

When reading the Sermon on the Mount, we are struck by contrasts. Most of the Beatitudes describe ideals or qualities that we long for. We may have trouble being meek, pure in heart or hungry and thirsty for righteousness but, unlike the world around us, we value these characteristics and desire to see them flourish in our own lives. However the Beatitude about persecution and slander is harder to aspire to with any great fervency. We want to be popular, or at least accepted, and we want to be spoken well of by all men. We do not want opposition or hostility, and we certainly do not want to be hated, excluded, insulted and rejected.

Despite our misgivings, anyone engaged in the ministry of the gospel must expect the blessing of persecution. Opposition is an inevitable outcome of faithful gospel ministry. The key question for us is how to respond to this opposition. Our options are either to respond in fear, or to respond in joy.

The Response of Fear

The thought of opposition, hostility and persecution often fills us with fear, but this fear is usually amorphous, irrational and fed by over-active imaginings. We anticipate the outcomes of situations before they happen and conjure up in our minds all manner of awkward moments, dreadful repercussions, horrifying conflicts and excruciating tortures and pain. Before we even understand or experience the nature of our opposition we are already planning pre-emptive strikes and responses of our own. Thus fear is a dreadful emotion which leads us to irrational and stupid actions.

But what are we actually afraid of? What is it about facing opposition that triggers such a strong and fearful response in us?

Frequently it is **fear of failing**. It can be the failing of a personal nature – not living up to our own standards of achievement. Or, it can be a sense of failing the gospel for we are not presenting it convincingly enough or with power and success. But either way God does not call us to success but faithfulness in the ministry of the gospel. He is the one who gives the results. We are to sow or water as the opportunity may arise. It is in the weak clay vessels that the glorious transcending power of God is displayed.

Sometimes we **fear loss of dignity**. This is good old fashioned pride. We hate being laughed at and we hate losing face. We put forward a Christian view in our tutorial class, or at the youth fellowship, or at the dinner table at home, or in front of a scripture class in school – and everybody pounces on us. We haven't got the answers and we don't know what to say. We have to retire in ignominious embarrassment. The fear of losing face is a dreadful expression of pride.

A **fear of not knowing all the answers** can paralyse us. We assume that we should be able to answer all questions on all subjects, and are concerned that we will face situations where we get 'stuck' However it is not part of the claim of the gospel that we have omniscience. We cannot prove in any absolute sense the truth of the gospel of Jesus. We cannot prove, in any mathematically absolute sense, the truth of the gospel. We cannot argue people into the kingdom

of God. Therefore we should not be fearful of being found not knowing everything.

Connected to this issue of thinking that we should have all the answers at our fingertips, is our tendency to anticipate and **fear an onslaught**. Part of the reason for this fear is that we know too much. All the negative comments and difficult questions that have ever been thrown at us, or that we have ever read in any book, are always assumed to be in the mind of the person who is opposing us. We are fearful that they are going to raise every objection and every question instead of paying attention to the one objection or question that they are raising.

Finally, many of us are **fearful of emotions**. We are afraid when we see people expressing their feelings strongly. We are uncomfortable and worried that we will not be able to cope with them. Thus we do not like provoking unpleasant emotions. The fear that we have in these situations leads us to defensiveness or to avoidance. We become defensive and give false answers, protecting our pride and misrepresenting the gospel. Or we avoid ever arousing opposition by speaking in such bland generalities that nothing we say ever offends anybody.

The Response of Joy

When it is Inappropriate

When experiencing opposition there are several reasons why we should not rejoice in the face of opposition. We should not rejoice because we are masochists. There are some people who just love a good fight. They are argumentative, quarrelsome, irritating people who love to stir up trouble and dissension. They do not mind being attacked themselves but rather have a perverse joy in being the centre of attention. Paul told Timothy that the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Thus, we shouldn't seek to provoke and be antagonistic for the sake of the opposition that comes.

Why We Should Rejoice

There are many reasons why we should be rejoicing when opposition comes. Jesus' argument is an important one to bear in mind. Jesus says that it is false prophets who are always spoken well of while true prophets meet opposition. We cannot extend this to mean that every time we face opposition it is because we are on the side of truth. However, we should not be dismayed when we face opposition as if somehow we have moved away from truth. Those who speak the truth must expect opposition to come. Those who only ever face popularity are in danger of only ever teaching man's sinfulness.

Opposition is always better than apathy. When our teaching of the gospel is met by apathy we are truly defeated. The apathy comes from people not understanding the message we are preaching or not believing the gospel or not caring about us. If you tell people that there is a bomb underneath their house and they greet your news with a yawn there is no salvation left for them. They have rejected you totally. They do not believe your message and they don't care whether you do or don't believe your message. When people rise up in opposition to you they demonstrate that at least they understand what you are saying and agree that it is an important subject.

With the preaching of the gospel opposition frequently demonstrates that people have understood the idol that you are wishing to wrench from their heart. The gospel calls upon us to change the way we live. The gospel calls upon us to turn away from the idols that we serve.

People's way of life or their idol is very dear to them. If we call upon them to denounce what they are living for and accept Christ we are attacking things to which they have great emotional commitment. Emotional outbursts of opposition are only symptomatic of understanding clearly the claims of Jesus over their lives. It is to be expected.

That they express their opposition to you and disagreement with you is frequently an illustration of their concern for you. They may be concerned with their idol that you are attacking, but they could go home and kick the dog. To raise the matter with you shows that they have a continuing concern either to find out the truth or to maintain your relationship. It is frequently this concern for you and for the continuing relationship that gives rise to their outburst. Thus, in expressing their opposition they are inviting you to continue working with them on the issue.

What to do with Opposition

The first thing to do when facing opposition is to acquire the right mindset. It must not be the mindset of fear. Fear will lead us to avoid the conflict. We will back down about the gospel claims or not even preach it properly in the first place so as to avoid arousing opposition. We also must not allow fear to drive us to a defensiveness which will increase the heat of the emotional opposition. As we become more pig headed and argumentative we increase the antagonism and decrease the usefulness of the situation. The right mindset is to rejoice that the person has taken the gospel message so seriously and is concerned to find out the truth with you.

Next we must get rid of useless and unhelpful emotionalism. We draw the sting of emotion by accepting the other person's contribution to the debate. It is useful to try and express to the other person, in your own words, the arguments that they are putting forward. This makes the opponent aware that you have understood their objection. Feeling understood helps calm their feelings of antagonism. Being very calm and careful in the words that you use will help to diffuse some of the emotional antagonism at the time. It is important to diffuse the emotions for they frequently get in the way of listening to the arguments. We must not reject the emotions as something bad for they are an important indicator of how much the message is touching home. But in discussion and explanation it is important to accept the emotions and leave them aside in order to listen accurately.

If ever there is a time for prayer the face of opposition should provoke us to it. When people are so angry with what we are saying they want to rise up and oppose us we must pray that God will turn their anger against sin instead of against His gospel. That is the moment for real and concerted prayer that people will see the idols that are in their hearts and reject them rather than the truth of God's word.

Thus with the right mind set, and drawing the sting of emotion, we must prayerfully seek to explain carefully and accurately the nature of the difference between our view points. Then lovingly and carefully we must seek to show the reasonableness of belief in Jesus and the unreasonableness of their continued opposition to Him. If the message is striking home to such an extent that people are angry with us it will most likely take some time for them to calm down and think through what we are saying. Thus we should also be looking for an opportunity to discuss this matter again when emotions have settled and they may listen more carefully to what is being said.

Discussion Starters

1. What are the situations in which you expect to face opposition in preaching the gospel?
2. What are the ways in which we avoid opposition and so compromise the gospel?
3. What are the kinds of idols that the gospel will challenge and thus arouse opposition in the hearer?