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Matthew 5:1-12:

When Losing Is Winning!

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When Losing is Winning!

Matthew 5:1-12

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

In the most recent *World Watch List* research, more than 388 million Christians worldwide face high levels of persecution or discrimination. This is a record high and roughly one in seven believers on earth. In 2025 alone, an estimated 4,849 Christians were killed for their faith, with Nigeria accounting for about 72 % of those deaths, more than any other country. The crisis in Nigeria is especially stark: in January 2026, armed gunmen attacked multiple churches in Kaduna State and abducted roughly 160–177 worshippers during services, leaving many still missing and drawing global attention to the dangers faced by Christian communities there.

These are not simply statistics for a report or headlines for a news cycle. These were men, women, and children, who gathered to worship Christ and were targeted for trusting in Him as Savior.

As we gather here in peace, it would be a mistake to think that what happens to Christians elsewhere belongs to a different story than the one Scripture tells about the Church. The same unbelieving world that resists Christ there is the world we live in here. The same Gospel that draws violence in one place draws discomfort, rejection, and opposition in another. Scripture does not promise that such things will always remain far from us. God forbid it ever come to that. And yet Jesus does not speak these words to scare His people, but to prepare them. In this way, if faithfulness ever costs more than we are comfortable with or have come to expect, we are not shocked into silence or driven into despair but held together by His promises.

I. Identifying Persecution

With that reality before us, we turn to the words of Jesus Himself. Today, we are going to listen especially to Matthew 5:11–12. Not because the rest of the Beatitudes are unimportant, but because here Jesus speaks most directly and personally about persecution. He speaks about being reviled, spoken against, and rejected on account of Him. Jesus looks His disciples in the eye and says, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” And it is there, right in the face of suffering, that He anchors His people not in fear but in promise: “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”

What Jesus does first is clarify what He means by persecution and just as importantly, what He does not mean. As Christian people, we have a tendency to frame these words as if Jesus is addressing every hardship, every inconvenience, or every unpleasant experience we endure in life. On the opposite extreme, He is not blessing us for being careless with our words, unloving toward our neighbors, or combative in our confession.

Peter will later remind the Church that suffering for doing wrong is no badge of honor. 1 Peter 2 states,

“For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.”

You see, Jesus is far more specific. The persecution He speaks of is suffering that comes on His account. It is the cost that comes from belonging to Him.

That important detail is so crucial to identifying persecution in an unbelieving world that so often leans toward both exaggeration and denial. It guards us from calling every disagreement persecution. Being challenged or corrected is not the same as suffering for Christ. But on the other hand, His definition also prevents us from considering persecution to be only imprisonment or death. Jesus counts more than violence. He counts words spoken against His people. He counts lies, rejection, and pressure to conform. He even counts the quiet cost of staying faithful when it would be easier not to. And when allegiance to Him is the reason, Jesus says, “Blessed are you.”

The attachment of Christ to persecution and even martyrdom becomes especially important in moments of tragedy where the word “martyr” is often used too quickly and too loosely. The Church does not call someone blessed simply because they were hated, silenced, or even killed. Suffering alone does not make a martyr. Death alone does not earn that name.

A martyr is not defined by how loudly they spoke, how influential they were, or how strongly others opposed them. A martyr is defined by Christ where suffering and loss are borne for His name, in confession of His Gospel, and in faith that clings to Him even unto death. Anything less than that may be tragic, unjust, or horrifying, but it is not what Jesus is speaking of here.

And that distinction is not meant to diminish suffering; it is meant to protect the Gospel. Because when martyrdom is detached from Christ, it becomes a tool for outrage, a badge for causes, or a weapon in our arguments. But when martyrdom is anchored to

Christ alone, it remains what it has always been in the Church: a witness. And this is to the faithfulness of the Savior who was confessed and not the individual. Jesus does not say, “Blessed are you when the world agrees you were right,” but “Blessed are you when it happens on my account.”

II. Forgiveness for the Persecutor

Jesus does not stop with blessing the persecuted, but He also exposes something deeply uncomfortable for us: there is forgiveness even for the persecutor. As Jesus said of His own persecutors, “And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” (Luke 23)

That truth does not sit easily with us because when we hear about persecution, our instinct is to draw a clean line. In our minds we categorize that there are the faithful over here and the violent over there. Victims and villains. Innocent and guilty. And we are very quick to know exactly where we place ourselves. But Scripture will not let us stand at a safe distance. Before we ask whether we would remain faithful under persecution, we must ask a harder question: In what ways have we stood closer to the persecutor than we care to admit?

We may never carry a weapon or storm a church, but the same sinful heart lives in us. It’s the heart that wants silence instead of confession and that might avoid speaking Christ’s name because it might cost us something. It’s the same kind of heart that withdraws love or speaks dismissively about other faithful Christians when faith becomes inconvenient or embarrassing. Persecution does not begin with violence. It begins with contempt. And contempt is never as far from us as we would like to believe. Jesus speaks forgiveness even here not because persecution is small, but because His mercy is greater.

That truth is not meant to excuse evil. It is meant to humble us. Because if forgiveness can reach that far, then it reaches us too. It reaches us in our fear and in our willingness to let others bear the cost of faithfulness while we remain comfortable. The Law strips away our imagined innocence and only then does the Gospel become as important as it truly is.

III. Your Reward is Great

So here we stand, with nothing left to prove. Here we stand ready to hear Jesus loud and clear, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.” That reward Jesus speaks of is Himself. It is His righteousness credited to you, His forgiveness spoken over you, His kingdom already declared yours. The blessing does not wait on your faithfulness but it rests on His. The Son of God nailed to the cross, in the deepest act of persecution the

world has ever carried out, is where your reward is secured. Not by your suffering, but by His. Not by your courage, but by His obedience unto death. The kingdom of Heaven is yours because Christ claimed it for you with His blood.

As Luther once wrote,

“If I examine myself I find enough unholiness to shock me. But when I look at Christ in me I find that I am altogether holy.”

The world will speak against you. It will misunderstand you, mock you, or push back against your confession. But Christ has already spoken. “It is finished.” You are forgiven. You are justified. You belong to Christ. And nothing, neither persecution nor fear nor even death, can take that away.

Amen

Pastor Lucas Abbott