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BE A VICTOR NOT A VICTIM!

Today's Text: Matt. 5: 1-12

Extracts:

And seeing the multitude, (Jesus) went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and *taught them, saying, "... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* [Matt. 5: 1-2, 10-12]

In the November 2008 US elections, Elizabeth Dole was seeking re-election as Republican Senator from the State of North Carolina.¹ She had a good chance of being reelected, given that she had the national name recognition and North Carolina was relatively a conservative state. However, as the campaign heated up, Dole came out with a video ad against her Democratic opponent, Kay Hagan, in which she referred to her as godless and suggested that she had received money from the Godless Americans, a group of atheists. The television ad featured a voice-over by a woman with a voice close to Hagan's own saying, "There is no God." Hagan was a Presbyterian minister. In spite of media criticism, and a defamation suit filed by Hagan, Senator Dole stood by her "facts." On November 4, 2008, Hagan roundly defeated Dole, 53% to 44%. Soon after the elections, Hagan dropped her lawsuit against Dole.

Dole's claims against her opponent were false and meant to damage Hagan's chances of winning. After winning, Hagan was well placed to seek her pound of flesh by following through with her defamation suit and possibly claiming damages. However, by dropping the case against Dole who had falsely maligned her, Hagan chose to be a victor instead of being a victim. If you had been in her place, what would you have done?

In this week's study, Jesus is asking believers to do much more when they face persecution in order to turn their earthly ordeals for His sake into victory. Let us find out how to go about that.

¹ Story based on the following sources: "Dole's Second 'Godless' Ad Adds 'Facts' on Hagan (VIDEO)," blogmyway.org, Oct. 30, 2008, <http://www.zimbio.com/Elizabeth+Dole/articles/7/Dole+Second+Godless+Ad+Adds+Facts+Hagan+VIDEO>; and "Hagan outs Dole as senator from N.C.," www.timesoftheinternet.com, Nov. 4, 2008.

1. The victim may not always be the underdog!

A persecutor is somebody (or group) that subjects another person (or group) to cruel or unfair treatment on a systematic basis on account of such a person or group's cultural or religious beliefs or values. For example, the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel after the death of Joseph. Under the apartheid system in South Africa, the government jailed Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders for championing equality for all races irrespective of skin colour. Ethnic cleansing has featured in recent times in such places as Bosnia, Ruanda and Darfur. Even at family level, some members may feel that they are being discriminated against on account of their gender or birth order!

Wherever there is a persecutor, there are victims, that is, people who are adversely affected by the actions of their persecutors. In this case, victims are the ones who are provoked and harassed. It may be for a season or on an ongoing basis. For example, some children are harassed at school by bullies before they are able to defend themselves. In the office, some people may be facing sexual harassment from their bosses or colleagues. Refusal to cooperate in ungodly acts is standing in the way of some employees' job security or advancement or even job satisfaction. In your church, the new minister may be under investigation for alleged misappropriation of funds. Deep down in your heart, you know that he has been framed because of his firm stand on promoting a God-fearing rather than a user-friendly place of worship. What do you do in such circumstances?

As the affected party, you can choose to play the victim or the victor. However, whatever you choose to do has its ramifications. We shall concentrate on cases where you have been falsely accused on account of your principled stand. Let us examine both cases:

a) *Case 1: You can choose to play the victim*

Everybody knows that you are the one who is provoked or harassed. You may be helpless in that you cannot stop it or successfully defend yourself. In some cases, you may be able to defend yourself but you have chosen to play the victim. What does that mean? It means that you will fret and worry to set the records straight. You will portray yourself as the underdog and the one who needs other people's understanding or sympathy. That road has its advantages and drawbacks.

If you have the means to defend yourself and the facts are in your favour, it may be a good idea to fight for your good name. In most cases, however, your enemies are better organized and they strike at the point where you cannot easily or soon enough fight back. Take the case of Naboth whose vineyard was next to the palace of Ahab, king of Israel. The king wanted it for a vegetable garden and offered to pay Naboth for it. The poor man

refused, saying, “The Lord forbid that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you.” The king complained to his wicked wife, Jezebel. She told her husband that it was not a problem for her to obtain the piece of land for him. She wrote letters in her husband’s name to the elders and the nobles dwelling in the same city with Naboth. She told them to proclaim a fast, and she set Naboth with high honour among the people. Meanwhile, she had arranged for two scoundrels to come into that assembly and testify that they had heard Naboth blaspheme God and the king. Under the law of Moses, truth is established in the mouth of two or more witnesses. So, the people stoned Naboth to death. As soon as they had told Jezebel of Naboth’s death, she gave his vineyard to her husband, and he paid nothing for it [**1 Kgs 21: 1-18**]. Naboth was too dead to defend his innocence!

When you brood over insults or injuries against you, especially on false charges, and refuse to forgive your persecutors for such offences, you are playing the victim. Every night, victims delight in reading before going to bed Psalm 35, especially where it says, “Let those be put to shame and brought to dishonour who seek my life ... who plot my hurt. Let them be like chaff before the wind, and let the angel of the Lord chase them” [**Ps. 35: 4-5**]. Is that how to pray for your enemies? What if your success is the source of your persecution? What if envy is their basis for attacking you for no just cause? How do you know that your vengeance can adequately compensate your hurt? Is that not why God has said that vengeance is His and He will repay, and that you should overcome evil with good [**Rom. 12: 19-21**]?

b) *Case 2: You can choose to be the victor*

People have various reasons for laying false charges against you or for persecuting you. Envy may be a major reason, as we had earlier mentioned. For example, Daniel was the most prominent of the three governors that were next in rank to Darius, king of the Medes. Out of envy, the other two governors conspired with the satraps to frame Daniel’s downfall. They said, “We shall not find any charge against this Daniel *unless we find it against him concerning the law of his God* [**Dan. 6: 1-5**]. They deceived the king to decree that those who prayed to other than his god within the following thirty days be thrown into the lion’s den. For continuing to pray to the one and only true God, Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den [**v. 6-17**]. Daniel’s offence was his blessing for serving God that had granted him favour with King Darius.

Sometimes, your offence is upholding the truth even when it is politically incorrect. The prophet Jeremiah found himself in that kind of situation. His offence was that he had told the people of Judah God’s message not to resist the Assyrians but to surrender and go into exile in Babylon for their safety. [**Jer. 38: 1-2**]. The princes advised the king (Zedekiah) to let them

put Jeremiah to death for weakening their morale. The king handed him over to them and they threw him into a dungeon. Luckily, there was no water in it but Jeremiah sank in the mire. He would have died there but for the Ethiopian eunuch, Ebed-Melech, who stole away to the king to plead for the prophet's release [vv. 4-10].

You can choose to play the victim but, as we had seen earlier, that may not achieve your desired end. Instead, you should play the victor. In this case, you look at the total picture of your experience and look up to God for your deliverance. For example, Jeremiah did no wrong but he was being persecuted for his righteousness. What was his attitude to his persecutors? He kept telling them the truth of God's message. In due course, king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon attacked and sacked Jerusalem. He took King Zedekiah and the princes captive to Babylon, just as the prophet had foretold. Moreover, the invading king set Jeremiah free and told his commanders to do as the prophet wished- whether to stay or to go to Babylon [Jer. 39: 1-12]. Did he gloat over the fall of his persecutors? No. Instead, he chose to remain and to minister to their needs. Even when some elders among the remnants came to him to seek the Lord's guidance whether to stay or flee to Egypt, Jeremiah said, "I have heard. In deed, I will pray to the Lord your God according to your words, and it shall be that whatever the Lord answers you, I will declare it to you" [Jer. 42: 1-2]. That is not the tone of a bitter victim! That is the attitude of a clear victor.

As long as we want to practise our faith in Christ, we shall face and suffer persecution [2 Tim. 3: 12]. In the Sermon on the Mount, the first part of which we shall study presently, Jesus Himself teaches believers what to do in order to reap abundant blessings from persecution.

2. Jesus on the Beatitudes

We all saw the huge crowds of 250,000 people that the then US Democratic Presidential nominee, Barack Obama, addressed in Berlin, Germany during the summer of 2008. Have you ever asked how they were invited and brought together? I am sure it was by the power of Internet communications that the Obama campaign team has used to revolutionize political campaigns in America and, in deed, all over the world. Many of those invited to the venue might have read his books or heard of his political exploits on the campaign trail. They might have seen him too on television. But they came by invitation to see him in person and to hear his eloquent speech.

In the time of Jesus, there was no Internet, You Tube, or cable television. But, as He "went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people, ... *His fame went throughout all Syria*, and they brought to Him (all their

sick and tormented) and He healed them.” As a result, “*great multitudes followed Him*” from all over Galilee, Judea and the region beyond the Jordan [**Matt. 4: 23-25**]. It was that multitude hungry for food, healing and salvation that Jesus taught the new doctrine. When it was over, “the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them *as one having authority, and not as the scribes*” [**Matt. 7: 28-29**]. He had authority because He spoke as Immanuel, God with us!

What is the difference between *teaching* and *preaching*? Let us use an example to illustrate both concepts. After the Holy Spirit had descended on the disciples on Pentecost Sunday, Peter spoke to the multitudes that gathered and he began by saying, “Men of Israel, *hear these words*” [**Acts 2: 22**]. That was preaching. He went on to *preach* to them about Jesus and His salvation ministry. After they had heard him and gladly received his message, about three thousand were baptized [**vv. 40-41**]. What happened to those who had believed? They “continued *steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship in the breaking of bread and in prayers*” [**v. 42**]. That part is teaching, that is, deepening the knowledge of those that had already believed. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he said, “I ... could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for *until now you were not able to receive it, until even now you are still not able*” [**1 Cor. 3: 1-2**]. He wrote them to consolidate what he had taught them.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is *teaching* what it takes to be happy and live a life that can bring you to the kingdom of heaven. The message is for those who want to aspire beyond material and physical blessings from God to pay premium attention to the more important journey to heaven [**Matt. 6: 33**]. Just like the crowds that thronged around Jesus in those days, many people today come to church or revivals merely to obtain material or earthly blessings. After that, they scam like a stray dog that has snatched a bone from the pack. The righteous, as used by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (and in Scripture), refers to the person who walks by faith [**Gen. 15: 6; Rom. 4:1-3**]. Therefore, Jesus is addressing you too, right now.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus pronounced the blessings that eight groups of people will receive in heaven in return for their earthly ordeals for Christ’s sake. They are as follows [**Matt. 5: 3-10**]:

- The humble in spirit shall inherit the kingdom of heaven
- Those who mourn shall be comforted
- The meek shall inherit the earth
- Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled
- Those who are merciful shall obtain mercy
- The pure in heart shall see God
- Peacemakers shall be called sons of God
- For those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, the kingdom of heaven is theirs

For those eight groups of people to receive the blessings pronounced by Jesus, they must be ready to face and endure persecution. So, He reassured them as follows [vv. 11-12]:

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Just for striving to live godly in Christ, people will revile and persecute you and make false allegations against you. Yet, Jesus is *teaching* you to rejoice and be exceedingly glad because the blessings that follow the victory are worth the pains!

3. Conclusion: The gain exceeds the pain!

Writing to the elect pilgrims of the Dispersion, Peter said, “Since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that *he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God*” [1 Pet. 4: 1-2]. Therefore, you can now afford to ignore the distractions that your persecutors and detractors represent as you march on the road to eternal salvation in heaven. You cannot fight for yourself because only God knows the appropriate judgment that He will mete on your enemies. You cannot fight for yourself because you may be the very cause of your persecution- thanks to your success!

So, when they falsely revile and persecute you for Christ’s sake, you are blessed. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad because your reward is great in heaven. Be a victor, not a victim.