

**Russell Kelfer**

# **The Reason for Persecution**

**554-B**

**Series: The Beatitudes**

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

# The Reason for Persecution

We are returning to our study of the eighth and final Beatitude.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

It is almost as if Jesus turned and pointed directly to His disciples as He punctuated the principle with this explanation.

“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.

Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”  
(Matthew 5:11,12 NKJV)

We are examining this passage in a four-fold way. We looked first of all at the reality of persecution in the last lesson. In this lesson, we come to the reason for persecution. Just who is it and what is it that drives the world to attack the Christian? In the next lesson, we will be dealing with the results of persecution. There are eleven things that happen in the Christian’s life when he undergoes persecution. The last lesson will cover God’s response to persecution and what is His prescription for persecutors.

In the last lesson, we examined the reality of persecution. We recognized that persecution has been and is a reality in every generation. It is part and parcel of the promises of God. These are some of the verses that were shared in the last lesson:

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.  
(II Timothy 3:12 NKJV)

For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,  
(Philippians 1:29 NKJV)

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you:

but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be

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glad with exceeding joy.

If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

(1 Peter 4:12,13 NKJV)

Let's take these four sets of passages and put them back-to-back in order to paraphrase them. We can then see a clear message of God to us concerning persecution. It may go like this:

If you let God live His life through you, persecution will be a natural by-product because God gave you, as a Christian, not only the right to receive His life, but the privilege of suffering for the life you have received. It is, in essence, a part of your job description as a Christian. You have not been left without an example to follow. Christ suffered to show us what the Christian life entails. So dear Christian, do not seem shocked or confused when persecution comes as though something abnormal is happening. This is the normal Christian life. Instead, get excited. God is allowing you to experience the very agony Christ experienced so that you can enjoy the very ecstasy of His glory when He comes again. Consider this a cause for joy. It means the very glory of the Spirit of God is resting upon you.

So, persecution is a planned part of the Christian experience. In the last lesson, we discussed a definition of persecution. It is the harassment, abuse or attempted destruction of the rights or happiness of one person or group by another. Its literal meaning is to be put to flight through undue pressure. It means to resist, reject or attempt to put to flight or destroy one whose existence or presence possesses a threat to another's peace of mind. Remember that there are two kinds of persecution:

Persecution 1- Corporate persecution is where the body of Christ undergoes suffering or persecution for the name of Jesus Christ. The source is the world and the object of it is the church. The cause of it is the church's stand relative to righteousness. We discussed that throughout history, the true church of Jesus Christ has suffered and suffered and suffered at the hands of an angry world. In the United States, we have lived in a cocoon of false assurance in an era in which more have died for the name of Christ than in all of the eras that have preceded it. But God has called the church to be prepared for persecution. I wonder if He considers us prepared?

Persecution 2- Personal persecution is when the source is

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the world, and it often uses other Christians. The object is the individual Christian himself. The cause is the righteousness of God manifested through a surrendered life. This is the kind of persecution that we can best identify with. This is when individual Christians suffer at the hands of an angry world that is offended by the life of Christ.

In the last lesson, we looked at the passage again and made 5 basic conclusions for the purpose of our study.

1- Persecution produces joy. Oh what bliss.

2- Persecution comes from one thing. “Oh what bliss for the man or the woman who is persecuted for righteousness sake, for My sake,” Jesus said.

3- Persecution may be verbal as well as physical. “Blessed are you when men shall revile you.” The word “revile” means all forms of verbal abuse, to jeer, to taunt, to ridicule.

4- Persecution demands a supernatural response. “Rejoice and be exceeding glad.” Jump for joy as Luke says.

5- This response is justified for two reasons. First, “great is your reward in heaven”. Secondly, you are in great company when you do.

Foundationally, we have seen the reality of persecution. In this lesson I want to look at the reason for persecution. Why is it that some people and some groups seem subject to genuine persecution when others do not? What is it that so offends the conscience of the world that it curls up like a serpent and strikes at everything that moves and bears the name of Christ? What was it that drove Saul of Tarsus to hunt down and destroy the followers of the Way?

Simply speaking, what is the reason for persecution? Though the issue is relatively complex, I believe it can be simplified with the purpose of making personal application. Let’s begin by asking Paul, the most transformed persecutor in history, what it is that lights the fire of persecution under the world.

I want to look at Galatians 6:12 and 5:11 from the Living Bible, and put them together. I want us to see that Paul has a very specific reason why Christians are persecuted.

Those teachers of yours who are trying to convince you to be circumcised are doing it for just one reason: so that they

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can be popular and avoid the persecution that they would get if they admitted that the cross of Christ alone can save.

(Galatians 6:12 TLB)

Paul explains that the popular way is to bypass the cross. When you bypass the cross, you bypass persecution. He goes on to say,

Some people even say that I myself am preaching that circumcision and Jewish laws are necessary to the plan of salvation. Well, if I preached that, I would be persecuted no more-for that message doesn't offend anyone. The fact that I am still being persecuted proves that I am still preaching salvation through faith in the cross of Christ alone.

(Galatians 5:11 TLB)

Paul's answer to the question is very simple. Christian ethics do not offend. Christian works do not offend. Christian institutions do not offend. Christian charity does not offend. Only one thing offends and this one thing is the cross. Paul said, "If I can inject anything, anything at all that man can do to add to what God has done, my persecution will cease. If I am still being persecuted, it proves that I am preaching the cross. Let me cling to the cross. This is my message."

Have you ever wondered why Mormons and other similar religions do not want their women to wear crosses as jewelry? Have you ever wondered why so many cults and groups, contrary to the Word of God and the will of God, will allow you to take any of the principles of God except the blood of Jesus Christ alone for your salvation? To confront man with the cross is to incur the wrath of Satan and thus to incur the wrath of man. Paul explains this in I Corinthians 1.

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom

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did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom;

but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness,

but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

(I Corinthians 1:17-24 NKJV)

There is God's message. The message is one of the cross. It has two manifestations, the message of His death and the message of His life.

The message of His death is a very simple formula. Organized religion and the world cannot accept it. Eternal life equals God plus nothing. Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:3-7 together explain it better than you or I ever could.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,

not of works, lest anyone should boast.

(Ephesians 2:8 ,9 NKJV)

But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared,

not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,

whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

(Titus 3:4-7 NKJV)

This is the difference between all of the cults, all religions and Christianity. Religion is man's futile attempt to find God and to earn favor with God. The cross is God's successful attempt to come to man because man had not, could not, and would not come to Him. The cross says that all can come without respect to persons and that offends. The cross says that you must come on God's terms not yours. That offends. The cross says God's terms are unconditional surrender, admission of sin and the acceptance of grace. That offends. The cross destroys man's concept of self-sufficiency and replaces it with God dependency. That offends. When the world is offended, it persecutes.

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THE CROSS

To the Jew, it was a stumbling block.  
To the Greek it was a joke.  
Surely God has a nobler plan  
Than to picture man so weak,

To portray a world as dying,  
Cancerous victims of sin,  
To portray a loving, caring God  
Knocking to get in.

But that my friend is God's way.  
God Himself paid all the cost  
And offered it all to sinful man  
By dying Himself on a cross.

To the world, indeed, it was foolish.  
So foreign to the mind of man  
To think he cannot save himself,  
That only Jesus can.

Men hate the cross, they loathe it.  
They struggle not to see  
Only as man leaves the cross  
Can ever man be free.

They struggle to avoid the cross.  
Ten thousand paths they trod  
But all ten thousand paths still stop  
Before they get to God.

Oh Christians we must realize  
This one important thing,  
Until a man has seen the cross,  
He'll never meet the King.

Just what does the cross represent to the world? It represents a mirror that reflects all of man's futility. What does the cross represent to the world? It represents an entrance fee to heaven that no one but God can afford to pay. What does the cross represent to the world? It represents a map, a maze of endless dead-ends followed by one direct route to the heart of God. It represents the value God places on one human soul, the price of His own Son. It represents a comparative value scale between



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the best man can be apart from God and the least God needs to redeem man. Man's best comes short of the glory of God. It represents the greatest expression of love a holy God could ever show rebellious man and that is Calvary. It reminds man that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. Without the blood of Jesus Christ, there is no eternal life. The cross offends the mind of man.

Just as the cross offends where the death of Christ is concerned, so the cross offends where the life of Christ is concerned. For the Christian, life follows death daily. If any man shall come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross (having died every day) and follow Me. As Colossians 2:6 says,

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so  
walk in Him, (Colossians 2:6 NKJV)

How did you receive Him? By faith at the cross. How do you walk in it? By faith at the cross.

So the message of the cross in the life of the Christian offends as well. Just as eternal life equals God plus nothing, the death of Christ offends because He needs no help from us, so then abundant life equals God plus nothing. The life of Christ offends because it supernaturally depends on Him. Paul said it best in Galatians 2:20,

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I...  
(Galatians 2:20a NKJV)

I think these are three of the most important words in Scripture, "it is no longer I."

...it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the  
life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of  
God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.  
(Galatians 2:20 NKJV)

The cross lived out in your life is the life on Two Mile Island. It is not a religious imitation of Christian principles cushioned by the world's philosophies or explained away by the world's self-righteous standards. The cross speaks through the crucified life. It defies human understanding, and the world is stunned and angry.

Christ's life is so demonstrably different that it defies human explanation. Either it is supernatural or it is not real at all. Supernatural behavior requires either a decision or an

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explanation. The world does not have an explanation, and the world does not want to make a decision. So it fights us with all it has.

Have you ever listened closely to the message of the cross? Let's gather around now and go again to Calvary. We see as we approach that hill a mob taunting, jeering and making fun. On that hill, we see three crosses. As we get closer, in spite of the mob and the noise, we can hear the cross speaking to us. What the cross says is what offends the world in which we live.

Listen, the first thing the cross says that offends the natural mind is that it offers unqualified forgiveness. As you come close to the cross, you hear from the lips of Jesus, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Jesus was not speaking to well-meaning scholars who through some trick of fate misinterpreted the will of God. He was speaking of conniving, self-serving hypocrites who had turned the worship of God into a legalistic sham to justify their own existence and then bribed a weak link in Jesus' team to betray Him. They deliberately falsified charges against Him, deceived the masses into an emotional frenzy, caused Him to be beaten until His flesh was a mass of wounds, spit on Him, ridiculed Him with a crown of thorns and a mock title, taunted Him to save Himself if He was really God; and as they gambled for His garments at His feet, they jeered. It was for them that Jesus entreated the Father, "Please, Father, forgive them. They don't understand what they are doing."

The world cannot handle this much love without a decision. Either this supernatural flow of forgiveness came from God Himself or it did not. If so, He was God's Son. If He was God's Son, He alone has eternal life. If He alone has eternal life, we must fall down beneath that cross and cry, "My sins nailed Him there." That is the forgiveness of the cross. It offends the natural mind.

A wife may be slandered by her husband and treated with contempt. He may be unfaithful and unrepentant. Still, she waits to forgive. That is the message of the cross. Let her cry out, "I will remain God's woman and I will forgive seventy times seven times seven." All the while she prays and prays and prays for his salvation and for his welfare. If she goes to her unbelieving friends and asks for counsel, the world and all of their counsel will call her a fool and will laugh and mock her. They will tell her

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to come to her senses and demand her rights. The cross says to forgive. Man without the cross cannot forgive. So either he must come to God and find His forgiveness or persecute the one who by forgiving has led them to the cross.

Do you see this principle? Maybe a friend has deeply wronged you. Maybe a fellow employee has stolen what was rightfully yours. In spite of this you forgive them, and you will bring them and those who watch you to the cross. They must make a decision. Does this quality of life really exist? If so, why do they not have the power to live it? They are offended for they have heard the cross, and the cross says, "I forgive."

Listen again as the cross speaks. This time it speaks of unselfish compassion. From the lips of Jesus we hear, "Woman, behold thy son. Disciple, behold thy mother." Never has a man had so little occasion to seek the welfare of others, and yet He had such a perfect heart to do so. His life was ebbing away. His reputation was demolished. His own flock had scattered. He had to appear weak in order to give us His strength. But of whom or what was He concerned? His possessions? He had none. He never cared to accumulate them. His reputation? He laid that aside with His robes of glory. His program? It was God's program. His organization? It had disintegrated. His heart was beating for His mother. His heart was always beating for another. At the moment in history when His own needs were the greatest, He was busy meeting someone else's needs.

The world can understand charity from those who have it to give. They can understand tolerance from those who have been tolerated. But let them see the one who has nothing give away everything. Let them see the dying care for the living. Let them, in Jesus' name, see a compassion so unselfish that it not only lays aside its own welfare, but it is totally unaware that it has any welfare to lay aside. Let them see that quality of life, and they see the cross. Either it is God doing it or they have no answer. If it is God doing it, they have no choice there at the cross. The cross offends.

Come again to the cross for a third time. Again, it speaks. This time it speaks of uncompromising submission. Listen as Jesus says, "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." John 10 adds a great deal to this. It says,

"Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life

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that I may take it again.

No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.”

(John 10:17,18 NKJV)

So Jesus was no puppet on a string nor was He a pawn in the game of life. His life was not stolen from Him. He was faced with a choice: exercise His own preference and live, or do the will of His Father and die. It was no easy decision. Great sweat drops of blood don't accompany easy decisions. In agony of soul He cried, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me." Then eye heavenward and heart totally yielded, He cried, "Nevertheless, Thy will be done." I don't believe this was some form of condescending acceptance, "Nevertheless, Thy will be done." I think Jesus was saying, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me," but with a note of triumph He cried to the Father, "Nevertheless, You first, Me last."

To desire the will of God without regard to cost is beyond the world's comprehension. In poetic form, here is man's dilemma.

### WHAT DO I WANT IN LIFE?

What do I want in life? You ask,  
Am I seeking fortune or fame?  
Is my goal to one day stand in awe  
As others revere my name?

What is it that I desire of life,  
To in comfort live out my days?  
To never, ever suffer or cry?  
To never regret my ways?

What is it that life ought to offer me,  
Flowery beds of ease?  
A chance to live as I want,  
To do just as I please?

That question is best not answered  
By some poetic phrase,  
'Tis better verse than amplified  
By how I live my days.

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What do I desire of life?  
That question haunts me still.  
Does not but one desire count  
That I might do His will?

But wait, you say, to do God's will  
May not be what I choose.  
To live His life may mean to die  
And I've so much to lose.

To live His life may suffering mean  
Who I dare to ask  
Would ere choose suffering as his lot  
Or sorrow as his task?

What if His will means endless pain  
Or agonizing grief?  
Or if it means unjust rebuke  
Or loads with no relief?

What if His will means sacrifice  
And suffering, untold loss?  
Oh God what if Your will means  
I must face a cost?

Christian, Christian, listen  
There's but one place to start.  
When asked what do I want of life  
Say, "I want to please God's heart."

Say, "Suffering, that's what I want of life  
If suffering brings to me,  
A glimpse of all His glory  
And all He wants will be."

Say, "Loneliness, that's my desire  
If that's what He would choose  
To teach that His companionship  
Means love I cannot lose."

Say, "Pressure, that's what I want from God  
If pressure in my life  
Will cause God's best to surface  
Amidst the fire and strife."

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“Heartache, God, I’ll ask for that  
If it is in Your plan  
To take and break and then  
To make me God’s kind of man.”

“A second mile, the other cheek  
A chance to give and give,  
Lord, if that’s Your choice  
To teach me how You lived.”

The world will never understand  
They’ll laugh, they’ll jeer, they’ll scorn  
They’ll cry out fool until by faith  
They too have been reborn

Just what do I desire of life?  
I want just like God’s Son  
To stand in life’s Gethsemane  
And shout, “Thy will be done!”

Think about it. The Son of God thought about it and chose to die, for He only came to do His Father’s will. If you submit to the will of God like that, the world will either think you are stark raving mad or else they will see the cross.

As the poem asked you, what is the will of God for you? What is it you really want from life? If you knew that the will of God for you was suffering, and God would ask you the question, “what do you want from life?” Would you honestly say, “Lord, I want to suffer.”? If the will of God for you, was that you would accomplish the most in your life through pain, and God would say, “What is it son or daughter that you want from Me?” Would you be willing to say, “Pain.”? If the will of God for you was loneliness to teach you His companionship, would you be willing when asked by Him, “What do you want of life, my child?” Would you be willing to say in response, “Loneliness.”? What if it were God’s will for you to be poor in this world’s goods that He might make you rich in heavenly treasures, would you be able to answer when He asked you, “What would you like in life My child?” would you be willing to answer, “Little of this world’s possessions.”

The cross says joyful obedience even unto death. The world is shocked into disbelief or challenged to believe. But the world has to choose, because it has seen the cross.

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But lo, the cross speaks yet one more time. We hear again from the voice of Jesus, this time of impartial acceptance when Jesus said, "Today, thou shalt be with Me in paradise." It is not so hard to believe if it was said to John or Peter or James, or even Mary Magdalene or Lazarus. But to whom is Jesus speaking? He is speaking to a condemned criminal who, puzzled by the strange power of a man seemingly innocent, saw that in the midst of His suffering Jesus would care for His mother and forgive His accusers. Suddenly the thief saw through tear stained eyes the cross. Two men hung there beside Jesus. One saw a fool who, if He were God, would surely save Himself. That fool who saw a fool will spend eternity in hell. The other thief saw God dying for man because He wanted to. This thief is even today in the presence of God.

My friend, this is the cause of persecution. The cross. It says all of God and none of me. It is God's righteousness replacing every thread of self-righteousness. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. From that cross, He made available to us and through us unqualified forgiveness. Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Unselfish compassion is seen as He says, "Woman, behold thy son. Disciple, behold thy mother." Uncompromising submission is seen as He says, "Into Thy hands I commit My spirit." Impartial acceptance is seen as He says, "Today, thou shalt be with Me in paradise." The world at the cross is stunned.

In the next lesson, we will look at the results of persecution. We will look at 11 things that will happen as the result of persecution. In closing this lesson, please consider that the degree to which you and I are persecuted by a godless world is the degree to which we unashamedly present the message of the cross. It is the degree to which we do not shuffle our feet and compromise when life's conversations imply that God is impressed with the works of man. It is the degree to which in love we boldly share that every man, every woman must come to the cross or he or she cannot come to God. Likewise, the degree to which we are persecuted may well be the degree to which we live by faith the unbelievable life of the cross. That death and that life to the Jew is a stumbling block. To the Greek, it is foolishness. But to the Jew and Gentile alike who believe it is the power of God unto salvation. It is eternal life that leads to abundant life. It is the righteousness of God making foolish the righteousness of

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man. Thus, it presents unbelieving man with a choice he cannot avoid. The natural Christian life will lead to persecution. But Jesus said, “Oh what bliss. What joy that finds its root within itself. What self-contained happiness for the man and for the woman who is so blessed of God, so honored of God, that he can be persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

**dtm** DISCIPLESHIP TAPE MINISTRIES, INC.

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230

210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778

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