

Matthew's Directives for the Persecuted.

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Disclosure: I, along with most Western biblical scholars, have never experienced persecution because of my faith or religious practices. The following exploration of a religious text designed in part to sustain persecuted believers is therefore inherently limited.

I. Guiding Assumptions

- a. The Gospel of Matthew is functionally designed as a manual for a mission intended to reach the non-Jewish world, though its first phases are clearly Jewish (10:5-8). Evidences include: (1) the inclusion of four non-Jewish women in the Messiah's genealogy (1:2-7); (2) the logical sequence of the five discourses from inauguration on the mountain of revelation, known as the Sermon on the Mount, to the triumphant return of the Son of Man (chaps. 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 23-25); and (3) the mountain-top commissioning of the eleven that concludes the manual (28:18-20).
- b. In the briefest form, the twice attested demand, "Repent for the Empire of Heaven is at hand" (3:2, 5:17), accounts for the subsequent development of the Sermon on the Mount, including the Beatitudes (5:1-12), the pregnant communal identities as "Salt of the Earth" and "Light of the World" (5:13-16), and the five antitheses, case studies of the assertive "the good works" that illustrate the pervasive character of the Empire on earth (5:21-48).
- c. The mission to declare and implant allegiance to the Empire of Heaven has two distinct phases evident in the Gospel of Matthew and hinted as early as the dual audience of the inauguration address which Jesus convenes (4:23-5:1, 7:28-29), namely the crowds Jesus has gathered and at least four of his disciples.
- d. First, Jesus sends out the "Twelve Disciples"/"Twelve Apostles" (10:1-4) to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" where they will expand the range of Jesus' reach and imitate his itinerant healing, teaching and preaching of "the gospel of the Empire." (9:35-10:15). Even the designation, the "Twelve Apostles", evokes the numerous promises of God to re-convene the scattered tribes (Isaiah 11:11-12; Ezekiel 37:12-14; Jeremiah 30:3; Amos 9:14, 15. Jesus promises the Twelve that they will be sitting on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes. (Matthew 19:28).
- e. What about those who respond to the apostles' call? The resident converts to the Empire of Heaven of necessity continue to live in their villages and

urban apartments. But now they too become part of the “Light of the World.” They are called to bear witness through their highly visible “good works” to the reality and character of “your Father who is in Heaven”, resulting in those witnessing their works praising Him. (5:16, 45). The remainder of the Sermon on the Mount provides assurance and warnings to the resident clusters of converts.

II. Persecution: The Reality of Resistance to the Empire of Heaven

- a. Obviously, the dangers facing the followers of Jesus involved more than persecution. Internal strife and wolves in sheep’s clothing could destroy a fragile fictive family (5:21-24; 7:15-20. Cf. 12:49). But the anticipated dangers from persecution accompanying the expansion of the mission show up early in the Sermon on the Mount. Persecution is highlighted in the dominant position of the final beatitude, itself expanded and personalized, (“you [pl.], “me”) (5:10-12). The persecution here [Gk. verb διώκω; noun διωγμός] takes the form of insult (Gk. ὀνειδίζω) and a more generic “uttering all sorts of evil against you (5:10-12, Gk. εἰπωσιν πᾶν πονηρὸν ῥῆμα καθ’ ὑμῶν). The persecution described here is essentially verbal, amounting to the destruction of reputation and allegations impossible to quash in a culture centered on honor. The ramifications for social displacement and exclusion, along with financial loss can be readily imagined. Even groundless allegations lay the groundwork for severe reprisals.
- b. The communities invested in the Empire of Heaven are directly urged to not hide their identity but let their “light shine before men” (5:14-15). Lamps are lit to lighten the entire room. It is not mere modesty needing to be overcome. The threats of hostile reception and persecution are much more likely. Jesus notes that attempts to hide the light are futile, since the community is like a city on a hill (5: 14). Efforts to hide one’s loyalty from neighbors in the multi-story apartments that comprised the majority of urban housing and even from one’s family members would likely be impossible. See also 10:34-39 where Jesus ironically describes his mission as breaking up family ties, specifically between father and son, mother and daughter, and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Even stronger, is the prospect of family members putting one another to death because of loyalty to Jesus and the Empire of God. (10:21). Missing from the list are the breakup of husband and wife ties. See 5:31-32 on the indissolubility of marital vows.

- c. The last antithesis (5:43-48) sets forth the dual command to “love your enemies and pray on behalf of those persecuting you” (5:43-44). Typically, the placement of the final item in a series lends added weight or urgency to that item. As with the arrangement of the Beatitudes, the final item in the series of the Antithesis confronts the specter of persecution.
- d. The mission instructions to the Twelve Apostles in chap. 10, especially in vs. 16-39 are overwhelmingly focused on the reality of persecution in all forms awaiting the itinerant apostle. The itinerant emissaries of the Empire of Heaven are advised to “be wise as serpents and harmless as doves,” and when persecuted in one town, prudently flee to the next (vs. 16, 19). Martyrdom is not to be sought. Hostile legal action, physical torture, and even the loss of life are to be expected from Jewish and non-Jewish persecutors. One is reminded of the parallels of abuse suffered by Paul in the book of Acts and specified in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27.
- e. The third discourse in chap. 13, provides a collations of parables illuminating the reception and earthly growth of the Empire of Heaven. The specter of persecution arises in the parable of the four soils. Jesus privately explains that the seed falling on the rocky soil represents the eager convert who receives the Word with joy until tribulation [Gk. θλίψις], or persecution [Gk. διωγμός] arises. (13:21)
- f. Close attention to modifications Matthew made with the Markan account of what defiles (Mark 7:21-23) is revealing as to the nature of persecution Matthew presents as imminent:

Mark 7:20-22: *“What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, **slander** [alt. blasphemy, Gk. βλασφημία], pride, foolishness.*

Matthew 15:18-19: *But comes **out of the mouth** proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, **false witness** [Gk. ψευδομαρτυρία], **slander** [Gk. βλασφημία]*

The alternate translation of the Greek, βλασφημία, as blasphemy against God, is unlikely since the rest of the evil is directed towards other humans. The addition of “out of the mouth” echoes “utter all kinds of evil” (5:11) and emphasizes verbal assault. The final two items in Matthew’s list are verbal.

Matthew's movement of "slander" [βλασφημία] to the dominant final position on the list shows the significance of this threat to the community of believers. "False witness" [Gk. ψευδομαρτυρία presumes legal settings where believers are on trial. Matthew sets forth Jesus' trial as a reminder of the threat of false witnesses in a judicial setting. False testimony was welcomed at Jesus' hearing before Caiphas. Many false witnesses came forward but none managed to corroborate the witness of any of the others, thus falling short of the lowest judicial standard (26:59-60; cf. Deuteronomy 19:15 and Matthew 18:16).

- g. The identity of "the least of these my brothers" in Jesus' description of the separation of the nations (25:40) by their treatment of the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned, has generated substantial controversy. The author of Matthew may well have the traveling emissaries of the Empire of God in view, those who travel without resources for daily sustenance (10:9, 10) and face the prospects of imprisonment prior to trial (19:17-20). Alternately, given Jesus' identification of his true brothers as the one doing the will of my Father in heaven (12:46-49), the least of these my brothers" may be any traveling disciple. See 10:42 where even a cup of cold water given "one of these little ones" because "he is a disciple" will qualify as worthy of heavenly reward.

III. Reinforcing Resilience: Re-reading Matthew for Resources

- a. Matthew provides up-front statements of the likelihood of persecution, whether social isolation or a more organized or extreme form. Any would be follower of Jesus was called "to take up his cross and follow me." (16:25). To become a follower of Jesus and a witness to the Empire of Heaven could actually complicate one's life. Both John the Baptist and Jesus, the original proclaimers of the Empire of God, are executed.
- b. The communal context, the plural "you" in 5:11-12 implies a circle of support. Resilience under the pressure of persecution is not forged through solitary, silent endurance. Resilience is hardened when forged in a communal setting. When the individual weakens, the community upholds.
- c. The beatitude of 5:10-12 sets forth assurances designed to strengthen communal resilience. First, Jesus assures that doing what is right ensures a present placement in the Empire of Heaven—"for theirs is [Gk. ἐστίν] the Empire of heaven" (5:10). What Matthew extracts from the generic

“righteousness” in 5:10 probably aligns with the “good works” performed openly (5:16). Note that the “righteousness” not to be practiced “before men” (6:1), turns out to be traditional Jewish religious observances of prayer, fasting, and the giving of alms (6:2-6, 16-18).

- d. The future reward for enduring persecution is “great”, so great that the only appropriate response to persecution is for the community to “rejoice and be glad” in the present (5:12). A festive re-alignment of reality. While not evident here the reward will be given where it counts—in heaven.
- e. Any external efforts of Jewish leaders to shame and diminish the community of believers is countered with the claim that standing up for the Empire’s Messiah will actually catapult them to the status of the honored prophets of Israel’s past (5:12, cf. 10:41).
- f. The prudent choice when faced with the prospect of death on account of following a crucified Jewish criminal is to choose allegiance to Jesus. He pledges to acknowledge “before my Father who is in heaven” the one who acknowledges him at great personal cost (10:32). Life lost for Jesus’ sake is life assured, life “found” in the end (10:39, repeated in 16:25).
- g. The long section on the futility of worry over material needs, including food, water and clothing, asserts that these needs of one seeking “first God’s Empire and his righteousness” will be met. “Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.” (6:28-33).
- h. In characteristic fashion Matthew presents both the carrot and the stick approach. Denying Jesus “before men” will result in Jesus’ denial “before my Father who is in heaven” (10:33). To save one’s life by denying Jesus is to lose it (10:39, repeated in 16:25).
- i. Overall, the antitheses of 5:21-48 present a lifestyle of assertive action on behalf of the other, whether brother or beggar. The dramatic “turn the other cheek” and “walk the second mile” are surprising responses to public shaming and coercion. A re-reading of Matthew 5:38-42 in light of the concluding section on the love of the enemy suggests that a powerful source of resilience lies in the lifestyle of assertive love on behalf of friend or enemy. There is a higher purpose than mere survival. The persecuted acts as an agent of “your Father who is in heaven.” Hostile behavior becomes the occasion for “letting your light shine.”
- j. Assured of the Father’s immediate and ultimate care, the community of light transcends the unending pattern of revenge, even reaching the height of prayer for the well-being of the persecutors, whether material or spiritually. Thus, the community’s creative responses to persecution reveal the

character of “Your Father in heaven” and fulfill the command, “You must be perfect [Gk. τέλειος, mature, fully developed in a moral sense], even as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48).

IV. Widening the Circle

- a. The religious persecution of Jews by non-Jews including martyrdom, has generated a body of literature, including 1 and 2 Maccabees, and Midrash Eleh Ezkerah. A comparison of the means of strengthening resolve in these and other Jewish texts with the Gospel of Matthew could reveal both the elements shared and where Jesus’ approach seen through the lens of Matthew differed.
- b. A wider survey beckons noting the approaches to resilience in the face of persecution in the remaining literature of the New Testament and other first century Christian literature.
- c. As the largest world religion, Christianity is also the most widely persecuted. A comparison of resilient coping with persecution experienced by contemporary Christian communities with strategies set forth in Matthew could be profitable at several levels.