

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

***Forsaken For Whose Sake?***

*Psalm 22; Matthew 5.1-2, 10-12*

Russ Dean, August 20, 2006



Dr. Marion Lawson’s office was on South Broad Street, only a few blocks from my childhood home. I hated that place. If you ask me, it was nothing more than a well-disguised torture chamber, complete with reclining chair so young patients could “relax,” a little porcelain spitting sink located at one elbow with its incessant sound of water spinning constantly down its drain, and that imposing gallows of an instrument that looks all-the-more in my mind’s eye like some kind of sadistic medieval tower of agony – interconnected belts and gears and pulleys, all driving Dr. Lawson’s demented tool of choice – the infamous, whining, screaming, squealing nerve-seeking, pain-reeking dental drill. As far as I’m concerned, Dr. Lawson may as well have used a 3/8-inch Black-and-Decker carpenter’s model with a masonry bit, for through my childhood visits I recall him pulling a baby tooth and filling more cavities than I care to admit even having... but I cannot recall ever receiving a shot of Novocain!

I was glad to walk into a dentist’s office as a young man and read, “Pain-Free Dentistry Practiced Here.” I didn’t know there was such a thing. I can relate to Madeleine L’Engle’s comment that we live in a society that tells us we don’t have to hurt (especially at the dentist’s office). Thank you, Jesus!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “We’re afraid to be human because if we’re human we might get hurt. We live in a society that tells us to ‘Take aspirin, Anacin’ – so there’s no pain, whatever we do. We don’t grow if we’re not open to hurt.”

Athletes boast, “No pain, no gain,” but athletic machismo belies the deepest meaning of those words, and such easy boasting calls to mind the words of Shakespeare’s Romeo, standing under the balcony window of his beloved Juliet who cried out, “He jests at scars that never felt a wound.” “No pain, no gain” is a true enough statement, but the point today is that arguably no one within the sound of my voice has ever known any true pain, whether emotional, social, or physical – endured “*for righteousness’ sake*.” Try as we may, most of us do little better than I, reaching for a silly example of a few moments of discomfort in a dentist’s chair, to claim any pain of persecution. The best I can do is to “jest at scars” – for I surely have felt no wounds.

Here at the end of the beatitudes it would have been nice for Jesus to let us off a bit easier, don’t you think? To give us something that we could really sink our teeth into and take home from this series. To provide for us a word of comfort or easy assurance to which we can really relate. But Jesus’ parting word, his final farewell in this sermon will give no such relief to a comfortable Church, in an affluent America.

When has the Church in America known what it means to be persecuted? And what does it say to us that we have no such memories, because there virtually are no such memories? Oh, we might point to Roger Williams, the first outspoken Baptist in America, exiled from the original colonies because of his radical message of freedom of religion, which included freedom from religion, or to Anne Hutchinson, who suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Puritans because of her outspoken views, and who was later killed by Native Americans in a hostile frontier. But these two, and a handful of

others who were martyred in this country long ago, are little more than footnotes in our religious history. Most people are not even familiar with their names.

When has the Church in America known what it means to be persecuted? And what does it say to us that we have no such memories? There is an interesting aside here, for in the language of the religious right, language of persecution has grown in recent years. Generally speaking, this so-called persecution allegedly comes from the left, a liberal elite, or from an onslaught of secular humanism, directly confronting a so-called “Christian nation.”<sup>2</sup> A significant part of our population is being led to believe that America is “under siege” from this advancing enemy. Now, you may share some of the sentiments of the voices of this outcry, and there may be some validity to a few subtle points of their critique, but it should go without saying that a nation composed of a vast majority of admitted Christians and whose elected officials are almost unanimously of one religious faith – such a nation is not a nation under persecution. Not long after his re-election, none other than President George W. Bush was named by “Christianity Today,” which is one of the leading mouthpieces for evangelical Protestants, as the most influential Christian in the world. Say what you will of this questionable designation, it should be clear that in a nation where such a claim can even be suggested, such a nation cannot be “persecuted,” virtually by definition.

If the American Church is being persecuted today, dare I say, God help America!  
Countless forebears in faith gave their lives, suffering unmentionable cruelties and

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<sup>2</sup> I choose these words deliberately and carefully because I do not believe we live in a “Christian nation.” I believe our founders’ wisdom was displayed in that unique entitlement which they have bestowed upon us: freedom of religion. I do not believe this nation was founded as a “Christian nation,” nor do I want it to be one, per se. I want the freedom to practice my faith, without the coercion of any state sanctioned religion. The only way this freedom is operable, is for others to have the same freedom, even if they choose a different religion, or no religion at all. Paul was not speaking of American freedom, but I believe his words are apropos, “*For freedom Christ has set us free.*” (Galatians 5.1)

torture, the agonies of executions conceived to bring unimaginable pain, and they did so for simply confessing the name of Jesus, or for standing firm to the principles and ethics of a Christ who would give his own life for others. Before they lit the fire in the year 156 CE, for example, officials gave Polycarp, the outspoken Bishop of Smyrna a chance to recant his Christian faith, but his final words were these:

Eighty-six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong; how could I blaspheme my king who saves me? You threaten the fire that burns for an hour, but then is quenched; you are ignorant of the fire of judgment to come. Why delay? Do what you wish.

Such was the convinced and dying witness of too many of our ancestors to even number; such is the continuing faith of too many of the religiously faithful around the world today, Christian and non-Christian, still being persecuted for their beliefs, yet against this backdrop many of our nation's religious leaders today whine that our children can no longer be forced to pray in our nation's public schools, and they call this persecution. "They" have not "taken away our children's right to pray" – nor can "they" ever do so! And be clear about this: though difficult, the decisions regarding prayer in school and the posting of displays of the Ten Commandments on municipal properties are not grounds for claims of religious persecution. They are the inevitable, healthy, and ever-changing outworking of religious practice in a pluralistic society, that is based on the very best of Baptist principles – a free Church in a free State. So-called "Christian America" is not being persecuted by anyone. If it is dying, it is by a hypocritically self-imposed arrogance on the one hand, and a pathetic apathy on the other, from being raised to believe that the "Christian way," as any one group defines it, must be the way of the State, and everyone in it. Such an untenable theocratic view deserves to die, for it

represents a Church that has been co-opted, however imperceptibly, by the desire for power and control. It is a Church, already controlled by the mentality of the State, and as Clarence Jordan reminds us, such a Church, “due to its weakness, loses its influence and is discarded.”<sup>3</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ must always stand apart from the prevailing culture, to offer a critique and an alternative to that culture that is based on self-giving and not personal gain, sacrificial love and not competition, a bias toward the least of these – not favoritism to the rich and powerful.

I do not believe the American Church is being persecuted. Nor that the Church, as we have known it, ever has been. “No pain.” Perhaps, then, we should ask: No gain?

James Howell says,

As we sort through what the Beatitudes mean for us today, we need to pause, take a deep breath, and reflect on the truth: if we absorb Jesus’ words, if we walk in his way, if we try to embody his words and stick closely to him in the real world, we will suffer.<sup>4</sup>

I know Dr. Howell is right, in theory, right in radical practice, right in the Christian ideal – but the slightly jaded realist in me says that short of a world-changing catastrophe, bringing with it the end of this nation as we know it, “Christian America” will not soon willingly suffer for Jesus. The Church will not be forced to do so, and, thus,

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<sup>3</sup> Clarence Jordan, *Essential Writings*. The complete quotation is as follows: “The history of the Christian movement demonstrates that the intensity of persecution is geared, not to the moral level of the non-Christians, or persecutors, but to the intensity of the witness of the Christian community. The early believers were not persecuted because the Romans were such bad people. In fact, according to the world’s standards, they were quite decent. Oh, on big occasions they would throw a thousand or two helpless people into the amphitheater to be clawed to pieces by lions, but the thought of atomizing [with a nuclear bomb] a whole city probably would have horrified them. The strong conviction of the believers might not have caused the Romans to persecute them, but there could have been no persecution without such faith. One wonders why Christians today get off so easily. Is it because unchristian Americans are that much better than unchristian Romans, or is our light so dim that the tormentor can’t see it? What are the things we do that are worth persecuting? . . . Whenever tension ceases to exist between the church and the world, one of two things has happened: Either the world has been completely converted to Christ and his Way, or the church has watered down and compromised its original heritage. In the latter position, the church, due to its weakness, loses its influence and is discarded.”

<sup>4</sup> James Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*.

its members will not choose to leave the comfort of their own homes and communities to risk the denial and death of self, which is at the heart of being a follower of Jesus.

So where does this leave us? Does this final beatitude have nothing, for us? I pray this is not the case, for it would be a travesty to have to leave this final word, and not be touched by its challenge. I pray that Jesus' words will still call some to a most-radical "follow-ship." To leave the comfort of home, to go where most are not called to go, to do what most are not called to do, to give what most are not willing to give. The world needs such rare witnesses. Maybe even someone here is being called for such a life.

But more than that, since such followers are few and far between, I pray that those who cannot or will not go, will learn the truth that Simone Weil puts so plainly in her book *Gravity and Grace*: "It is human misery and not pleasure which contains the secret of the divine wisdom." Those of us who have never know what it is to feel truly forsaken, who have not faced persecution, can only know the hidden God, the great, wounded healer, as we experience that God, through the pain others.

Elie Weisel, who survived the horrors of the German concentration camps, and now travels the world, writing and speaking, lest we forget this miserable chapter in our human history has said to his own people, and to all people:

A Jew must be sensitive to the pain of all human beings. A Jew cannot remain indifferent to human suffering, whether in former Yugoslavia, in Somalia or in our cities and towns. The mission of the Jewish people has never been to make the world more Jewish, but to make it more human.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Elie Wiesel, message in *The American Jewish Committee*. I believe in Christian faith; I believe in spreading the good news of Jesus around the world, but I believe in the Church's zealotry to "Christianize the world," the ethical demands of Jesus that would have us "humanize" the people of the world, have often been lost to a purely religious impulse. I believe that meeting the physical needs of the world's people is a spiritual goal. Maybe making "them" more human, does in fact make "us" more Christian. And maybe we ought to worry more about this and trust more in the Grace of God to deal with the billions around the globe who do not share our belief system.

More sensitivity to the pain of others will make us more human. Sensitivity, whether to war-torn children in Iraq, displaced families in Darfur, frustrated leaders in Lebanon, orphaned children in Cuba, abused and exiled mothers in Ethiopia, victims of gun violence in America, drug lords in L.A., death row inmates in Central Prison, homeless men and women in Charlotte, the mentally ill in our community, the widow next door, the spouse or child at your side... A genuine sensitivity to pain, in all its forms, is where the *kingdom of heaven* begins. And though sensitivity to the plight and pain of others is far from a personal experience of persecution for righteousness, it is a beginning, for completely pain-free living, to be sure, will never bring us to the face of God. If God is with those who suffer, and I believe God always is, then the very least we can do “*for righteousness sake*” is to be present.....

Our thanksgiving represents a great paradox: Thanks be to God that we have not been called to endure persecution. Yet, our comfort is also our great loss for, as the Apostle Paul notes, *our suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...* (Romans 5.3-5). So, until that day comes, let us commit ourselves to those who do feel the forsakenness of God in their lives. And in being present to their pain, may we and they know a little more of the hope, which is the *kingdom of heaven*.

May it be so!