

THE GOSPEL IN PRINCIPLE 8

We come tonight to the final principle of Celebrate Recovery: “Yield myself to God, to be used to bring this good news to others, both by my example and by my words.” And the beatitude that is used with this principle is Matthew 5:10: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

At a glance, I think there is a disconnect between persecution and Principle 8. I don’t believe there is much persecution of Christians in this country, as I understand the term. We are inconvenienced for our faith; we get hassled at work; legislation works against what we believe to be Biblical. We live in an increasingly faithless culture, and it bothers us. But persecution, for me, is torture, murder, public humiliation, and prison – and Christians experience this around the world. No matter my situation, I am not in their league and their faith humbles me.

I think we also miss what the persecution in this statement of Jesus is for. Blessed are those who are persecuted **for righteousness’ sake**. Persecution for being right does not count – if you are right in an argument, and are obnoxious as you yell to win the argument, the persecution you think you endure may well be deserved. Persecution for being righteous does not count either. The righteousness of Christ is humble and serving. If you feel righteous, be careful. Acting righteous may indeed lead to persecution, but if acting righteous means you come across as arrogant and condescending, again I do not think Jesus’ blessing here applies.

But I think there is an understanding of persecution in the context of recovery that may be helpful for us tonight. We are at Principle 8 and Step 12

tonight, which means that for those of us who have worked the steps, we should see progress in how we live our lives (and if you're not there yet, then be encouraged that progress will be yours as you continue to work on your recovery), and as we live differently, there are consequences.

So I think of the woman who has the courage to set boundaries with her abusive husband, and has gained the strength to keep those boundaries. Her well-being is threatened, and so she is now being persecuted for righteousness' sake, and Jesus' blessing is hers.

I think of the recovering addict, estranged from his family because of his choices, but now dealing with the inevitable falsehoods that the ex-wife continues to feed her children. He will not engage, because he is living for righteousness' sake, and he endures what is persecution.

So in the context of recovery, let's define persecution like this: **pain for Jesus' sake.** Physical, emotional or spiritual pain, experienced when we truly live for Jesus – when we live more like Jesus, when we love more like Jesus and when we speak more like Jesus.

Note the beatitude says “for righteousness' sake,” but Jesus is clearly our righteousness. Also, note that he expands on this beatitude in v. 11: “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” “Righteousness' sake” and “my account” clearly are the same thing.

So if you are feeling beat down tonight, or defeated, or alone, and you know you are trusting Jesus more than ever before, and are trying to live like Jesus

as best you can, then be encouraged, because Jesus promises **you** the kingdom of heaven. **There is blessing in becoming a little more like Jesus**, even as you endure unfair criticism, legal pressure and physical threats.

Also note that as we come to the final beatitude of Jesus, we see that the promised blessing is the same as the first: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**” That’s interesting – did Jesus run out of blessings and decide to just use the first one again? Did he make a mistake and simply forget that he already promised the kingdom of heaven? Obviously not – there is a beginning to recovery, but really there is no end to recovery (“reasonably happy in this life, supremely happy in the next,” as the Serenity Prayer reminds us). We find ourselves back at the beginning, only now the kingdom of heaven is not just a promise that we cling to, desperate because we are at the end of ourselves. The kingdom of heaven is becoming a reality – a taste of the kingdom now (enough to make us happy now). We don’t have to wait to experience this blessing.

So the kingdom of heaven is for those who are “poor in spirit.” It is for those whose lives have become unmanageable. It is for those who admit that they are powerless to control their lives. We lay down our arms – we surrender to King Jesus, and he promises the kingdom of heaven. It may seem like an unattainable promise to those just starting this process, but the kingdom of heaven is for those who have no power in their flesh.

It has to start this way, so that we trust Jesus as the only Power for our recovery. And when that happens, we grow strong in His Spirit, so that now, he

reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is also for those who are growing stronger in the strength of his Spirit.

The poor in spirit finally understand that Jesus became powerless just so that we might receive the kingdom of heaven. The poor in spirit begin to finally believe the gospel that that King of creation would become a weak man like us, weak in his flesh.

¹⁰ For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹² saying,

“I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

¹³ And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And as we grow in our recovery, we grow in our understanding of the gospel: there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (no shame); we have been reconciled by the blood of Christ (no longer an enemy of God); we are adopted children, loved deeply by God the Father; and we are loved deeply by God the King, just as Jesus is. We are becoming, even in small ways, more and more like him, even as he became like us.

So the first beatitude is a promise to cling to. The final beatitude is a reality that we experience now.