

Russell Kelfer

The Response to Persecution

556-A
Series: The Beatitudes

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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At last, we come to the final Beatitude. All good things must come to an end, and I'm told all other things as well. Regardless of your perspective, there is reason for rejoicing. But we can't stop without asking God for one more miracle. In the next lesson, we will ask for another miracle as we climb up into God's lap and from His vantage point take a God's-eye view of His beautiful attitudes. You may ask, "What is the miracle we are praying for?" The miracle is that we are going to attempt to condense, which means to reduce to an abbreviated form or to simplify. fifteen and a half months of lessons into a single lesson.

The obvious question is, "If it can be said in one lesson, why did it take us sixty-two weeks?" The answer is found in the amazing doctrine of the wind. The doctrine of the wind says that teachers and preachers must breathe more deeply in order to keep from fainting as they stand before a crowd. They breathe deep and must hold it long. Thus we have the mysterious justification for a long-winded teacher. Already we have in this lesson the perfect example of long-windedness. All I have said thus far is that we will have a summary of the Beatitudes in the next lesson, and it has taken me almost 2 paragraphs to say it. You ask, "Why didn't you just say that?" It all has to do with the doctrine of the wind.

In this lesson we will put an end to persecution. We will be looking at its final but most important element. In the last few lessons we have looked at the reality of persecution. There are two kinds of this persecution: 1) the persecution of the church at large and 2) the persecution of individual Christians. We then looked at the reason for persecution. We realized that the reason for persecution is the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross offends. The death of Christ offends because it says that eternal life equals Christ plus nothing. The life of Christ offends because it says the abundant life equals Christ plus nothing. In the last two lessons we have discussed eleven blessings from God for those

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who endure persecution. These blessings can also be called the results of persecution.

We conclude this lesson with the response to persecution. How does God expect us to act in the furnace of affliction? I know that we are supposed to leap for joy because we have studied that eleven good things are a result of persecution. I know that we are supposed to rejoice and be exceeding glad for the kingdom of heaven is ours. This should be our attitude toward God and toward circumstances. But what is our attitude supposed to be toward people, toward those who persecute us? What must be our actions and reactions to them as they jeer at us, lie about us and even threaten our lives? For the answer, we have to go back to Two Mile Island. We will look at the conclusion of the Two Mile passage found in Matthew 5.

On our first visit to Two Mile Island, we found out what we were supposed to do when in the course of life others, under duty or through self-centeredness, abuse our rights, privilege or reputations. We were to turn the other cheek and go the second mile. We were to give away our clothes. We were to give and give and give to those who ask.

Now we come to the ultimate challenge. Enter our enemies. Their goal is our destruction with malice and forethought. The joy of their life is the ruin of ours. The cause of the conflict, the heart of the hostility is the cross of Jesus Christ. How do we respond to them?

On our last trip to Two Mile Island, we stopped at Matthew 5 and toured verses 38-42. We will return in this lesson and begin our journey at verse 43.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,” (NKJV)

(Reason)

that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?

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Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?

Therefore you shall be perfect (mature, complete), just as your Father in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:45-48 NKJV)

So we have moved from the spirit having our rights violated as a matter of course into the arena of deliberate persecution. God's instructions are so dramatic, so clear, so complete that not a one of us will have a viable excuse for not obeying. Our outline for this lesson looks like this:

I- The Object of Our Response

A- Who are our neighbors?

B- Who are our enemies?

II- The Expression of Our Response

A- How to love your enemy

B- How to bless your enemy

C- How to do good to your enemy

D- How to pray for your enemy

III- The Essence of Our Response

A- What does it mean to be your Father's children?

B- How to understand the rain that falls

C- How to love the unlovable

D- How to greet all men

E- How to have the mind of God

Let's begin with the object of our response. Jesus starts this amazing passage with this amazing statement.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,"

(Matthew 5:43,44 NKJV)

Loving your neighbor was not a new principle to the Jew. In Leviticus 19:18 it says,

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: (because) I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:18 NKJV)

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So many read this passage and conclude that Jesus was saying the Jew under the law was admonished to love his friends but hate his enemies. But the Scripture does not really say that. In Exodus it says in a modern translation,

If you happen to see your enemies cow or donkey running lose, take it back to him.

If his donkey has fallen under his load, help him get the donkey to its feet again, don't just walk off. (Exodus 23:4,5)

Then in Proverbs it says,

Don't be glad when your enemy meets disaster. Don't rejoice when he stumbles. The Lord will know if you are gloating and He won't like it.

If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. (Proverbs 24:17; 25:21)

So the Jewish law was not confined to loving friends and hating enemies. Nor was it confined to loving Jews and hating Gentiles. This was the work once again of the Scribes and the Pharisees. The Scribes and the Pharisees had determined that since God brought judgment on the enemies of Israel, that God desired at a personal level that the Jew love other Jews but hate Gentiles. So they wrongfully determined that their neighbor represented Jews and that God therefore wanted them to hate their enemies, all of which were not Jews. They were wrong on both counts.

In Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus plainly answered the question, "Who is my neighbor?". He said that our neighbor is basically anyone who has a need. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Our neighbor is anyone in need of love. So the greater the need, the greater the love. Enter our enemies, neighbors with the greatest need of all. If that is who our neighbors are and our neighbors include our enemies, then who are our enemies? Jesus again left no question marks. He graphically described who our enemies are. Jesus said that there are four kinds of enemies.

1- Those who hate you. The word hate literally means active ill will in words or conduct. It is the absence of love in any relationship. Those who hate you are those who speak in such a way or act in such a way as to demonstrate that they do not love

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you. Do you have any enemies?

2- Those who curse you. This means to pray or wish for evil to befall another. Your enemies then are those who curse you or who secretly or openly hope you fail. Do you have any enemies?

3- Those who spitefully use you. This means to treat with contempt and threaten with insult and take undue advantage of. Those who spitefully use you are those who take advantage of you or insult you.

4- Those who persecute you or put to flight through undue pressure. These are people who actively seek to destroy you because of the cross.

Those are your enemies. Jesus holds up the mirror of the Word and holds up again an image that diametrically opposes the world. The world says to love your friends and hate your enemies. Jesus says to return love for hate and the world is amazed because they don't possess the power to do that. The world says to bless your friends and curse your enemies. Jesus said to return a curse with a blessing. The world says to help your friends and use your enemies. The Word says to do good to those who spitefully use you. The world says to pray for your friends but ignore or destroy your enemies. The Word of God says to pray for your enemies.

Let's look now at the expression of our response. The first commandment is that we are to return hate with love. There are four Greek words for love. "Eros" means physical passion. "Storge" means family love. This is the kind of love a father has for a son, a sister has for a brother or a mother has for a child. "Phileo" means strong affection or to like someone. This is the word from which we get philanthropy, which means a love of people or the love of man. We get the word philharmonic from phileo, which is love for music. We get the word Philadelphia which means city of brotherly love. It is a strong affection tied to liking someone. The last kind of love is "agape". This is a divine love which expresses itself without variableness. It doesn't change and is not affected by external things.

ELEMENTS OF AGAPE LOVE

There are five elements essential to understanding agape love.

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1- Agape love is almost always accompanied with a mention of the cross. We see this in these verses,

God so loved, "agaped" the world that He gave His only begotten Son. (John 3:16)

In Galatians 2:20 Paul said,

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved (agaped) me and gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20 NKJV)

In this is love (agape), not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation (personal payment) for our sins. (He died on the cross.)

(I John 4:10 NKJV)

In Romans 5:8 we see the same thing.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8 NKJV)

2- The object of agape love need display no merit and may offer no response. Agape love will not change or be affected by anything the recipient is or does. That is why we can agape our enemies. There is a story in one of the commentaries about a handsome lifeguard sitting up on his platform on a beach. A beautiful young woman goes into the waves and proceeds to drown. The lifeguard knows that the water is rough, and he may well lose his life trying to save this woman. For a split second he wonders if it is worth it to try to save this young woman. Finally, he decides to take the risk to try to save her. The next day another person is in the water drowning. This time it is a crook or a pervert or a murderer. It may even be someone who killed his own child maliciously. Now what does the lifeguard do?

Romans 5:7,8 says,

For scarcely for a righteous man might one die, but perhaps for a good man some would even bear to die.

But God showed forth His agape toward us that while we were still enemies of His, outcasts, rebels, He died for us.

(Romans 5:7,8 paraphrased)

3- Agape love is not just liking someone. James Boice, in his commentary, says that to like someone is to have a certain emotional feeling towards them. Because we cannot entirely control our feelings, it is not always possible to like everybody.

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Even God often does not like the way we are, but He always loves us. You may not always like your children, but you can always love them.

4- Agape love is an act of God. It cannot be reproduced by man apart from God. Therefore, it is impossible to love this way unless Christ is in you. If you are not a Christian, you cannot have God's kind of love. Unless God is in control of your life, you cannot express God's kind of love.

5- Agape love is expressed through an act of the will. Boice goes on to say that agape love is not a matter of feelings, it is a matter of the will. Therefore, it is something that is always possible. It can always express itself in positive action. If love is a matter of our wills and our wills are surrendered to God, then it is possible to love our enemies and bless those who curse us, to do good to those who hate us, to pray for those who persecute us and use us. It is possible, and it is essential.

Practically speaking, C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* put it this way:

The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste your time bothering over whether or not you love your neighbor. Act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we will find one of life's greatest secrets, which is that when you are behaving as if you love someone, you presently come to love them. The worldly man treats certain people kindly because he likes them. The Christian trying to treat everyone kindly finds himself liking more and more people as he goes along, including the people he could not even imagine himself liking at the beginning. So we love people by choosing to do so and by acting as though we do.

You may ask, "How do we know if we are loving our enemies?" There is a very simple formula found in I Corinthians 13. If you want to know whether or not you are loving your enemy, then this is your checklist:

1) When your enemies are around, are you patient with them? More patient perhaps than you are with your best friend? Love is patient.

2) When your enemies are around, (those who abuse you,

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revile you and persecute you), are you kind? Kinder than you are to your best friend? Love is kind.

3) Are you envious of them and their blessings? Love does not envy.

4) Do you condescend to them when they are around you? Love does not condescend.

5) Do you react rudely, or do you rather treat them in a class of a king, with respect? Love does not lose its temper. It is always calm. Love does not even notice the injustice toward it. They put it away in file 13.

6) Love does not rejoice at the misfortune of its enemies. Love rather rejoices at their success. This is the hardest of all.

7) Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. You may say, "What if it doesn't work?" If it doesn't work, then God is not true, and God is truth. Love never fails.

1- Find out who your enemies are and actively live out I Corinthians 13 every time you meet them. This is Jesus' first commandment.

2- Return a curse with a blessing. Jesus tells us that the attitude of a curse says that you will get yours, I hope. The attitude of a blessing is that you can have mine. A curse wants another to get what they deserve. A blessing wants another to get grace, what they don't deserve. A curse demands the worse for another. A blessing demands the best for another even if the other is the one trying to destroy you. In Romans 12:14, Paul gives it the exclamation point! Bless them that persecute you! Bless them and curse not! When others seek man's worst for you, you are supposed to seek God's best for them.

To bless someone is to assume an attitude of overlooking what they are or who they are in an effort to secure God's best for them. Jesus says that we are to begin by seeking to bless those who proclaim a curse on you. You demonstrate a supernatural desire for the success for those who desire your failure.

It is easy to ask God to bless your family. It is easy to ask God to bless your pastor and your friends. Jesus says we are to ask

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God to bless our enemies.

3- Love leads to blessing and blessing leads to positive activity. This third element may well be the hardest. Jesus says to do good unto them that despitefully use you.

In Acts 10:38, we see a description of what it means to do good. Jesus went about doing good and healing. We are admonished to do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith. Simply put, to do good equals to do something good for someone else. Jesus says to do something good for that guy who just said something bad to you. Jesus asks, “Is your enemy hungry? Take him out and buy him a big meal.” “Is your enemy thirsty? Buy him something to drink.” “Is he lonely? Be a friend. “Is it your enemy’s birthday? Send him a card.” “Is your enemy himself being persecuted? Console him and encourage him.” “Does your enemy have car trouble? Help him fix it.” “Is your enemy broke? Give him money.”

The guy who uses you and does it for spite is your enemy. Make him your project by making him the object of a positive act of love. Find that person who you feel has it in for you, doesn’t appreciate you or doesn’t respect you. Your enemy is someone who seems to dig at you at every opportunity he gets. You can make it your business, in Christ, to find every need he has and desire to meet that need. The Spirit of God will work a miracle in his life.

4- Pray for your enemies, those who persecute you without a cause. This fourth commandment sounds easy, but, it isn’t. Jesus’ final admonition was to make up a prayer list and fill it up with the names of those who curse us, use us, hate us and persecute us. I want to ask you if you pray as actively for that spiteful coworker as you do for your best friend? You may answer, “No.” That coworker may not have a friend to pray for him. There are but a few categories of people in Scripture for whom we are commanded to pray. This is one of them. Pray for your enemies.

How do you pray for your enemies? I know that some of you are thinking we are to pray for them to get what is due them. That is not right. Jeremiah 29:7 teaches us that we are to pray for the peace of our enemies. We are to pray that they will have a heart of peace. We are to pray that the problem of the turmoil

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in their hearts would be solved. Numbers 12:13 says that we are to pray for our enemy's healing. II Timothy 4:16 and other passages say that we are to pray that God will not hold their persecution of us against them. Numbers 11 says that we are to pray that God will give us the capacity to bear their persecution. Numbers 14 teaches us that we are to pray for their forgiveness and deliverance and that God would be glorified in the process. We are to ask God not to lay that sin to their charge. We are to ask God to reveal Himself to them. We are to ask God to bless them and to bless their families. We are to ask God to give to them even what He has not given to you. We will then be tested to see if we can rejoice and thus experience an abundance of grace we never knew was possible.

Pray for them and for their real needs to be met. We are to pray for the healing of their hearts that is causing their hatred. Pray for anything in your life that might have justifiably aroused their anger or bitterness. The more they bear down on you, the greater the spiritual conflict, the harder you pray. Remind yourself that the battle is not between you and man. The battle is between Satan and God for the control of lives. If we understand that, our relationship with that person in our lives may be the battlefield; but the real battle is not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in high places. So turn your hatred to Satan, but turn your love to them.

In closing, let's look at the essence of our response. We must understand the importance of obedience to these revolutionary demands. Always, Jesus specifically tells us why. He never leaves us in the dark.

Principle 1- We are our Father's children. Jesus says, "Do this that ye may be the children of your Father who is in heaven." The literal meaning is that you don't do this to become God's children. You do this to be the children you have become. You do this because you are the children of God. It is the essence of godliness that a man who is filled with the Spirit lives the way God lives. God loves those He has no cause to love so we should, too.

Dr. Harry Ironside tells the story of a time when he was in Ganado, Arizona at a Presbyterian mission hospital. He met a

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poor Navajo woman who had been nursed back to health through the concentrated work of a Christian doctor and Navajo nurses. She had been cast out by her own people when they thought she was going to die. She was found after 3 or 4 days of exposure. After 9 weeks in the hospital, she recovered enough to begin to wonder about the unexpected care she had received. She said to one of the nurses, "I can't understand it. Why did the doctor do all of that for me? He is a white man, and I am an Indian. I've never heard of anything like this before." The Navajo nurse, a Christian, said to her, "You know, it is the love of Christ that made him do that." "Who is this Christ?" the sick woman asked, "Tell me more." The nurse called a missionary into the room and together they explained the gospel, and the staff began to pray. Several weeks passed for her to think about it. One of the staff asked her, "Can't you trust this Savior and turn from the idols you have worshipped to trust Jesus as the Son of the Living God?" As the Navajo woman pondered her answer, the door opened and the doctor walked in. The face of the old woman lit up and she said, "If Jesus is anything like the doctor, I can trust Him forever." She came to Christ and accepted Him as her Savior.

Dr. Ironside asks, "Can you see what it was that reached her? It was love." It was not man's love, but it was God's love manifested in a man. God's love. This is what you and I are to show forth to an ungodly and rebellious world. We are to do it as the sons of our Father so that many can come to see the uniqueness of His Son.

Principle 2- The principle of the rain and the sun. He goes on to say that God makes the sun to shine on the evil and upon the good. He sends the rain on the just and the unjust. We often use this passage negatively as though God sends Christian's sadness as well as unbelievers. The context of the verse is not that way at all. The context is that God's love is non-discriminatory. He sends rain to water the crops of unbelievers, because He loves them just as much and desires that they come to Him. He so loved the world, that He sent His only Son. His children seem to receive a great measure of His love because they came to Him, received His love and returned it to Him. It is amplified, multiplied, and He is glorified. But God does not love the Christian more, He just loves them differently than the unbeliever. In eternity, Christians will enter into the fullness of His love forever because they have

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responded to that love.

If you are not a Christian, you are an unbeliever, someone who has never personally asked Jesus to come into your heart. I want to encourage you that God loves you. God wants you for His own. You may get the impression sometimes that we are talking about some kind of a selective God who only loves those who talk a certain way, act a certain way and walk a certain way. My friend, nothing you could have ever done, and nothing you are now doing could be enough to stop God from loving you. The love of God is impartial. It is not affected by anything we do or anything we own. We cannot understand that.

If you have never been able to trust Christ because you feel He could never receive you because of what you have done, I beg you to understand that the love of God is available to you in the same measure that it is available to everyone. Perhaps it is available in a degree even greater because Jesus said,

He who is forgiven much has the capacity to love more.

(Luke 7:47 paraphrased)

If you have never personally said, “Jesus, come into my life and make me Your own,” I beg of you to make that transaction now. Invite Him to be your Savior. Your entire life will be changed, and He will give you the love to pass on, that unconditional love to the rest of the world around you. God loved Saul even while Saul was persecuting the dearest of His saints. God says that love knows no discrimination. That is the love He gives us.

Principle 3- Jesus brings it down to us. He says, “If you love those who love you, big deal. You aren’t really initiating love at all. You are simply returning love someone else has given to you. Even a tax collector does that.” God’s love equals infinity. Infinity does not vary. A Christian in fellowship with God demonstrates love to every unlovable creature. He demonstrates this to the spiteful, to the hateful and to the vengeful. One reason more people do not come to Christ through our personal witness is that we do not know how to love the world without becoming a part of the world.

Principle 4- Jesus says (I’m going to give a loose translation here), “If you only extend fellowship and show love to other believers who are acceptable to you, (I’m not talking about close

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fellowship, I'm talking about extending a hand of greeting,) you are no better than they are." Jesus takes it one step further. As the true church of Jesus Christ is an organization with a selective membership. This is true because not everybody belongs. But, it is not a closed corporation. Everybody can belong. The entrance requirements are the same for everybody. It is God's desire that everybody come. Don't treat everyone as though they were Christians. That is the highest form of deceit, but treat everyone as though they were welcomed candidates to become Christians.

Principle 5- It is possible to progressively receive the mind of Christ. Jesus concluded,

Therefore be perfect (complete), (fitted out and prepared) as your Father who in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48 NKJV)

David said in Psalm 18,

As for God, His ways are perfect.

It is God who has girded me with strength and makes my way perfect. (Psalm 18:30,32 NKJV)

God is complete, nothing can be added to His character. Paul said that we can be confident of this very thing, that He that started this miraculous work in us will complete it. He intends to finish what He started.

There may be someone who started the Christian life like a cannon, but at present has all of the power of a cap pistol. That is not the will of God. Did you dare ever to promise God that you would never let anything come between you and Him? Do you remember every saying, "Lord, if you deliver me from this, if you do that for me, my heart will be forever yours?" I encourage you that it is never too late to begin again. God's goal is full-grown saints, mature men and women who possess His mind continuously, think His thoughts and live His life because He is being allowed to live that life through them. Sometimes along the way we stumble and fall. Sometimes along the way we get discouraged and stop seeking that supernatural power. Sometimes God sends enemies to persecute us, to alarm us, to alert us and create a need in us that only He can meet. Dare we ask Him to do that? Dare we ask Him for enemies to love? To bless? To serve? To pray for? If that is needed for us to become more mature, what ought our prayer to be?

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There we have it. The Christian is to understand that his neighbor is everyone who has a need, even including his enemies. His enemies are all of the men and women who hate him, curse him, use him and persecute him. The Christian's response and responsibility is to love with agape love those he does not like. We are to bless them, serve them and pray for them. I ask you, this week, using God's definition of an enemy, to go home and make a list of those who might be considered your enemies. Begin a systematic, obedient program of loving them by interceding for them, by assuming the posture of desiring God's best for them and blessing them and by actively finding ways to serve them.

You may say, "I can't do that." Right. You can't do that. That is why He gave you His Spirit to live the supernatural Christian life. That, my friend, is where the blessing comes from. That is why Jesus said, "Oh what bliss, oh what happiness, oh what self-contained joy awaits those who are persecuted for righteousness sake and in the process learn to return love for hate and blessings for a curse, service for spite and prayer for persecution." Do you want to be happy? This is God's prescription for happiness.

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