

The Heavenly Citizens Charter 8

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew 5:1-12 TM

Back in the days before DVD's and video, when I was young, thin and reckless, I worked with a team of young people who put on road shows about Christianity in church halls. We sang, told stories, did drama sketches and showed a different film-strip each night of the week. The cassette recorder played the soundtrack and I followed the script with a torch, frantically trying to wind on the next frame at the right moment.

We owned five film-strips, and 'The Stranger' was our favourite. It was a spoof western about a town where nobody had a name and everyone was graded by a number - the Bank Manager was an A12, the Sheriff was something like a B21, his wife was a B35, his deputy was a no-good E96, and most ordinary folks were somewhere in between, or something like that: it was a long time ago!

One day a stranger walked into town, and - shock horror - he wasn't wearing a badge! What's more, He knew the Sheriff's name (Fred Harper, if I remember rightly) and was soon incredibly popular with the low grade riff raff who hung around the saloon. The Stranger did a lot of talking about a different way of grading and, after a while, some of the people began removing their badges and behaving in a real unhealthy fashion - loving each other, and other such nonsense. Something had to be done to stop the rot from spreading! The sheriff gave the Stranger a Y17 grading (that meant he was big trouble and should be avoided) but the Stranger just smiled at him, took off his badge, and walked away; the sheriff had no choice but to lock him in jail. Even that didn't wipe the smile off His face or stop Him telling His stories. So, they had a hanging. But doggone it, the problem only got worse and even the low grade deputy took off

his badge and started telling some tom-fool of a story about the stranger still being alive and giving him a name and a whole new meaning to life. By the end of the film-strip the jail was overflowing with low grade, badge less critters singing 'n' dancing 'n' and looking as though they were the happiest people in town. The Stranger was both a brilliant film-strip and the best fictional example I've come across of the eighth and final attitude which all true Christians are meant to possess.

The first seven attitudes have all been surprising, and have underlined the fact that authentic Christianity is disturbingly different from the common-sense of western society. But the eighth attitude is the biggest surprise of all: Mt5:10.

Today we feel sorry for people who are persecuted. We try to support them; we campaign for their release; we sometimes admire them; we pray for them; but we don't envy them or think their fortunate or blessed. Jesus does - if they're persecuted for righteousness sake, if their commitment to God provokes persecution.

The first seven attitudes were positive descriptions of Jesus' followers: Poor in Spirit, Mourners, Meek, Hungry for righteousness, Merciful, Pure in Heart, Peacemakers. The eighth is more the inevitable result of the first seven than a separate attitude of its own, but - like them - it describes a true Christian: it's an account of a genuine follower of Jesus.

Society won't buy Christianity on the basis of the attitudes. Mourning, Mercy, Purity, and so on, aren't attractive ideas to contemporary minds. Persecution is ever less so! Jesus' suggestion, that whoever is filled with His attitudes is bound to be persecuted, appears destined to put most people off Christianity for life! Paul underlines it by saying: "in fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12)". Paul knew

that Jesus never sweet talks people into following Him; He simply tells them the truth and leaves them to choose.

His promise to the persecuted is the same as His promise to the poor in Spirit: the kingdom of Heaven. By starting and finishing with the same promise He shows that membership of His heavenly Kingdom is His most important gift of all. Jesus' followers were often excited by miracles and the crowd's adulation especially when they were involved. However, Jesus told them not to rejoice about such things, but to rejoice that their names were on the list of those heading for heaven. It is the same in the other attitudes.

Those who are promised the earth, who are comforted and filled by God, who see God and are called His children, are reminded that none of these unimaginably wonderful things are as important as citizenship of His heavenly Kingdom: that's both the beginning and the end of true Christianity, both the entry point and the jackpot prize.

Many people who are today hailed as Christian heroes were not killed or imprisoned because of righteousness, but because of their race or their imperialism or their politics or their downright stupidity. So Jesus doesn't promise anything just to the persecuted. He doesn't congratulate those who are persecuted because they're awkward or political or objectionable. He doesn't commend the fanatical or those who get into trouble because they are foolish in the way they witness to their faith. He doesn't offer a reward to those who suffer for doing something wrong or for supporting a particular cause.

He doesn't even say that men and women are fortunate if they make enormous sacrifices because they want to obtain a heavenly reward for themselves - they're just as selfish as their greedy pagan neighbours. Jesus merely says that people who are persecuted in the cause of righteousness will receive His kingdom.

The fourth attitude showed that to hunger for righteousness is to be desperate to be like Jesus; so by implication to be persecuted because of righteousness is to suffer for being like Him. To be filled with the first seven attitudes is to be filled with the character of Jesus - and He was persecuted because of what He was like: He was despised, rejected, falsely accused, tortured and killed because He was quite different from the people around Him.

Persecution is the inevitable consequence of being like Jesus: that's why he told His followers to take up their crosses daily, to know that society would hate them, to be ready for suffering and disappointment and death - and to count themselves blessed because of the Kingdom that awaited them.

Many Christians think Christianity is intrinsically attractive. They believe that their friends will soon be converted if they experienced real dynamic worship, saw an authentic miracle, heard an outstanding message or met a Christ-like person. They're sure that people would flock to the faith if more believers went to 'Signs and Wonders' conferences, attended evangelism courses, and structured their congregations on a NT pattern. They miss the truth of the eight attitudes.

Authentic Christianity has always been deeply repugnant to ordinary people. The real followers of Jesus will always be persecuted, because there's something about Jesus, which is deeply disturbing. He's different. And humanity won't accept people who are different. Much of the worse in our human behaviour is a reaction against men and women who are not the same as ourselves: racism, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, class warfare, sexism, ageism, even the way we flinch when we see someone who is mentally handicapped.

Jesus is different. His teaching is outrageously unusual. Week by week as we've looked at these attitudes we've seen that His attitudes make virtues out of ideas which society despises, that His

principles are rejected by so many churchgoers (whatever such a description means) and that genuine Christianity is directly opposed to the common sense of western society. And the lesson of history is that when most of our friends see the original article, they won't embrace it, they'll persecute it.

Jesus was an extremist. He was extremely Poor in Spirit, extremely sorrowful, extremely pure, extremely loving, extremely humble, extremely generous, extremely merciful, extremely hungry for righteousness, extremely opposed to hypocrisy, extremely angry with half-hearted religious devotion, extremely annoyed with sin and selfishness and materialism, extremely disappointed by those who trust in their education, their natural abilities, their training, their congregation, their prayers and their religious practices. As a result He - and anyone like Him - is extremely persecuted.

Sadly, the Jesus of the attitudes is a "Stranger" to many in our congregations today and the attitudes themselves are alien to many who say they believe in the Bible. But anyone who lives the first seven attitudes will experience the eight: like Jesus, they'll find that they're not praised by the religious people of their day, they're persecuted by them.

There's nothing the world needs more than more people like Jesus. There's nothing the church needs more than more people like Jesus. And nothing's more certain than that those people will be persecuted by the world and the church.

Whoops - and there is the one thing more certain. Those unpopular, persecuted people will be blessed by God, they'll be happy, blessed and fortunate, they - the ones who make it to the end of the eight attitudes - will receive the reward of His Kingdom. Wow!

Pastor David

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