

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, November 6, 2016**

**BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED**

**Matthew 5:1-12**

The cloth around my neck this morning is called a stole. In the more liturgical churches, it's a mark of clergy office, and worn when a pastor leads his congregation in worship and prayer. I got this one at a conference on the persecuted church earlier this year, and I bought it for the symbolism embroidered on it. This is not an abstract picture; rather, it is the 14th letter in the Arabic alphabet, the letter nūn. In 2014, this letter—the first in the word "Nazarene"—began appearing on the doorposts of Christians in the Iraqi city of Mosul just before ISIS attacked and captured it. Muslims throughout the city had marked the homes of Christians with a nūn to make it easier for ISIS to identify the infidels and deal with them in their own sadistic fashion. I wear this stole today as a visible sign of my solidarity with our persecuted brethren in Iraq, throughout the Middle East, and to the ends of the Earth.

That Christians are persecuted for our faith ought to come as no surprise. After all, we were warned. Paul mentions persecution in most of his letters. He commends the Thessalonians for their "perseverance and faith" amid persecution (2 Thessalonians 1:4). He tells Timothy that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12) And he tells the Galatians that the Judaizers are trying to enforce circumcision among Gentile Christians because they want to "avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ" (Galatians 6:12). Peter talks about the suffering Christians will experience for their faith in both of his. He writes, "if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." (1 Peter 4:16) And he warns that "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour," a clear reference to the temptation to renounce the faith under persecution. (1 Peter 5:8) The book of Acts describes the earlier persecutions of Christians by Jews and Romans alike, from the warning by the Sanhedrin not to preach Christ to the imprisonment of Peter and John for doing so, from the martyrdom of Stephen to the beatings, imprisonment, stoning, and trials of Paul.

These are not just the ravings of paranoid fanatics. Jesus warned repeatedly that the lot of His followers would endure persecution and suffering for their faith. According to Matthew 10, when he sent out the apostles on their first preaching mission, He instructed them, "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another." (Matthew 10:23) Not exactly a promise of a warm welcome, is it? In the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, He said that some would fall away "when trouble or persecution comes because of the word." (Matthew 13:21) In the Olivet discourse in Matthew 24, He warned His disciples that "you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me." (Matthew 24:9) And according to John 15, in His lengthy instruction on the night of the last supper, Jesus told them, "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." We were warned that there would be persecution, and it was not because we're so important, but because the world hates and rejects our Lord. Because the world cannot abide Him, neither can it abide His followers, who are living testimonies to His love, mercy, and grace, and who therefore must be either forced to recant, or be silenced, if not destroyed.

The first place Jesus mentions persecution is early in His ministry. Those who would follow Him are to be under no delusions. He is not calling them to a life of safety and security, nor is He promising them health and prosperity. Instead, in the Sermon on the Mount, in the opening beatitudes, He declares that those who will be persecuted for their faith in Him will be "blessed."

The words "blessing" and "blessed" are among the most misunderstood and misused words in Scripture. The word used in the Beatitudes, *makarioi*, does not refer to happiness, much less to material benefits being showered on a person. It refers to the favor of God granted foremost through His presence and indwelling in our lives. So, another way to put verse 7, for instance, would be, "God will be with those who are merciful, for they will receive mercy." When we look at verse 11, it could be translated this way: "I will be with you, and you will receive my favor in the form of grace and strength, when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."

When Jesus says His people are "blessed" when we are persecuted, He definitely does not mean it's an intrinsically good thing, or a pleasant experience, or something we should feel happy about. When He says in verse 12, "rejoice and be glad," He's not referring to an emotional response, at least not one rooted in self. Joy and gladness, which are practically synonyms, refer to the exultation that one experiences when the purposes of God triumph. Think of it this way. When the Chicago Cubs won the World Series this week, the fans and the players had different reactions, even though in many ways they might have looked the same. The players were happy for their own accomplishment. The fans, on the other hand, were rejoicing in what someone else had done. When fans say, "we won!", they don't literally mean that they, personally, won, but that they were glad for the victory of a team to which they felt some connection. When we're persecuted, we don't rejoice at our emotional or physical pain. Being a Christian doesn't make one a masochist, any more than Christ was on the cross. But we can still be glad knowing that we have been obedient to the Lord's will, that His mission has been carried out, that His gospel has been preached. If we suffer because of those good and faithful actions, it is ultimately because of the world's rejection of Christ, and if the world rejects Him, we want to stand with Him in that rejection, that greater glory to Him and salvation for us might come as a result. For those who are persecuted to be blessed, then, means that when we are marginalized by the culture, or our beliefs mocked, or our livelihoods threatened, or our bodies attacked, He will be with us every step of the way, being marginalized, mocked, threatened, and attacked right alongside us, and will give us the spiritual resources we need to deal with it.

So what are those spiritual resources? That's where I'd like us to focus our attention this morning. We know that persecution is an ever-present reality for the people of God, and that what is happening in the Middle East today is far more the norm than the exception for most of the last two millennia. We also know that those who are persecuted will be blessed by God, but how? By being delivered from their circumstances? Yes, sometimes. Peter was miraculously delivered from prison, according to Acts 12, and Paul was delivered from a riot in Ephesus and from prison, according to Acts 19 and 16. But as the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 makes clear, earthly deliverance is not always going to happen. At times like those—when the Body of Christ and its members are threatened with homelessness, unemployment, hunger, beatings, slavery, and worse—God acts through His people to send forth the resources they need to stand strong.

One way He does that is through our prayers. We held a prayer vigil last night for the persecuted church specifically because there is no more powerful weapon that we can bring to bear on their behalf. Acts 12 tells the story of what the church did for Peter: "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him." (Acts 12:1-5) Given

that he was going to be put on trial, I suppose they could have gotten the man a good lawyer. Or they could have organized a prison break. But no, they set to praying for him, and the result was that he was delivered from Herod's hands. Even if he hadn't been, however, the value of their prayer for enabling Peter to stand up to the ordeal is incalculable. A modern testimony of this comes from a Russian woman, a poet named Irina Ratushinskaya. Though she was a signer of a letter in support of Andrei Sakharov, the exiled physicist and human rights advocate, she was not a political activist so much as a committed Christian who did not hesitate to write about the Lord she loved. In 1982, she was convicted of anti-Soviet agitation and spent several years in prison, during which time she wrote over 250 poems, using soap as a medium (she was denied the use of paper) until she was able to memorize them, at which point she would wash her words away lest the guards find them. In one of her most memorable poems, she gives thanks for fellow Christians from around the world, including the West, whose intercession on her behalf made her time in the gulag bearable. She wrote, Believe me, it was often thus:

In solitary cells, on winter nights  
A sudden sense of joy and warmth  
And a resounding note of love.  
And then, unsleeping, I would know  
A-huddle by an icy wall:  
Someone is thinking of me now,  
Petitioning the Lord for me.  
My dear ones, thank you all  
Who did not falter, who believed in us!  
In the most fearful prison hour  
We probably would not have passed  
Through everything—from end to end,  
Our heads held high, unbowed—  
Without your valiant hearts  
To lighten our path.

Irina may not have had the aid of angels to spring her from a Soviet prison camp, but she was able to endure conditions most of us would find beyond appalling. How? Because of the intercession of her brothers and sisters in every land, who had never met her and never would except through her published words, but who nevertheless was the recipient of divine care and strength, given to her in response to the prayers of her brethren. I've heard similar testimonies from Iraqi and Syrian Christians—who have suffered extraordinary loss—that the prayers of their fellow Christians around the world have been, at times, the only thing that has gotten them through another day, and given them hope for the future. One temptation that they face is that of apostasy. Countless Iraqi and Syrian Christians (collectively known as Assyrians) have been given choices by ISIS: convert or die. Or, convert or watch your family die. We can't imagine the pressure being exerted on the faith of those who face those kinds of choices. To date, only a relatively small number have wilted under that pressure, and what I have heard over and over is that those who don't are able to hold fast to Jesus because they know He is with them, and the prayers of their brethren have confirmed that presence. When we pray for our brothers and sisters, we give them strength and support just as surely as Aaron and Hur did when they

took hold of the arms of Moses and enabled him to hold high the staff of God to ensure victory over the Amalekites in Exodus 17.

You will ask how and what to pray. I would ask you to pray this way. First, pray for safety. While most Assyrians have fled ISIS controlled areas, there are still thousands in the region around Mosul, where intense fighting is on-going. In addition, many Christians are living in circumstances that make them easy prey for terrorists and criminal gangs. Second, pray for provision. Hundreds of thousands of Assyrian Christians are refugees living in Jordan or Turkey, or displaced persons living in abandoned or unfinished buildings or tent cities in Iraq. Hunger is a constant problem, children are not being educated, and sick people are going without needed medical treatments. Third, pray for steadfastness in faith. Even when they are not under direct physical threat, poverty and vulnerability make for constant temptations to give in and convert to Islam. Fourth, pray for organizations such as the Iraqi Christian Relief Council and Iraq-based Aid for Assyrians as they seek to help. I recently joined the board of directors of the ICRC, and have already seen amazing things, such as a gift of eight tons of food worth a quarter of a million dollars donated by, of all people, Jim Bakker, that has already been delivered to Christians in makeshift camps in Jordan. But much, much more is needed. Finally, pray for success for the Iraqi government as it seeks to liberate Mosul and the entire Nineveh Plain from ISIS, and for wisdom as it decides how to set up a safe haven region in the Nineveh Plain not just for Christians, but for Yazidis and other religious minorities threatened by Islamic fundamentalists.

A second way God sends His resources to His people when they are suffering and persecuted is through the generosity of others in the Body of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul writes to the church in Corinth about the offering that he is collecting for the Christians in Jerusalem. This was a church that was experiencing famine, and had suffered persecution repeatedly over the previous two decades since Pentecost. James, the brother of John, had been executed by Herod Agrippa. An unknown number of Jerusalem's Christians had been imprisoned. Others had been driven into exile, or handed over to the Romans as political threats. Providing for their basic needs had become difficult. So the apostle Paul took it upon himself to seek financial aid from the churches with which he was associated, and Christians in Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth and others contributed. They responded, not grudgingly or in fulfillment of a duty, but with "glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). In 2 Corinthians 8:3, Paul writes of the Macedonians, "Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people." They considered it a *privilege* to give for the sake of their brethren, even though they were themselves a poor people. This was at least in part an expression of what Paul had written about in 1 Corinthians 12, where he talked about the interdependence of the members of the Body of Christ this way: "God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." (1 Corinthians 12:24-26) Part of the Body was suffering then, just as now, and the Macedonians *pleaded* for the opportunity to help bring healing to their fellow members of the Body. That is our calling today.

How can you do this? Again, let me be very specific with one possible avenue. The Iraqi Christian Relief Council has started a campaign called Operation Return to Nineveh. The aim is to help rebuild churches, schools, and homes destroyed by ISIS in the Christian towns of Bartella, Batnaya, Baghdedah, Karmlis, and Tel Eskof. The needs are overwhelming, but every contribution makes a difference. You can go to this Internet link

<https://mophilanthropy.co/iraqichristianrelief/>

and give a one-time gift, or set up a monthly donation. Whatever you can do, consider it your way of helping to heal the Body of Christ, further the mission of the Kingdom in Iraq, and serve the saints in need.

One final thing you can do that has no direct biblical parallel is to advocate. Obviously the Roman Empire was not a democracy, and in any event was the persecutor rather than protector of God's people. In 21st century America, we have an opportunity to do something the first century church could not. There is currently a resolution before Congress called House Concurrent Resolution 152. The purpose of this legislation is to put the United States government on record as supporting the Republic of Iraq in its decision to form a 19th province in the Nineveh Plain as a safe haven for Christians and other religious minorities. Among the co-sponsors are members of both parties, including two from Virginia. See, this isn't a partisan issue, it isn't even a specifically Christian one, but rather it is about the protection of "the least of these my brethren," whether you hear that expression from Matthew 25 as referring to Christian brothers and sisters or the downtrodden of humanity. But it also isn't the kind of issue that moves most members of Congress to action. That's where you come in. We've got three, possibly even four congressional districts represented in the membership of this congregation. If you will lift your voices—write letters, send emails, visit offices on the Hill and in your district—you will be heard. The unpaid director of communications for ICRC is a staffer for the Senate Budget Committee, and would be glad to help you make those contacts. Just email me and I'll be delighted to put you in touch with her. The Lord has blessed us by virtue of where we live with a means to make a difference in the lives of our brothers and sisters. This means to help them is almost unprecedented in Christian history. We dare not ignore it.

Our Lord warned us that His people would be persecuted, and He promised that we would be blessed by Him when that happened. Today, the warning is a reality. The blessing will be as well, and we are called to be part of it. Let us pray.