

Blessing, Not Cursing

Gospel Culture, Part 8

Romans 12:14

David Sunday

March 4, 2018

We're going to be in Romans 12:14 this morning, but first I want us to hear the words of our Lord Jesus from Luke 6.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. We want to respond to those who mistreat us more and more like Jesus did and like He teaches us to do in these verses. So we pray for the help of Your Spirit, that we may more gladly share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. We ask this in His name. Amen.

In Luke 6:22-31, Jesus says:

²² Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! ²³ Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets. ²⁴ But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵ Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. ²⁶ Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

²⁷ But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. ³¹ And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

Clearly the Apostle Paul has these words from Jesus in mind as he writes Romans 12:14. He's telling us what it looks like to be a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God; how to worship God with our lives and how this then gets expressed in our relationships. He's moving

now in verse 14 to how we respond to those who mistreat us, echoing the words of our Lord Jesus: *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”* Our theme this morning is blessing, not cursing and we’ll be looking at these two points:

1. Be prepared for the reality of persecution.
2. Get empowered for a radical response to persecution.

1. Be prepared for the reality of persecution.

Don’t you love how the Bible refuses to paint a rosy picture of what the Christian life will be like? Nowhere in Scripture are we given the idea that if we follow Jesus, life is going to be smooth and easy. The health, wealth and prosperity gospel is no gospel at all. It really is a heresy from hell, designed to keep comfortable, wealthy Westerners from repenting and following King Jesus. It’s also designed to manipulate poor people into giving what little they have to fund the extravagant lifestyles of false teachers. It’s heresy.

The Bible makes it clear that if you follow Jesus, there will be a cost. There will be hardship. There will be persecution. That’s the reality we’re confronted with in Romans 12:14. It shouldn’t surprise us and it shouldn’t scare us either.

Back in 2016, Mark Howard wrote an article for The Gospel Coalition about the church in Iran. I just read it a couple months ago and it greatly encouraged me. The article said, “Persecution threatened to wipe out Iran’s tiny church. Instead, the church in Iran has become the fastest growing in the world and it is influencing the region for Christ.” Some of us are old enough to remember the Iranian revolution of 1979, when a hard-line Islamic regime took over the country. Missionaries were kicked out. Bibles were destroyed and became very scarce. Believers were persecuted and several pastors were killed. The pressure was so intense that many people feared the little fledgling church in Iran would soon be snuffed out. But the Iranian Christians kept blessing, not cursing, their persecutors. They kept sharing the gospel.

In the last 20 years the church in Iran has grown faster than in the previous 13 centuries combined. Back in 1979, it is estimated that there were 500 former Muslim believers living in Iran. Today it is estimated that there are hundreds of thousands—maybe even a million—former Muslim believers living in Iran. A couple years ago Operation World called this the fastest growing evangelical church in the world—the church in Iran. And they’re sending gospel servants to the Afghan people where the gospel is also growing.

I’m so encouraged and stirred by this good news of the growth of Christ’s Kingdom. But as I think of the Christians who are being persecuted around the world, I also think it’s hard for us here in the Fox Valley to identify with them. I imagine we even feel a little uncomfortable,

because we don't quite know how to relate to the persecuted church. We're not facing the kinds of persecution that some of our brothers and sisters in Iran or Syria have faced. We're not afraid, when we gather to meet with other believers, that our government is going to barge in, arrest us and throw us into prison. Few of us have ever been beaten or threatened physically for our testimony for Jesus.

We're here in this nation, where freedom of religion is enshrined in our constitutional rights, where our President and First Lady and Vice President and his wife just attended the funeral of Billy Graham on Friday. By the way, as I watched President Trump and Melania listening intently to Franklin Graham preach the gospel clearly on Friday, I was praying, "Lord, please save them. Please bring them to repentance and faith in You." They surely heard the gospel powerfully this past week.

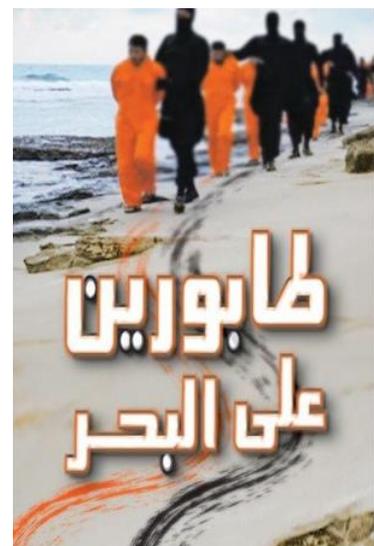
We live here in this country, in these affluent suburbs, and it's easy for us to think of the persecuted church like it's some far-off, separate realm from us. But friends, we have to rouse ourselves to compassion and empathy for our persecuted brothers and sisters. Jesus wants us to feel the reality of what they're experiencing as if we ourselves are being persecuted with them.

You may have heard the name Nick Ripkin. He and his wife Ruth have worked closely with persecuted Christians for 30 years. He laments that there is an eerie, uncomfortable silence in many Western churches about the persecution believers around the world are facing. To whatever extent we are silent and aloof toward believers who are persecuted, it breaks the heart of God. Jesus, the Head of the church, feels the pain of all His members, and we too ought to feel a fellow sympathy and empathy with our brothers and sisters who are suffering.

I like how Ruth Ripkin corrects our thinking: "There is no such thing as a persecuted church and a free church. There is only the church! There is one church—one church that is at the same time free and persecuted." That's the way to think: one church. We are one with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Remember this picture of Egyptian Christians who were working in Libya and were carried away by terrorists to be tortured and then executed for their faith. As their throats were slit, many of them were shouting, "O Lord Jesus." These people of the cross are our brothers in Christ. They are our family. We are one with them. When they suffer, we suffer. When they triumph, we triumph. That's the attitude the Lord Jesus wants us to have.

The Lord Jesus also wants us to face the very real



prospect that we too will experience persecution for the sake of Christ. Let's look at what Jesus says in John 15:18-21:

¹⁸ If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

Jesus is saying, "Face the reality that if you believe in Me, you will be persecuted." Now, how do we grapple with that reality here in America? If to you persecution only means that there's a decent chance that you or one of your family members might be killed this month for the sake of Jesus, then it's true—none of us is really being persecuted in America.

But what if the biblical category is bigger than that? What if in the Bible persecution includes being reviled, having evil and false things said about you, being ostracized or hated, being fined, being kicked off a college campus, being treated unjustly, being publicly mocked and scorned? The Bible includes all these kinds of things, and more, under the category of persecution.

That's why, in answer to the question, "Are Christians in America being persecuted?" Kevin DeYoung says, "The short answer is 'Yes, all the time.' The not as short answer is: 'Yes, Christians in America are persecuted, but not as frequently, consistently or with nearly the intensity that Christians are persecuted in many other parts of the world.'" I think we need to get this in our thoughts, because if we don't grapple with how the Bible speaks of persecution, when we come to teachings like this that are really pronounced in the New Testament, we'll just kind of distance ourselves. We'll disconnect and think, "I doubt that's ever going to have anything to do with me here in America."

Let's think about when you're in the board room and everyone is urging a policy that would bring revenue into the company—but at the expense of honesty and integrity, or maybe by exploiting other people. So you speak up. You try to present a persuasive argument against this policy. They ask, "Is this because of that religious stuff you believe?" That scorn you're feeling, that ridicule you're feeling, that can be a form of persecution. Or maybe you're a nurse and you are ridiculed for opposing a woman's right to choose because you won't facilitate abortions. These kinds of things are happening. It's becoming much more difficult, for instance, for doctors

and nurses in the United Kingdom—because of the stringent policies of the National Health Service—to conscientiously object.

So when people look at you funny and exclude you and mock you, these can be subtle forms of persecution. The point I want us to see is that it's not just the overt physical torture of persecution that the Bible includes in this category. It's also the more subtle, intellectual, emotional, social and legal forms of persecution that can also be cruel and painful. What I want us to understand is that no Christian gets a pass. No follower of Jesus is exempted from this.

Look at how the Apostle Paul put it in 2 Timothy 3:12. There are no exceptions here, no qualifications. It's very blunt. What does God say to us? *"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* There it is. Now, of course it's possible to be a church member and never get any kind of opposition or persecution. It's possible to be so tame, so quiet, so non-offensive, blending in with the world so comfortably, that no one would ever suspect there's anything objectionable in you that they wouldn't agree with. They'd never be confronted with the claims of Christ or with the challenge of a holy God, because you're a chameleon. You're blending right in.

That's how a lot of professing Christians are. There's no chance they're going to get persecuted, because no one really knows that they stand for Jesus. But if you want to be godly, if your life is so filled with the Holy Spirit that wherever you go you're reminding people of Jesus, then you can expect that people in the world will treat you the same way they treated Jesus. He came from heaven to earth. What does Acts 10:38 say about Him? *"He went about doing good"* to everyone, all the time. He did nothing but good—healing people, relieving pain and suffering, declaring truth and love. Was there ever a kinder man? Was there ever a more gentle, more loving, more truth-filled or wiser man than Jesus? No.

But how did we respond? We treated Him with rage and spite. *"He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not"* (Isaiah 53:3). Then we scourged Him and whipped Him. We crowned Him with thorns and nailed Him to the cross. That's how we treated Jesus, and Jesus says we can expect that same kind of treatment from the world as His followers.

If you're born again and the new nature of Jesus lives in you, some people are really going to give you a hard time. They might not even rationally understand this, but it's simply because you remind them of Jesus—and they hate you for it. Martin Lloyd-Jones says when this happens, we should wear it as a badge of honor. I love how he puts this: "The world, without realizing it,

can, by persecuting you, pay you a great tribute and do you a great kindness. By treating you in the same way our Lord was treated, it is giving you an absolute proof that you are a child of God.”

“What a compliment,” is what Lloyd-Jones is saying. If you’re treated like Christ in this world, wear it as a badge of honor. Be glad to share in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings. Be prepared for the reality of persecution. Don’t insulate yourself or distance yourself from brothers and sisters around the world who are experiencing it right now. Pray for them. And don’t be surprised or naïve about the prospect of being persecuted yourself. If you want to live a godly life in Christ, you will be persecuted. Now, that seems scary, doesn’t it?

I was reminded of the story Corrie ten Boom told of when she was a young girl and the Nazis were coming into Holland where she lived. She was afraid that if they came for her, she would not have the courage to stand. She told her dad how afraid she was and he said to her, “When you are going to take a journey on the train, do I give you your ticket three weeks early, or just as you are getting on the train?” She said, “You give it to me when we’re getting on the train.” He said, “So God will give you the special strength you need to be strong in the face of death just when you need it—not before.”

There will be grace. What will that grace look like? It will look like what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 4:8-10:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

That’s what the grace will look like—persecuted, but not forsaken. I love how the Apostle Peter describes it in 1 Peter 4:12-14:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

When will the Spirit of glory rest upon you? Just when you need it—not before. The grace will be there at precisely the point when we need the strength.

I want you to notice something here in Romans 12:14. It’s not calling us merely to endure persecution. It’s not just saying, “Put up with it. Bear it.” Of course, it is telling us to do that, but it’s not just telling us that. It’s not merely telling us not to retaliate when we are persecuted. Of

course, it's saying that, but it's saying more than that. God's Word is calling us—not just to a passive response to persecution—it's calling us to an active movement toward the persecutor in love. It's saying to us, "Bless those who persecute you."

We're thinking, "Wait. What did that just say? Bless?" So he repeats it, in case we didn't hear it the first time. "Bless, and do not curse." That's a radical response to persecution.

2. Get empowered for a radical response to persecution.

How do you get empowered to respond like that? Let me read you the story of Fatima from the article about that church in Iran. This story is very moving to me. Fatima's earliest memories were of being raped by her brothers. At age 11 she was sold into marriage to a young drug addict, who abused her and then divorced her when she was 17. Upon returning home, she was raped again, until she decided to leave.

On the street, she heard the gospel preached and she trusted Jesus. In time, she married a Christian man. As they were receiving training in evangelism and church planting—and here's the key phrase—Fatima felt called to go back home and witness to her family. Her entire family repented and gave their lives to the Lord. The first church Fatima and her husband planted was in her childhood home.

Blessing, not cursing. That's an astonishing example. Friends, this does not mean that someone who has been abused or molested or raped should go back to the abuser and be vulnerable to further abuse. That's not what this story is telling you. Somehow God had brought Fatima to a point where she could safely, with her husband, return to her family and bear witness to them. That's not always possible, or wise, or timely.

And being a blessing to our persecutors does not mean that we shouldn't seek legal rights for Christians around the world. Remember what Paul and Silas did in Philippi, after they had been unlawfully beaten in prison. When they were released, they protested, "We are Roman citizens. Our rights have been violated." They wanted it on record that Christians had been treated illegally. So we can use the legal system today to appeal for religious liberty. When something illegal is done against Christians—whether it's in our own country or around the world—we should defend and advocate for civil rights and religious freedom. We should ask God to raise up strong, intelligent, respected lawyers, politicians, journalists and economists who can advocate for policies to protect and advance religious liberty. None of that is inconsistent with Romans 12:14. It's not wrong to resist and repel persecution where we are able.

But Romans 12:14 is talking about when we are persecuted. How should we respond? We must not respond with cursing, asking God to send our enemies to hell. That's what we do when

we say “God damn you” to someone. We’re asking God to curse that person. Instead, we must respond with blessing, praying that God would be as merciful to our persecutors as He has been to us in Christ. That’s what you’re called to here, to pray that God would be as merciful to those who are abusing you as He has been to you in Christ.

I don’t know about you, but I think that means restricting your diet of cable news and political commentary that probably serves only to agitate your spirit and anger you, making you bitter and wanting to curse people who are on the other side. That’s not love. That’s not blessing when we get angry like that. We can be a lot like Jesus’ disciples in Luke 9, a story that is a little bit humorous:

As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. He sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival. But the people of the village did not welcome Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. When James and John saw this, they said to Jesus, “Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?” (Luke 9:51-54 NLT)

Brilliant, guys. Have you ever felt like that? You’re watching people advocating for policies that you know are against Christianity and what you would love to see in our country. Your heart is so angry, it’s almost like you want to call down fire from heaven to consume them. Jesus rebukes you, when that’s what’s in your heart. Jesus says, “Oh, no. Bless those who persecute you. Bless; do not curse.” *“Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went on their way preaching the gospel.”*

Now, if you read the Psalms—as I love to do—you’ll come across numerous prayers asking God to execute judgment on His enemies. They’re called “Psalms of imprecation” or “imprecatory Psalms.” Paul himself, in 1 Corinthians 16:22, almost sounds like he’s doing the same thing. Listen to what he says: *“If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.”* So what is it, Paul: Romans 12:14 or 1 Corinthians 16:22? Are you disobeying your own counsel here when you say, “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed”?

I found this distinction by a man named William Ross to be helpful. “While Paul instructs us not to curse others, he does not prohibit asking God to pour out his justice.” It’s a subtle but important distinction. We’re not to act like little gods, thinking we know how God should administer His justice in every situation. “We can pray, ‘Father, save the lost!’” That’s blessing those who persecute you. “Save them, Lord! Show the same mercy to them that You’ve shown to me.” We can pray that. And at the same time we can pray, “Father, pour out Your wrath upon evil and upon evildoers,” as the Psalms teach us to pray. We can submit to God’s justice and to

God's mercy simultaneously, as Ross points out, "without assuming that only one of the two options will bring Him glory."

God has amazing wisdom in how He is able to be both just and merciful. He's working all this out. Our attitude toward those who abuse us or persecute us should be to pray that they would experience God's mercy—even as we trust in God's justice, which is good.

Have you read the story of Louis Zamperini in the book Unbroken? It's quite a book. He describes the torture he endured in a Japanese prison camp during World War II under that maniacally cruel prison warden named Mutsuhiro Watanabe—nicknamed "The Bird." It's just horrific. It's a wonder Zamperini came out of there alive, after all he suffered.

For years he was filled with anger and hatred, seething revenge, plotting to return to Japan so he could murder The Bird. He was giving over to depression and alcoholism, which were destroying his life. In 1949, he attended a Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles, where he heard the gospel and believed. Jesus started doing a work of transformation in his heart and the desire for vengeance started to go away. He was empowered by God's grace in 1952 to go back and preach the gospel to 850 Japanese war criminals—former tormenters and abusers—in the prison where they were being held. After he spoke, he requested a meeting with his former guards. He says:

I looked out and saw them coming down the aisle, and of course I recognized each one of them vividly. I didn't even think of my reaction. I jumped off the stage, ran down and threw my arms around them—and they withdrew from me. They couldn't understand the forgiveness. I went and told them about Jesus.

One of the soldiers wondered, "How can you forgive these men who persecuted you so badly?" "Well, Mr. Masaki, the greatest story of forgiveness the world has ever known was the cross. When Christ was crucified, He said, 'Forgive them, Father. They know not what they are doing.'" I said, "It's only through the cross that I can come back here and say this, but I do forgive you." He responded to the invitation to become a Christian.

Zamperini tried to meet with The Bird in 1952, but The Bird wouldn't meet with him. Then some people told him they thought The Bird had committed suicide. Later on he found out that was not true. Then in 1998, as an old man, Louis Zamperini went back to Tokyo for the Olympics, and he carried with him a letter for The Bird. The Bird still refused to meet with him. So he passed along this letter to the man who had tortured and dehumanized him for so long:

To Mutsuhiro Watanabe,

As a result of my prisoner of war experience under your unwarranted and unreasonable punishment, my post-war life became a nightmare. The tension of stress and humiliation caused me to hate with a vengeance. Under your discipline, my rights—not only as a prisoner of war but also as a human being—were stripped from me. It was a struggle to maintain enough dignity and hope to live until the war's end.

The post-war nightmares caused my life to crumble. But thanks to a confrontation with God through the evangelist Billy Graham, I committed my life to Christ. Love has replaced the hate I had for you. Christ said, "Forgive your enemies and pray for them." When I heard that you had committed suicide, I was sad. When I found you were alive, at that moment—like the others—I also forgave you and now would hope that you would also become a Christian.

Friends, it's clear from this story what empowers a man to bless and not to curse. What empowers a woman to bless those who persecute her? It's when you come to the cross of Jesus and realize that's exactly what God has done for you. You were persecuting Him with your sin, yet He was the Father Who ran with arms open wide to meet you. You see the Man upon the cross. You see your sin upon His shoulders. You listen to the crowds chanting, "Crucify Him!" and you feel ashamed. "I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers." You hear Jesus say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" and you repent. You realize that He was dying for you. You say, "It was my sin that held Him there until it was accomplished."

Then you look at your persecutor and realize that he or she is really not that different from you. They too are sinning against God and Christ, but they're blind to it. They're in bondage to the devil, dead in their trespasses and sins, following the course of the world, following the prince of the power of the air—the spirit who is now at work in the sons of disobedience (Ephesians 2:1-10). You are no different from them, really. We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind. We were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, saved us by His grace. He was so kind to us when we were persecuting Him.

Let His Holy Spirit fill you like He did for that holy servant Stephen. When the crowd was enraged and ground their teeth at him, as the stones started to pummel him, what does Acts 7 tell us? Stephen "*gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand*

of God.” Jesus rose from His seat of honor, as Stephen’s Defender and Advocate, ready to welcome him into heaven.

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Blessing, not cursing. To this, you and I are called:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps... When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:21-24).

Let me invite you to just gaze upon Jesus for a while. You may be disbelieving in Jesus this morning. You may have come in here fighting against Jesus. Jesus wants you to know He died for you. He loves you. There will be a day of cursing for those who don’t love the Lord Jesus Christ. But today is not that day. Right now is the day of salvation. Jesus is willing to bless all who have persecuted Him. No matter how badly you have sinned against the Lord, He offers you blessing and forgiveness. He offers you life, freedom and eternal love. That’s Who our Savior is.

If you’ve received that love, if you’ve received that forgiveness, if you are trusting in Jesus, He wants to strengthen you to go into this world of hate and to be a blessing, because you’ve gazed upon His beauty and you’ve experienced His love.

Let’s take a minute to silently think about His love, to gaze upon the loveliness of Christ, to prepare our hearts to feast at His Table.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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