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“BECAUSE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS-JUSTICE”

Matthew 5:10-12

■ Matthew 5:10: **“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

? Persecution might endanger North American Christ Followers in our lifetime. If so, is our **“righteousness”** distinctive enough for us to be targeted?

■ {Php 3:18; Mt 5:11} Would **“enemies of the cross”** find sufficient cause to **“insult [us], persecute [us] and falsely say all kinds of evil against [us] because of”** Jesus?

■ {Mt 5:12} Would they have motive to persecute us **“in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before”** us?

“Blessed are those who are persecuted.”

The key phrase in verse 10 is **“because of righteousness.”** The Greek *ἕνεκεν* [heneken] (**“because of,” “on account of,” “by reason of”**) is a small word that introduces a crucial distinction. Not all persecution is **“blessed”**, only that which is in reaction against **“righteousness”** or Christ himself.

☑ Churchgoers who picket funerals with posters that scream **“GOD HATES ___”** are commonly despised and cussed out. They interpret it as religious persecution. Yet those who jeer at them are not rejecting biblical faith; they are reacting against obscene bigotry.

☑ Many believers who seek public office or promote particular policies do so as an act of discipleship. They are often misjudged and mistreated. This can be a rejection of righteousness. Still, faith is not all that is involved; economic and social interests also shape our politics. The opposition might well be reacting against those factors.

☑ During middle school and high school I had a few friends, but a lot of kids treated me like a non-entity. A few used me as a verbal (or physical) punching bag. I told myself I was blessed, because it was persecution for acting like a Christian. In retrospect, it probably wasn't.

Sometimes Christians are maligned, mistreated -- or worse -- for reasons that have little to do with faith. That is not what Messiah is talking about when he says **“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of δικαιοσύνης [dikaiosynē].”**

In almost every English language Bible this *δικαιοσύνη* is rendered **“righteousness.”**

📖 It is a somewhat misleading choice. Every lexicon worth its salt indicates that *δικαιοσύνη* incorporates the concepts of *righteousness* and *justice*. Both ideas are strongly present in the word. (This helps explain why the same translators go with **“justice”** in some other verses.)

It is convenient to simplify this by narrowing *δικαιοσύνη* down to one term, but it isn't better. We need both of them.

Not only so, we need them *as nouns*. Turning either into an adjective (for example, “righteous justice” or “just righteousness”) diminishes them. The ideal solution is to read δικαιοσυνη as a hyphenated word: “justice-righteousness” or “righteousness-justice.”

★ Δικαιοσυνη is “**righteousness.**”

📖 {Ro 3:24; 8:29; 1 P 1:2} It encompasses our status as those who “**are justified...by**” God’s mercy and kindness, our identity as God’s children who are being “**conformed to the image of his Son,**” and our lifestyle as Christ followers who are “**obedient to**” Messiah.

Righteousness is not perfection. It’s a pattern of obedience to God in thought, word and deed that flows out of our redemptive interaction with him.

Righteousness is relational in substance and expression. It begins in relationship with God and takes form in relationship with others.

{Mt 22:37-40} It would be impossible to overstate how central relationship is in this. When “**An expert in the law tested [Jesus] with [the] question, ‘Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’**” he replied, “**‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**”

★ Equally, δικαιοσυνη is “**justice.**”

📖 Justice is the appropriate treatment of others in keeping with God’s standards. It is equity in personal

relationships and social systems. It is compassionate fair play in government, the courtroom, the workplace, the market place, and out in the community.

It is tempting to reduce justice to an inflexible equation of precisely calculated rewards and punishments. We want our enemies to get what they deserve!

{Ps 103:10} That is not right! Biblical justice is tempered by mercy, for God “**does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.**”

Malachi 6:8 summarizes the call to justice tempered by mercy: “**He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**”

Justice and mercy go hand in hand. In Matthew 23:23 Jesus warns contemporary religious leaders, “**Woe to you You have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.**”

■ “**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of justice-righteousness.**”

Is my “**righteousness**” distinctive enough for me to be targeted? How about you?

The goal is not to provoke persecution in order to secure God’s blessing. That is unhealthy. It’s sick!

The goal is to be the kind of disciples who *will* be targeted if antichristian persecution becomes real here.

This means embodying righteousness and justice from the inside out. It means being righteous in what we think, say and do, in private and in public, by loving God and others. It means seeking merciful political, criminal, economic, and social justice, not only for me and mine, but for the poor and vulnerable.

The question is: how? How can we do this?

? How can we consistently obey God in all things and fulfill his Law of love? How can we **“act justly... love mercy... and... walk humbly with [our] God”**?

Please, hear my confession. I have never bowed to an idol. I have never murdered anyone. I have never committed adultery. It’s easy for me to conform outwardly to basic moral standards.

I *have* succumbed to **“greed, which is idolatry”** (Colossians 3:5). I have indulged in hateful anger, which is on par with murder (Matthew 5:22). I have “[looked] **at a woman lustfully,**” thereby “[committing] **adultery with her in [my] heart**” (Matthew 5:28). Inward righteousness is not so easy!

I am not personally guilty of horrific injustice. But as a middle class White American male I benefit from historic and ongoing injustice in our economic, political, and educational systems. My efforts to secure justice for others have been spotty.

{Ro 3:23; Is 64:6} I **“have sinned”** and **“fallen short of [God’s] glory.”** Next to him I am **“unclean, and all [my] righteous acts are like filthy rags.”**

I cannot make myself righteous enough. I know this, for I have tried and I have failed.

Still, the kingdom of heaven is mine! Though I am not able to make myself truly righteous, Christ in me is!

📖 Matthew 5:10 starts with the phrase, **“Blessed are.”** **“Blessed”** is a synonym for **“favored by God.”**

God sends his blessing in many shapes and sizes. His greatest favor is not physical health, material wealth, or worldly success; it is the power to see Messiah as he is, share in his life, and participate in his mission.

■ In verse 11 Jesus says, **“Blessed are you when people insult you”** and so on, **“because of me.”** On the surface, this points to our verbal confession of faith. Going deeper it is a sign of his Spirit dwelling within us.

That takes us right back to verse 10. In Christ **“the kingdom of heaven”** is ours and we might be **“persecuted because of δικαιοσύνη,”** for Jesus personifies perfect righteousness-justice.

{Eph 4:22-24} The Scriptures remind us that we **“were taught... to be made new in the attitude of [our] minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true [justice-righteousness] and holiness.”**

{Jn 15:18-20} Adherence to biblical Law is risky when it compels us to disobey civil authorities. Yet the presence of God the Son can be a more dangerous provocation. He warns his followers,

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world,

it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world.... That is why the world hates you... ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.... They will treat you this way because of my name.”

I have no desire to be hated. At the same time, I hunger and thirst to be so like Jesus that his persecutors would persecute me, too!

{Ro 8:29; Gal 2:20} By God’s undeserved mercy and kindness I am being **“conformed to the image of his Son.”** My old, sinful self has **“been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”!**

? That is the real me, the eternal me, the me who is being Created by God -- and he is all about δικαιοσυνη. Is that you?

- ▣ **“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 is the word of the Lord.