

Bless those who persecute you

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church 28th April 2019

*“Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse”
(Romans 12.14)*

Introduction

We return this morning after our Easter break to our studies in Romans. We are in chapter 12, where the apostle is speaking about how we are to live out the practical implications of the Christian life.

Today we are going to be thinking together about verse 14, where the apostle instructs his readers to have a loving attitude towards those who persecute them. He says to them, “Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse”.

This verse deals with something that every Christian must expect at some point in his life: persecution. It teaches us that the way in which we respond to persecution is to be distinctively Christian. We are told to bless those who persecute us. We are to pray for good to come to them, rather than harm. This is in sharp contrast to the way that many other groups would respond. Many would seek to fight back and to get revenge on their persecutors. Many would call down curses on those who attack them. The world says, “Stand up for yourself. Do not take anything lying down. Stand up for yourself. Fight back. Give as good as you get.” This verse tells us that we should love those who persecute us, and pray for them.

As we think about this verse, I want to do so under three headings:

1. We must expect persecution
2. We should bless those who persecute us
3. Truths which will help believers to bless those who persecute them.

1. We should expect persecution

The apostle says, “Bless those who persecute you.” He does not say, “In the unlikely event of you suffering persecution, you should bless those who persecute you.” No. The words carry with the expectation that as believers we will be persecuted. Each one of us will in different ways experience persecution.

Jesus taught us that experiencing persecution is fundamental to being a Christian. In Matthew chapter 16 verses 24 – 25, Jesus is recorded as having said, shortly after Peter’s confession of him as Christ and the Son of God, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.” In other words, Jesus is saying, if we want to follow him we must be ready to die a cruel death for his sake. If we are not prepared to die for him, we cannot be his disciples.

Paul writes in his second letter to Timothy chapter 3 verse 12, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Jesus himself was persecuted, even though he lived a perfect life, and had only done what was good to people. If Jesus, who was perfect, was persecuted, how much more should we, who are sinful, expect to be persecuted? It is recorded in Matthew’s Gospel chapter 10 verses 24 and 25 that Jesus said, “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!”

The reason why we will be persecuted is that the world is in the grip of Satan, who hates Christ and his Word. Satan uses unbelievers to express his hatred against Jesus. Jesus is now in heaven, and cannot be touched by Satan. This being so, the way that Satan expresses his hatred against Christ is by getting his own followers to attack Jesus’ people. Jesus said, as recorded in John’s Gospel chapter 15 verses 18 – 21

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, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will

persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.

Persecution takes various forms. In some parts of the world, and at some points in the history of the church, it has taken the form of direct persecution by the State. Believers have been beaten up, fined, put in prison, tortured and executed, by state powers which are implacably opposed to Christ. These things happened in New Testament times, as is evidenced by what the writer to the Hebrews says, in chapter 10 of that book, verse 34, which says. "You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions." There are believers living in very difficult conditions in North Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia and other countries where the State is fiercely opposed to Christianity. We do not face that sort of direct persecution by the State in this country at the moment, but there are many signs that this could be changing soon.

In other countries and situations, the persecution is by lawless elements within those societies, who make it their business to kill and to injure believers. The state may officially guarantee freedom of religion and say that it disapproves of the actions of these lawless individuals, but in many places the state has proved largely unable to stop atrocities from taking place. This is true in countries and areas like Northern Nigeria, Egypt and Pakistan.

Here in the West, at the moment, the persecution that we suffer is much more subtle. It may take the form of the loss of a job for making your Christian views known, or of people mocking you and distancing themselves from you.

Jesus warned us that persecution may well come from family members disowning us or being horrible to us. He is recorded in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 10 and verses 34 to 36, as saying,

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

When you experience family members mocking you for being a Christian, or laughing at God, this is a form of persecution. For some it is more than just mocking and jeering. I heard the other day of a man

who lives here in the East End, whose family is Moslem. He expressed doubts about Islam to his family, and a family member pulled a knife on him.

Sometimes – and this is where it can be particularly painful – it can be fellow believers who mistreat us. It should never happen, but sadly it does sometimes happen, that a believer who is not walking with God as he should be can turn and attack other true believers. This may be because the believer who is not walking with God feels challenged by those that are walking with God.

One way or another, then, the Scriptures do tell us that we will suffer persecution if we are true believers, especially if we are open in what we say about Christ and his Word, and if we seek to obey Christ in our lives.

So this is the first point, that there will be persecution. We should expect it.

2. We should bless those who persecute us

The apostle writes, “Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse.”

The word that is translated “bless” here means literally “to speak well” of a person. Greek work “eulogeo” is the word from which we get our English word “eulogy”.

We should speak well to those who persecute us, and speak well about them to others, and speak well on their behalf to God, in other words pray for them. Let us think about these three ways of speaking well.

1) We should speak well to them

As regards speaking to them, we should answer their unkind words to us with kind words back. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 12 and 13, “We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly.” We should speak nicely to those who speak in a horrible way to us, and who treat us wrongly. We should put away insults and rudeness. We must make sure that the persecution that we suffer is entirely without foundation or provocation, because our own speech is without fault. Peter writes in his first letter, chapter 3 verses 9 to 11,

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it.”

We should remember how Jesus spoke to his tormentors, when he was on the Cross. Peter says in his first letter chapter 2 verses 22 and 23, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”

2) We should speak well to others *about* those who persecute us

We must be very careful not to slander or to malign those who do wrong against us. It can be very tempting to exaggerate the wrong that others do, and to make out that they have done worse than they have, and so to damage their reputation. It is not wrong to share honestly with others any threats or cruel things that might have been said to us, but we need to be very careful to report accurately and fairly what has been said or done. God is the God of truth. Truth must mark all our speech about others. Paul writes in his letter to Titus chapter 3 verses 1 and 2, “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no-one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility towards all men.” James says, in chapter 4 of his letter, verse 11, “Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.” Peter writes in his first letter, chapter 2 verse 1, “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.”

3) We should speak well of others *to* God

Above all, we should speak well of others **to God**. In other words, we should pray for good to come to them. This is made clear by the second half of the verse, which says, “Bless and do not curse”. Cursing is praying that disaster or harm will come upon a person. We are not to do that. Instead we are to pray for good to come to them.

So we see that we are called not just to bear persecution with a sort of stoical fatalism. We are not just to refrain from retaliating. We are urged rather to go on the counter-offensive by praying for God's blessing to come those who persecute us. We are to do the most loving thing a person can do: to pray to Almighty God on behalf of those who mistreat us: to ask God that they will be blessed, and particularly that they will be converted and know God.

In saying this, Paul is of course reiterating the teaching of our Lord, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5 verses 43 to 44: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." Jesus also says, as recorded in Luke chapter 6 verse 28, "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

Jesus' teaching is illustrated by an incident which took place, which is recorded in Luke's Gospel chapter 9 verses 52 to 55. Jesus had sent messengers ahead into a Samaritan village to prepare the way before him, but the people did not welcome him. Then James and John, two of Jesus's disciples said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Some manuscripts add that Jesus said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

Jesus practised what he preached. As he was dying, he prayed for those who were nailing in the nails into his hands and feet, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Stephen, the first martyr, did as his master had done. Acts 7 verse 60, records that as Stephen was being stoned, "he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'"

So this is the second point: we are to bless those who persecute us.

3. Truths that will help us to do this

I would like now to turn our thoughts to how we can do this.

From a human point of view this is impossible. How can anyone love someone who hurts him, and pray for blessing to come upon his persecutor? What is impossible with man is possible with God. When a person is born again by the power of the Holy Spirit, and is renewed in

thinking by receiving the Word of God, he is enabled by God to behave in a way which previously would have been totally impossible.

This is another example of the outworking of the principle in verse 2 of this chapter, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.” As our minds are transformed by the Word of God, we will be enabled to do this.

Let us think together of some Scriptural truths that will help us to love our enemies and bless our persecutors.

1) Remember what you once were

Remember that at one time you were yourself dead in your trespasses and sins. You did not love God. You were enslaved by sin. But for God's working in your life you would in all probability be just like those who are persecuting you. Paul says in Titus chapter 3, verse 3, “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.” Naturally speaking, you and I are no different from our persecutors.

2) Remember why you are what you are now

If you are saved, why are you saved? Is it because of any merit of your own, or any virtue? No. It is entirely because of God's kindness to you. Paul continues in that passage in Titus, in verses 4 to 7,

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

How can you look down on the person who persecutes you? How can you hate him? The only reason you are not like him now is because of the undeserved grace of God that has been lavished on you.

3) Remember who is behind what they are doing

The person who is persecuting you is blinded by Satan. He is a pawn in Satan's hand, and is acting as Satan's agent. Your real enemy is not the person who is being horrible to you, but Satan. The person who is being nasty to you does not really know what he is doing. Your real enemy is the devil, and the battle is spiritual. Paul says in Ephesians chapter 6 verse 12, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

4) Remember the sovereignty of God

The person who is persecuting you is under the sovereign rule of God. Your persecutor is unable to lift a finger against you apart from the permission of God. When Satan wanted to attack Job, he could only act with God's permission. Jesus said to Pilate, as recorded in John's Gospel chapter 19 verse 11, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." God will only allow to happen to you what is for your good, and for the good of other believers who belong to Christ. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8.28). Whatever you go through has been allowed by God for your good.

5) Remember that it is a privilege to be persecuted

Suffering persecution is a tremendous privilege, because God will reward those who suffer persecution, with a better knowledge of him in this life, and a great reward in the world to come. Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew chapter 5 verses 10 to 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."

The person who is persecuting you is doing you a favour. You can be genuinely grateful to him or her for adding to your treasure in heaven. You do not need to be resentful in the slightest.

6) Think of what is going to happen to them apart from God's intervention

The suffering that the person who has persecuted you will have to endure in hell is indescribable. It will be hard enough in hell for a person who has lived a "decent" life. For the person who has deliberately tormented believers, those who are the beloved sheep of God, the suffering and torment in hell will be unspeakably terrible. If we only remembered this, it would soften our hearts towards those who persecute us. Do not be angry with the person who is persecuting you. Pity him. Pray for him.

Conclusion

We have learned from this verse today that those of us who are Christians must expect to be persecuted. We have also seen that our response to that persecution must be different from what we would naturally want to do. We are to pray for those who persecute us.

All this is possible only if you are a true Christian. If you are not born again, you will find it virtually impossible to have true love for your enemies. So I ask, as I finish, are you saved? Have you seen yourself for what you are, a terrible, hell-deserving sinner? Have you asked Christ to save you? If you are in any doubt about it, I urge you to come to Christ and to ask him to give you eternal life.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=42819831417679>

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