



*The Easy Yoke*  
March 28, 2007  
Lenten Vespers 6

Matthew 5:10-12  
“Yoked to the Kingdom”  
M. Craig Barnes

This is the last of our Lenten Vesper Services, which have been focused on the Beatitudes.

As if the previous Beatitudes were not challenging enough, the final one claims “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you.” This Beatitude does not sell well. We want our spirituality to get us out of trouble, not into trouble. Why would it be a blessing to be persecuted and what does that even mean in our culture?

Well, in order for us to understand that, it is important to understand what it meant for the first church that read Matthew’s gospel. For the first three hundred years of the church’s life, it was often persecuted. And the reason was that the Christians were thought to be traitors. That’s because they would not burn incense to Caesar.

Emperor worship was common in this day. No one actually thought Caesar was a god, by the way, except maybe Caesar. But to burn incense to Caesar was an act of loyalty. It would be similar to our pledge of allegiance. To affirm that he was among the pantheon of gods was to say that your ultimate loyalty was to the emperor. Caesar is lord.

The Censor, a Roman official, would come into a town and everyone in that community would have to burn incense at the altar before the emperor. They would then receive a certificate called a *libellus*. This was in essence their citizenship papers. Christians did not have these citizenship papers because they refused to burn incense to Caesar. They could not call anybody, but Jesus, lord. And so they were thought to be treasonous.

They were also thought to be unreasonable because, after all, Caesar didn’t care if you worshiped other gods as well. In fact, it was encouraged to worship many different gods. Christians were thought odd because of this devotion to one lord. So, they were persecuted for being traitors and for being fanatics about worshiping only one god.

There are some parts of our world today, let us be clear, where Christians are physically persecuted. The Sudan comes to mind. We’re not even aware of how many Christians have lost their lives, have been raped or displaced in that current persecution. Clearly, there are some who know what physical persecution is because they wear the name Christian.

But we also have to ask, “Does even our own wonderfully tolerant society persecute those who are serious about calling Jesus, Lord?” And I think the answer to that is yes. Like all Christians who are serious about only calling Jesus, Lord, you will find that you are also persecuted for the high crime of

treason, not because you'll be thought to be a traitor to the nation, but because you'll be a traitor to our prevailing culture. Our culture will not tolerate singular devotion to the lordship of Christ.

Remember what Caesar wanted? He didn't want exclusive loyalty. He wanted divided loyalties. Caesar wants you to serve more than one lord. And Caesar is alive and well in our culture. If Jesus is your only lord, then work is not the lord for you. See how you will get into trouble with this? Collecting money can no longer be your lord. Family is not the lord. Being the one who is right is not the lord for your life any more. Achieving, collecting, even wonderful things like falling in love or getting your dreams to come true—that's no longer the lord of your life. It can't be.

Christianity claims there can only be one center to your life. Everything else has to find its place in relationship to this one center. But our society encourages us to have many centers and they will all compete and pull at you. Work wants to be a center, so does family, so does recreation, so do your commitments to your health, so maybe even your commitments to church or volunteering at the schools or wherever it is that you are trying to make a difference. It all pulls.

To be clear about your one lord is to resist the pull. It is rather to organize everything around the one center. That puts you at odds with our society. You may not get the promotion you want at work if you don't put work at the center of your life. You may not get your family's or your friend's blessings over your choices, if they are not at the center. Now you're playing to an audience of one.

This doesn't mean that you don't have things other than Jesus in your life, but it means that everything finds its place in relationship to this one Lord. Is that persecution? Well, it's certainly not at peril to your physical life, but it is at peril to the life that others want you to live.

The tremendous irony is that Christianity spread through the Roman Empire during its time of persecution. And the greater the persecution, the further and more thorough the spread of Christian missions. Why was that? It's because the Christians were free, and freedom is always compelling. The word *martyr* is actually probably best translated from the Greek as *witness*, so they were making a witness even as they were being martyred. And what they were witnessing to was their freedom.

Now, how is it that those who are persecuted are free? Well, everyone who was baptized as an adult in the early centuries of the church was baptized through immersion. We have second and third century baptism liturgies and they were essentially funeral services. The baptismal candidate would come up to the waters. The priest would announce that this person was setting aside their old life, the old nature, the old values, and old expectations. All of that was left behind. And as the priest said that, the person would take off their clothes as a way of taking off this old life. This person would walk down into the water, and the priest would put the person down under the water saying, "Buried with Christ in baptism."

Then the person would rise up out of the water, put on new clothes that had never been worn before as a sign of putting on Christ. And as this new Christian was doing this, the priest would talk about the new identity this person has taken on. Why did they go through all of that? Because they knew that when they came up out of that water bearing the name "Christ-ian," that they had already signed their death warrant. They could and probably would be persecuted for being Christian. And the church wanted

these Christians to be unafraid. So they got the dying over with. That's what baptism means. Dying is now behind you.

The early church's secret was that you couldn't scare dead people. So the Christians were not afraid. What more could Caesar do to them? They had already given it all up. That's what made them free. And it's what made them compelling as a witness.

Blessed are you when you are persecuted because you are free. You are free of every other agenda in life. You can't be pulled anymore. How do you manipulate a dead person? It's over. It's past. You're alive to one singular identity.

It's interesting that all of the other Beatitudes are in the third person, but this one is in the second person. It's as if Jesus wants to drive this one home. Not, "Blessed are those who are persecuted." It is "Blessed are *you* when you are persecuted." He is not saying that you will be blessed *if* this should happen. Jesus assumes that it will happen. There is no avoiding some form of persecution if you say Jesus alone is lord. Blessed are you when you are clear about the singular identity.

I hasten to give a quick caution, and that caution is that you don't have to go out in search of persecution to obtain the blessing. As the old saying goes, Daniel may have been placed in the lion's den, but he probably didn't pull any tails. I don't encourage you to look for it in order to get the blessing. The blessing comes simply from having one center to your life. That's what makes you free.

Our society thinks that what freedom means is that you can do anything that you want. But as anybody knows who has tried that for a while, this doesn't actually lead to freedom. Doing anything that you want leads to confusion and eventually exhaustion and a whole lot of mistakes. Freedom comes from knowing what your life is about, having the one center, being clear about your identity. The blessing is that, when you are persecuted, your reward will be great in heaven.

Let me tell you quickly what this doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that you should put up with all kinds of nonsense in this life because God will reward you in the next life. It doesn't mean that religion is an opiate for those who are oppressed in spite of the Marxist critique of the church.

What the Beatitude means is that those who live under heaven have a compelling vision of life. They know where their true citizenship is. They know that their real citizenship paper is their baptismal certificate. That's the only citizenship paper they need. They know who they are. They belong to heaven and so they live always with an alternative ethos. They live as exiles in a foreign land, clear about where home is, clear that they will live by the standards of home. They will live by the culture of home. They will live as citizens of home even though they are not home. And they will continue to work for this new kingdom of home that is breaking into this world. But they know where home is and the reward is not just that they'll get home some day. The reward is that they will live in this life with a clear and compelling vision of their home.

The late pastor and author Ray Steadman frequently told the story of the old missionary couple who came home on the steamer at the end of a long career serving in Africa. They were surprised when they got on the boat to discover that they were on the same boat with Teddy Roosevelt, the former

president. They came to port in New York and they were a bit frustrated that such a fuss was being made about the return from a recreational hunting trip that the former president had been on. The mayor came out. The band was there. Everybody was making a huge celebration at the return of Teddy Roosevelt after his safari.

But what about these two missionaries who had spent their lives trying to do things like build schools, churches and clinics? They had gotten to the end of their career and they had no pension. They were in poor health. They were alone. There was no celebration for them on the pier when the boat arrived. They were discouraged and uncertain about their future. They quietly made their way off the boat and settled into the small apartment they had rented in New York City. And the husband said, "But where is our celebration?" And his wife smiled at him and said, "Ah, but we are not home yet."

*Benediction:* Blessed are those who have a compelling vision of their home until they finally arrive. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.