

**“Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted for
Righteousness Sake, Part Two: The Biblical Notion of ‘Reward’”
Part Ten in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5:11-12**

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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Today’s scripture lesson is an expansion on the Eighth Beatitude, not a Ninth Beatitude. We know this for three reasons: first, the subject matter of verses 11-2 is the same as verse 10; second, the beautiful poetic parallelism of verses 3-10 is broken in verses 11-12; and third, there is a shift to the second person, making it more personal. This raises an obvious question: Why was the Eighth Beatitude expanded?

The community for which the Gospel of Matthew was originally written—sometime in the 80s—had recently suffered an unsettling experience. The church, most likely located in Antioch of Syria, was comprised largely of Jewish Christians with a rapidly growing number of Gentile Christians. For a generation, this community of believers had worshiped in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and in homes and outdoor spaces on Sunday morning, commemorating the day the Messiah had been raised from the dead. They were proud of their Jewish heritage and deeply committed to Jesus of Nazareth, whom they believed was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.

Now to be honest, we should note that a degree of tension had always existed between the community of Matthew and the larger Jewish community over whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. But during the late 60s and early 70s that tension increased to the breaking point. Added to the longstanding theological disagreement over whether or not Jesus was the Messiah, two additional factors greatly intensified the strain between the two groups.

First, pagan Gentiles were increasingly being drawn to the message of Jesus the Messiah, and shockingly—at least to other members of the synagogue—Matthew’s community warmly accepted these Gentiles into their Sunday fellowship, not requiring circumcision or the adoption of any other distinctly Jewish practices. Faith in God through Jesus the Messiah was deemed sufficient for Christian fellowship. To non-Christian Jews, the willingness of the Matthean community’s to include Gentiles was offensive.

Second, in the year 66, Jews throughout Galilee, Samaria, and Judea launched a bloody war against the oppressive occupying army of the Roman Empire. Non-Christian Jews were deeply angered that Christian Jews refused to join their fellow Jews in their war to throw off the yoke of Rome.

These escalating tensions finally reached the breaking point: Christian Jews throughout the Roman Empire were expelled from the Jewish synagogues. In essence, Christian Jews, like Matthew’s community, were being told they were no longer considered to be Jews. Imagine

how distressing this was to the Matthean community! They valued their Jewish heritage and enjoyed worshiping in the synagogue with its familiar and comforting traditions. And in addition to being expelled from the synagogue, they were also alienated from beloved family members and life-long friends who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Granted, this was not the type of persecution Luther's predecessors had experienced, which we examined last week; no one in Matthew's community was burned at the stake or killed in some other horrible way. Note carefully the wording in verse 11: "Blessed are you when people revile you, and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely¹ on my account." This is verbal persecution. But as I'm sure you know, the old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is a blatant falsehood. Being told they were no longer Jews, and being expelled from the synagogue, was very, very painful.

Without in any way seeking to discount the pain of their situation, in verse 12 the Gospel exhorts them to, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Sadly, it is generally true that a prophet's own generation persecutes him or her because of the message, whereas later generations build statues to memorialize them and their message. Certainly, that was the case with prophets like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and Jesus. The role of a prophet is to bring God's word to his or her generation; that is, a prophet interprets the lives of his or her contemporaries and the world around them from God's perspective. That can be a painful ministry, both for the people *and* the prophet! Nevertheless, that is the mission of God's prophets.

When we experience persecution because of our testimony—whether it be through our words or our deeds—we are to rejoice that we are being counted among the members of this august band of believers, God's prophets.

Rejoicing even when one is suffering on behalf of Christ and his cause of justice is a noble and laudable thing. So why—I have been asked on several occasions—why did Matthew go and "spoil it all by introducing the idea of 'rewards'?"² Shouldn't we believe in virtue *for virtue's sake*? Shouldn't we do good simply because it *is* good? Doesn't the mention of "rewards" smack of a *quid pro quo* morality? Doesn't it sound like a *bribe* for doing good? If we only serve Christ because we'll receive a reward, doesn't that make the Christian life a *mercenary* affair? Doesn't it turn Christianity into a vending machine religion?

Well, it all depends upon how you understand the word "reward." As C. S. Lewis said, there are rewards, and there are rewards.

There is the reward which has no natural connexion with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany these things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it. . . . marriage is the proper reward of love. The proper

rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.³

Lewis' understanding of reward is in line with the basic meaning of the Greek word used in Matthew: *misthos* literally means "the fruit naturally resulting from toils and endeavors." Those who seek a fuller expression of the Beatitudes in their lives know that Matthew's mention of reward "is no mere bribe but simply the fit consummation of their earthly communion with God."⁴

In support of Lewis' understanding of the biblical notion of "reward," let me point to three additional biblical teachings related to the subject. First, the Bible repudiates the notion of "merit," that is, the idea that a person can have a claim on God's grace and blessings because of their good deeds. No! Salvation—and all the things that wondrous word implies—is always and only a gift of God grace. God's love and grace are unearned.

Second, Jesus promised "reward" to those who live as his disciples without any thought of reward. For example, in the Parable of the Last Judgment—or as it is sometimes called, the Parable of the Great Surprises—found in Matthew 25, "the blessed" are rewarded because they served and helped the needy with no thought of recompense.

And third, the reward promised is what has been promised throughout the Beatitudes: the Kingdom of Heaven, which we should understand as the experience of God's redemptive activity in our lives—both here and in the hereafter.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."

And that's today's good news. Amen

¹ "Falsely" is not found in many ancient manuscripts. It was probably added by a later scribe.

² A. M. Hunter, *Design for Life: An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Its Making, Its Exegesis, and Its Meaning* (SCM Press, 1953) 41.

³ C. S. Lewis, "Weight of Glory," in *Transposition and Other Addresses* (Geoffrey Bles, 1949).

⁴ Hunter 43.