



The Fruitful Heart

Matthew 5:11-12, Ephesians 4:30-32

All of the Beatitudes point out the benefits and blessings of allowing God's will to be done in our lives. When we are persecuted because of Christ we are assured that we will have a reward in heaven. We may take this as a sign that we truly belong to Christ because he was persecuted before us. "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, will be persecuted." (II Timothy 3:12) However, the reward we are

promised will surely make our trials and persecutions seem insignificant. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12)

Jesus reminds us that the prophets before us were also persecuted. The prophets received their call directly from God and spoke with God's authority. Their predominant theme was to call God's chosen people to repentance when they strayed from His commands. Some prophets were called to do strange things: Isaiah went barefoot and naked (Isaiah 20:2-3), Ezekiel lay on his left side 390 days (Ezekiel 4:1-8), John the Baptist lived in the wilderness and wore camel's hair clothing. (Mark 1:6) But God enabled them to withstand the bias and criticism of the people to whom they were called to speak. Many prophets were persecuted and some were killed because those who were not following God refused to hear their message. Jesus himself was the greatest prophet and was rejected, insulted and persecuted in many ways before he was crucified.

Despite opposition of the political and religious leaders Christ forgave those who persecuted Him and continued to preach his message of redemption to the people. He is our example of how to live in a world that will never know how to appreciate us. Jesus continued to teach despite all opposition. He was not overbearing and did not force assent from his listeners. He did not give them dogmatic answers but lead them into thinking for themselves. Most of all he taught by example. His loving spirit, when his disciples questioned or failed, overcame all their doubts and fears. When they fully understood the message they went out to imitate him and to fulfill the Great Commission to "go into all the world and preach the gospel".

As "Women of the Word," we will never go wrong by following Christ's example. Read Ephesians 4:30-32. Often we are tempted to be bitter or angry and to seek revenge on those who have wronged us. But if we follow Jesus' example we must forgive those who sin against us. As long as we do not forgive, the person we bear a grievance against is more in control of our lives than we are. In forgiving we are released. We then can follow in Jesus' footsteps to be forgiving to our persecutors and compassionate to our brothers and sisters. If we only stop to think what a great event it was when we received God's forgiveness and what he forgave in us, how can we not be forgiving of others who need our forgiveness?

When clay is put into a mold, pressure must be applied in order to form the clay into the exact shape desired. If we study God's word daily, it will apply pressure on us each day and mold us into what God desires for us. Dedicating our lives to being the best disciples of Christ we can possibly be will cause our lives to become models that will draw others to Christ.

Some followers of Jesus are physical followers only. They hear His teachings but never take them into their hearts and apply them to their lives. Some think His teachings are only for the spiritual realm and are not possible to follow in reality. They may believe that there are just too many worldly pleasures to which they would have to say "no". They just do not see that it is not what we say "no" to that is important. What is important is depending completely on the power of the One to whom we say "yes".

Whether we witness evangelistically with teaching and preaching or if we simply allow our lives to be a witness for Christ, discipleship does have a cost. It requires a commitment to take Christ at His word and to put all our trust in Him. Jesus did not make all the promises of rewards we have studied in the Beatitudes as only an inducement to get us to do the things we should be doing. Christ desires to see us blessed. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."(John 10:10) Possessing the Christian characteristics as Jesus taught in the Beatitudes will result in the fullest life possible.

Heart-to-Heart Activities:

1. If your group participated in "activity one" after the first Bible study of the year, then you should now disclose the names of prayer partners to one another. Give an opportunity for sharing about prayers that have been answered during this year.
2. If your group participated in "activity two" after the first Bible study of the year, the leader should pass out the envelopes that were collected during that session to the person whose name is listed on the front (or the women brought their own envelopes back). Give a few minutes for each to review what each had written. Then give an opportunity for each to say if they believe they have made progress on their Christian characteristics.

Reflection Questions:

- ♥ Think of a time when you were persecuted. What is your typical reaction or response when you are persecuted? Are you able to live out Matthew 5:12?
- ♥ Jesus was persecuted but forgave his persecutors. Why is it important that we forgive those who persecute us?
- ♥ How does a person we refuse to forgive have control over our lives?
- ♥ Why is it important that we model forgiveness to those who are not Christ's disciples?

- ♥ With a neighbor, discuss the idea that we are to live exactly as Jesus taught. How can we do that? Is it possible? What prevents us from living that way? What happens when we do?

Prayer:

God of abundance,

Enable us as disciples of Christ to be prepared for persecution when it comes. Help us not to become disheartened by it but to “rejoice and be glad” because our security is in You. May we submit to be molded into what you desire for our lives. Teach us to be forgiving of others as you have been forgiving of us. Give us hearts that are faithful in following your message so that fruit will be harvested for Your kingdom. In Jesus’ name, Amen