



*“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”—Matthew 5:10-12*

I have heard the Beatitudes my whole life and to be honest, I have never fully understood them or how in the world they could actually have anything to do with real life. I don’t remember seeing many real life examples as a child. In short, I simply viewed the Beatitudes as nice, religious epithets that were nice to say in church, but not any sort of teaching that anyone would actually live by.

This semester especially has shaken to my core a lot of the incorrect and/or preconceived notions of Jesus and His demands that I’ve held much of my life. Since this past summer (when I left a career in public accounting to attend seminary), I have not been able to shy away from reflecting more deeply on the implications of truly giving my life wholly to the Lord and obeying His commandments—even His hard sayings. This has been a gut-wrenching—but sweet and priceless time in my life. I’ve had the opportunity to reflect on the sort of radical lifestyle and value system that Jesus is calling His disciples, myself included, into.

Matthew 5:10-12 concludes a very counter-cultural message spoken by Jesus on the only real value system and path to joy in this universe that ultimately matter. I have found it deeply troubling, yet deeply inspiring that the last three verses offer about the most un-American means of finding true blessedness in this life one can imagine. Jesus says, in essence, that true reward and joy in this life come when you are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, when men casts insults at you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of Him. Either Jesus is speaking the truth or He’s not. However, let there be no confusion. He leaves no middle ground in understanding His pathway toward joy and reward—not only in this life, but also for eternity.

For years, I dismissed these verses. That changed, however, when I heard

a recording of a message titled “Doing Missions when Dying is Gain,” given by John Piper in 1996. It opened my eyes to missions in a way I had never seen—and I had grown up in a solid Bible-teaching, evangelical, missions-minded church. It was then that I realized Jesus isn’t saying these things to be cute or pithy. He, the Lord of the universe, is serious. He’s saying that following Him wholly—whatever the costs—is the only way toward true blessedness and reward in heaven.

The principle I see in these verses is this: The life of true blessedness and kingdom reward that Jesus holds out to His followers stems from a value system that is radically different than the value system of this world, and comes only when we wholeheartedly follow Him, no matter the costs.

Why is this so personally applicable? Through no choosing of my own, I have grown up in what some would call an upper middle class home, have been afforded the best education possible in my home city, and have been surrounded by many “who had it all.” And yet Jesus’ value system runs diametrically opposed to the values of blessedness I witnessed firsthand in the lives of friends and their families growing up. By His grace, God gave me a Bible-believing, praying Christian family in the midst of this world. I have seen countless peers who, though financially well established, come from some of the most broken and miserable families where divorce, alcoholism, and adultery run rampant. These, too, were the people who supposedly had everything this world had to offer. Yet, they weren’t happy. In fact, the opposite was true. I started asking myself some hard questions early on. If, I would often ask myself, this life of material abundance was what life is all about, then why are there brokenness and torn families? In light of this, Jesus’ value system in Matthew 5:10-12 holds itself out as all the more radical and otherworldly.

When I graduated from my all boys’ high school, one was considered an academic underachiever if he went to the flagship state university rather than one of the country’s more esteemed universities. It was an environment that pushed a value system of elite secondary and post-secondary education, and economic and personal success, in which career was a god.

Looking back, I see that more clearly. And while I am incredibly thankful for having been blessed with those educational opportunities, I am even more thankful that God has called me out of chasing the false promises of “blessedness” that much of that value system supposedly holds out for those who follow it. I am very humbled and grateful that God has given me this new life at my seminary to learn and follow more deeply into His value system of the kingdom of heaven. There, He promises, will be many costs in following Him the way He prescribes. As we see in this text, there may very well be much persecution. Yet Jesus is saying blessed are you if you ‘so wholly follow me’ that you are persecuted and suffer in this way.

Oh, for the grace and courage and extraordinary devotion to follow Him wholeheartedly as He is calling us to! Let us pray that He gives us such transforming grace and love, such courage, and such commitment that we don’t just read these three verses in church as nice, pretty epithets, but rather experience them firsthand in our lives.