, even certain foods for the general population so that they could go to support the war effort. Of course, rationing created a demand that was supplied illegally through the black market. My grandfather owned a creamery business in those days. He was only permitted to produce so much cream for consumers, which obviously limited his income. During this time he was approached by some guys who made him a very lucrative proposal. He could sell his cream on the black market, and make a lot of money and he certainly could have used the money. But, there was something about my grandfather that was worth more than money and that was his testimony for Christ. I am telling you this story because it means so much to me to know that someone in my family stood tall like that. I get to tell my children and hopefully grandchildren one day that this is the heritage that is being given to you. I look at the owners of Hobby Lobby who are standing up to the ungodly and murderous demands of Obamacare by saying, “We will not offer health insurance that pays for abortions because abortions are murder. We will close our business and forfeit millions of dollars, but we will not forfeit our testimony for Christ.” When they do that, we get to see Christ in them and more importantly even, the world gets to see that. They get to see that there are people who believe that there is something more important

than money and success. That is the point of the kingdom! But, persecution is not the only thing that you can expect as a follower of Christ.

2. **Anticipate Reward.** (10-12)

This promise has a now and later aspect to it. There is a blessing now to those who are being persecuted and a reward later in the life to come. Jesus modeled this in his own life and ministry. He endured a lifetime of resentment, rejection, ridicule, misunderstanding and scorn. He was betrayed by his own people, abandoned by his own disciples and rejected by his own family. But he knew what his mission was. He knew that he was here on this earth to live a perfectly righteous life, no matter the cost. He knew that his righteous life would be the occasion for hatred by others and would lead to his crucifixion. Just as his life was lived in our place, so too he died on the cross in our place, so that the payment that we deserved to pay for our sins was paid in full for us. This is what enables us to be forgiven and made members of his kingdom. We must accept this by faith in Christ alone, but when we do, we are restored to fellowship with him. Christ considered that the restoration of fellowship with him would be so honoring to God and so enjoyable for Him and us, that he was willing to endure the temporary cost of the cross because eternal joy that was before. Do you see that Jesus sets the mark and we keep the pace? We run because he ran for us. We endure because he endured for us. We face the rejection because he faced it for us.

a. **The persecuted are blessed.** (now)

That is, those who are persecuted for the sake of Christ, have these promises. And with these promises they get the assurance that their lives are known by God, cared for by God, and used by God. He has not left them and will not leave them. The history of the church is marked by those who, in their persecution, lean so heavily upon God that their lives are at rest and at peace. In fact I can tell you story after story of people like Bonhoeffer who while in prison ministered to the guards in such a way that it became obvious to all, that while Bonhoeffer was in prison, he was actually free, and the guards were the ones who were in bondage.

When you are called to go through persecution, God will be with you. You do not need to fear it even though at this point you cannot imagine enduring it. But, when you do, God will meet you with grace in that day. Beloved, I believe that God is gracious to give some of us a taste of that from time to time in order to prepare us for a more intense time of persecution that seems to be coming. We need not fear it, but prepare ourselves and the next generations for it. It will be worth it because...

b. **They get the kingdom.** (later)

Do you see in this text that the guarantee of the reward drives the response of faith? Here Jesus says something that appears to be preposterous. Rejoice and be glad when you are reviled, persecuted and lied about. By the way, this is not an emotion as much as it is an attitude. Resolve to rejoice because your reward is infinitely greater than the persecution

that you are enduring. Your reward is the kingdom. You get the kingdom, because you get the King! You get to reign with Christ. You get to be with Christ. You get to enjoy the love, delight, security, presence, mercy, laughter, pleasure and glory of Christ forever and ever. 60 seconds into eternity with God will already be worth a lifetime of perseverance in the midst of persecution.

When you are determining if something is worth the pain, you look at the reward that is promised. If the reward is colossal and the pain is minimal, then you will endure it gladly. That is what Jesus is saying. The reward of the kingdom is so colossal and so amazing that it far outweighs any pain that we could ever endure. Besides, when you are reviled, persecuted and lied about, you are in good company. You are in a noble fraternity of which the prophets are a part. This is not only encouraging, but it is a good and needed reminder that you are not the first to suffer for the sake of Christ. When you are persecuted, look underneath you. You are standing on the shoulders of giants. They endured. Now, look up. There is a generation of believers who are standing on you. Stand tall. Stand true.