

This morning we conclude our study of the Beatitudes from the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. I hope our discussions over the past few weeks have helped you better understand how to apply these guidelines to your daily life. During Lent, we have been asking ourselves: “Who is Jesus Christ to me? What is my personal relationship to Him? And what must I do to grow closer to Him?” Let’s look again at the fifth chapter of Matthew, the first twelve verses, for one last time.

Read Matthew 5:1-12

This morning, let’s discuss the last two beatitudes starting with verse 9: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” The *Message* paraphrases this verse as follows: “You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.” This is probably the most well-known of the beatitudes. To begin to understand what Jesus was talking about, we need to understand what is meant by the word “peace” or “shalom” here. In Hebrew “peace” means far more than the absence of trouble or conflict.

In Hebrew, “shalom” is often used as a greeting word or a departing word in much the same way we utter “hello” or “goodbye.” When a Jew said “shalom” they were wishing the other person the full presence, peace, and prosperity of God. In the Bible, peace means not only freedom from all trouble; it also means enjoyment of all good. This is reflected in the benediction in Numbers 6:24-26 where it states: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”

Notice here that Jesus is talking about the peacemakers, and not the peace-lovers. Sometimes in wanting to keep the peace, we let threatening and dangerous situations go unchecked, deciding to take no actions for the sake of maintaining the peace. Putting our heads in the sand hoping that the conflict will end only delays the unavoidable. There is many a person who thinks that he is peace-loving, when in fact he is piling up trouble for the future, because he refuses to face the problem and to take the necessary action to correct the situation.

Peace never just happens by chance. The peace which the Bible calls blessed does not come by evading problems; it comes from facing them head-on, dealing with them, and conquering them. What this beatitude demands is not the passive acceptance of things because we are afraid of possible trouble or conflict, but facing the situation head-on, even when the way to peace is through struggle. Peacemakers need more than a passive attitude; peacemakers take positive steps toward reconciliation. As Isaiah 2:4 states: “They shall beat their swords into

plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Peacemakers are those who long for and strive for healthy relationships instead of anger, hate, bitterness, and despair. A peacemaker is not satisfied with a mere quiet, a forced end to hostilities, or the absence of conflict. They long to see fullness of life and healing, an enjoyment of reconciled relationships. Those who long for this kind of peace and seek to make it happen are blessed because they are called sons of God. Why is this? Because by being peacemakers, they are fully engaged in God’s work. A working definition of a peacemaker is someone who is actively seeking to reconcile people to God and to one another. Their lives are given to reconciling adversaries, quenching hatred, uniting those who are divided, and promoting understanding and love.

Now the opposite of the peacemaker is the troublemaker; people who are mean-spirited, always stirring up trouble, creating conflict. Someone said that: “If we are not peacemakers, but instead are troublemakers, there is every likelihood that we are not true children of God.” In other words, we are not following the example set by Jesus. Remember that Jesus is talking about peacemakers not peace-lovers. Many churches try to be peace-lovers and will not deal with the local troublemaker and wonder why they are not growing and why there is always some conflict in their church.

God is the author of peace; and Jesus is the supreme Peacemaker. Isaiah 9:6 foretells that Jesus will be the Prince of Peace. Jesus came to establish peace; His message explained peace; and His resurrection enables peace. Making peace is never easy and by ourselves it is impossible. That’s why we must always seek God’s guidance first. We must let the Prayer of Saint Francis, our Responsive Reading, be our model for peace.

Some translations of the Bible calls peacemakers “children of God” while other Bible translations call them “sons of God.” Now you may not think this makes much difference, but the terms don’t mean the same thing. A “child of God” is one who is a member of the family; it is a statement of position. While a “son of God” is one who is like the family; it is a statement of character. A son of God is one who not only carries the family name but bears the family resemblance and reputation. Thus, Jesus is saying that as His followers become known as peacemakers, they will be recognized as the sons and daughters of God who share His name and share His mission of love and peace.

So the question for us this morning is - do the people in our life recognize the family resemblance based on our efforts as a peacemaker? You may be a child of God because you have accepted Jesus Christ into your heart, but are you a son and daughter of God because you pursue peace? Are you actively seeking to reconcile people to God and one another; putting

two neighbors back on speaking terms; restoring unity within your family; or making amends with a brother or sister? May each of us follow the example set by the Prince of Peace Himself.

Now let's look at the final beatitude found in verses 10-12: "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." While this is probably the least favorite of the beatitudes, you have to appreciate Jesus' sheer honesty. He was not like a lot of modern preachers who promise prosperity and success if you join their church. Jesus never promised that His way was going to be easy; He didn't come to make life easy but to make it worth living. Hopefully, we all recognize that the best things in life require some effort, and maybe even some suffering. Take for example, raising children; they are a true blessing, but they still have to go through the terrible twos and teenage years. That's why many people think having grandchildren first would have been better.

The early Christians faced persecution in many ways. For example, finding work in Jerusalem was difficult for a Christian stone mason since the city was controlled by leaders of the Jewish faith. And the same would be true in other cities where most of the work involved constructing temples for pagan gods. Your social life would also be impacted because many of the feasts were in temples where the food came from sacrifices to heathen gods. Often families were divided when one spouse chose to follow Christ and the other didn't. And of course, many early Christians were tortured and executed under Roman emperors such as Nero because they refused to worship Caesar instead of Jesus Christ. They were persecuted because of their beliefs; they were different.

Do any of you have a bucket list? A bucket list is a list of things you want to do before you kick the bucket. People have created lists with all kinds of goals such as to own a Ferrari, to visit exotic locations, to parachute from an airplane and more. If I had a list it would be to visit all the major league baseball parks. I read about one man's bucket list which included the unusual goal of "fighting a bear," which was followed by the comment: "that might end my bucket list."

Now in this beatitude Jesus is not telling us to add "to be persecuted" to our bucket list. This is not a command from Jesus to go out and look for persecution; but He's warning us not to get too comfortable. Throughout the gospels, Jesus indicated that if we follow His teachings, we will face opposition because the world will view us differently. In John 16:33, Jesus said: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." We may not look for persecution, but those of us who follow Jesus will experience it at times in varying degrees. In other words, don't go looking for trouble, but be prepared for it.

Unfortunately, many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are facing persecution all over the world today. Over the years, we have seen images on television of Christians being executed by ISIS and other radical groups. I found one report indicating that there was a 60 percent increase last year in Christians being killed worldwide. While our lives may not have been threatened to date, we do face persecution to varying degrees. With each passing day, the rights of Christians are being threatened by non-Christian groups or individuals at an alarming rate. While the government is bending over backwards to satisfy the demands of other religions and groups, Christians rights are being limited. Let me give you a few examples. Prayer is no longer allowed in schools or at government funded activities. Here in New Mexico, a few years back, there are those who wanted the nativity scene removed in Belen, even though Belen means Bethlehem. Then there was a high school in Albuquerque that had to stop collecting teddy bears for Christmas because of the objections of a Jewish Rabbi. You may be aware of more examples.

You may also have personally experienced some inconveniences because of your beliefs. When I was getting ready to retire from the Federal government, people would ask me what I was going to do. When I told them I was going into the ministry, the conversation would end quickly; they ran for the hills. By the way, that's a great way to get rid of that annoying person at a party; tell him you are a preacher. When I was in Socorro, I received complaints about my prayers at the local Rotary Club because I mentioned Jesus Christ. And how many of us heard "happy holidays" from store clerks and others at Christmas because they had been told not to say "Merry Christmas;" the stores don't want to offend anybody.

Those who take the teachings of Jesus Christ seriously and seek to live out their beliefs, especially the social implications, may well find themselves insulted, looked down upon, ostracized or even subjected to personal violence. However, Jesus said that we are to set an example; we are to love our neighbors as ourselves; we are to show agape love, always seeking the best for the other person no matter what. At times this may require taking a controversial position on a social injustice that opposes the status quo of society such as feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, fighting for rights of others who may not be like us, who may be different.

Now with all this discussion of persecution, you might be asking yourself: "is being a Christian really worth it; why not just give in and join the opposition and be like everybody else?" But Jesus tells us in verse 12 to "rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven." How is it possible to rejoice when people are persecuting you on His account? Have you ever watched the runners in a marathon, especially towards the end of the race? They definitely don't look happy; instead, they are sweating, breathing heavily, and experiencing pain in their legs. Why are they subjecting their bodies to such punishment? Well, it's because of what

awaits them at the finish line. Not only will they receive a medal and applause from the audience, but they will have the satisfaction of knowing that they have done their best.

Why should we choose to live in such a way as to be harassed, insulted and even persecuted for our beliefs? It's not because it looks like fun. It's because of the payoff that comes at the finish line. The runners in a marathon are not smiling at the mid-point, but they are at the finish line. The hope of what's coming keeps them going. Also Jesus tells us that we do not run alone; we follow the path of the prophets and other saints who have endured before us. In addition, Jesus Himself faced persecution and death on a cross on our behalf. We are blessed because our Savior runs with us and will reward us at the end for a life well-lived. Hopefully, we will all hear those wonderful words: "well done, my good and faithful servant."

As we prepare to shout "hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" next Sunday, and then sing "He is Risen" on Easter morning, consider this final question: "Do I live in such a way that I am different than the people around me and am thus subject to persecution because of Jesus Christ?" May the world see us as peacemakers and different. Dare to be different! Amen