

Blessed Are Those Who Mourn • Matthew 5:4

Grief is one of life's most gripping experiences. It is sometimes captured in a photograph of a father's face as he holds the lifeless body of his child. It is heard in the wail of the woman who has just been told that her husband has tragically died.

But when grief comes to you, you realize that grief is much more than that initial experience — much more than that first severe pain that seems to disrupt all that life is about. You discover that when the funeral is over grief not only continues, but that it often grows in silence. It comes back to strike powerful blows, often by surprise, when talking on the phone, walking down the street or driving the car. You discover that the surprises of grief and the power by which they attack are far greater than anything you could have expected. You discover that grief has an astonishing durability to it and it can last for a very long time.

Did you know that the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah describes Jesus as *“a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief”* (Isaiah 53:3)? As you read his biography in the New Testament, it often mentions Jesus' tears, but not once tells of his laughter.

I think that Jesus understands grief very well — all grief, not just the grief that comes from the death of a loved one, although surely Jesus understood that. The shortest verse in the Bible tells us that *“Jesus wept”* when he stood by the tomb of Lazarus, his dear friend. Even though he knew that Lazarus was to come back to life again, the emotions of grief captured Jesus and his tears flowed.

Grief can be over any horror, loss, difficulty, deep disappointment or broken dream. It can come from a divorce, from the lifestyle of a prodigal daughter or son, from losing a job,

from a broken relationship or any significant loss. My guess is that you may have traveled down the path of grief and that my raising the subject has perhaps brought to surface again some of the painful emotions that simply cannot be described by mere words. As time passes, you may have grown through your grief: grown deeper as a person, grown closer in relationships, grown closer to God, grown wiser in the priorities of life.

As you recall your own grief do you not, as I, find Jesus' words in his second beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount somewhat strange? Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”* “Blessed” means, at least in part, “happy.” Jesus was saying, “Happy

are those who mourn, happy are the sad.” Can that possibly make sense in your grief? In your sadness? In your pain?

Jesus was talking to and about Christians when he

said those words. At heart, he was describing the enormous difference between the rules and the way of life in the kingdom of heaven and the rules and the way of life in the kingdom of earth. It is such an astonishing difference that surely we conclude that one is upside down if the other is right side up.

Mourning is deep sorrow. There are nine different Greek words used for “sorrow” in the New Testament and this is the strongest of the bunch. It refers to an agony of soul, grief which cannot be contained, the kind of grief that cannot be hidden from others. Jesus is talking about the kind of grief that breaks your heart until you wonder if it can ever heal.

But in the beatitudes Jesus wasn't talking about mourning over the loss of a loved one,

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the breaking of a relationship or the loss of a job. He made clear in the first of his beatitudes in Matthew 5:3 that he is talking about that which is spiritual. He is talking about matters of the spirit in relationship to God. That's not to say that Jesus is unconcerned about our other grief, for he is deeply concerned and cares compassionately, but here he is talking about the kingdom of heaven and what it means to be a Christian.

Spiritual mourning is deep sorrow and grief over sin. We have difficulty attributing the same feelings of grief to spiritual mourning as we do to loss of a loved one. The fact that this seems strange to us shows how far earth's standards vary from heaven's standards.

Sin is a reality in society. Sin is the ultimate explanation for war, death, disease, divorce and for all of the problems that cause our pain and suffering. Jesus is explaining that someone who is a Christian should be broken hearted by the sin in our society and its consequences — hatred, injustice, violence, war, cruelty, racism, drugs, abortion, illicit sex, disease and death. Christians should grieve, not joke, about extramarital affairs, business rip-offs or oppression of the poor. It is a mark of a Christian to hate sin. It is a mark of a Christian to mourn sin. It is a mark of a Christian to see sin as God sees sin. But no sin should grieve a Christian more than his or her own sin. As much as we mourn the sin of society, even more so we should mourn and grieve the sin in our own lives.

I am fascinated that when I read quotes from the great saints of the Bible. These people after whom we name our churches and our universities, were keenly aware of their own sinfulness. David, for example, said, "*I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned*" (Psalm 51:3-4). St. Paul had trouble with sin in his life and explained it, saying, "*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do*" (Romans 7:15). He was obviously

sad about his own wrong behavior. It was St. John who said, "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*" (1 John 1:8).

Let me explain something that I think is important, but maybe not readily understood. I think that we sometimes have the mistaken notion that there is a keen awareness of sin in the life of someone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ, but when one becomes a Christian, then his or her sense of sin disappears because of the marvel of God's forgiveness. Let us not underestimate the marvel of what God does, for he does indeed cleanse away every sin. He wipes our slate clean through Jesus Christ. But the reality is that the more one matures and grows spiritually, the closer one comes to God and the more one sees God, the more keenly aware we become of our own sinfulness. Our sensitivity is increased because we see what was impossible before, a comparison between the holiness of God and our unholiness.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn their sin," he is explaining to us that sin and happiness are mutually exclusive. There are many people who would deny that, claiming that the way you have fun in life is with sin. They see God as against happiness, too strict and intolerant. There is a complete absence of logic in that line of reasoning. For God has demonstrated through the gift of his son how much he loves us and has declared repeatedly how much he wants us to be happy.

I suppose you would say that he is like the physician who diagnoses the patient as diabetic and says, "From now on you need to restrict the sugar intake in your diet and you need to have daily injections of insulin." Foolish is the patient who thinks that doctor is just being mean by taking away the sweets he or she desires and requiring injections. That's absurd logic, for what the doctor is saying is for that person's health and happiness — even if it is something the patient doesn't want to hear.

Jesus is explaining to us that sin is the opposite of happiness, sin steals happiness away, it ruins lives. When he calls us to hate sin and to be righteous, he is calling us to the only sure formula for happiness. It comes down to a question that I am almost reluctant to ask because I know that it's a very personal question. Have you have mourned over sin? Do you feel deep grief over sin and what it does to you and others?

On a personal note, let me share something. I have a prayer time every day. I start out by worshipping God, I confess my sins to him and pray for his forgiveness. I pray for myself, my family, for a whole list of people. I pray a lot of prayers and ask God for a lot of things. But there is one prayer that I hate to pray. I confess that I don't pray it very often because I'm afraid God will answer it. The prayer that I just hate to pray is, "God, show me my sins." I'm afraid he will. And I would just as soon get by without that. I'd like to think I'm okay. I'd like to think that I compare favorably with everyone else. I don't especially want God to show even me, much less anyone else, the sinner that I really am. For I am a sinner, that's the truth — that's the reality. But as reluctant as I am, it is a prayer that I must pray.

If I am ever to have happiness and to truly experience the full blessing of God, I, like you, must be counted among those who grieve and mourn, over sin. Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*"

But mourning has a bright side, and that is that comfort will come. Comfort is God's help for those who mourn. It's more than just feeling better. The word Jesus uses for "comfort" is the same one that he used to describe the Holy Spirit in John 14. The word refers to someone

who comes alongside to give help, a counselor who comes and puts an arm around your shoulder, an attorney who comes with you to court, a friend who stands by you no matter what. Someone who takes action, but in his case a supernatural action, possible and available only to those who mourn, grieve over sin. Let me say that the supernatural comfort of God under any terms is spectacular.

As a pastor I have had my share of seeing people in tragedy. I've stood by the caskets at many a gravesite. I've been with people in the hallways of hospitals outside emergency rooms. I've gotten the calls in the middle of the night. I've seen the pain in people's faces as they came

to terms as best they could with what has just happened. It's a helpless feeling to see such pain and not be able to relieve it.

The best I can do is to pray for them and offer them the comfort of God that is beyond anything that I could ever offer

myself. And I have stood back and been amazed to see people in the worst moments of their lives experience the supernatural comfort of God. That's the comfort, that's the help, that's the counsel that Jesus promises to those who are blessed, or made happy, in the midst of grief.

God forgives those who mourn and confess their sins. He gives strength not to sin some more. He explains that sin and sin's consequences are part of this world and will increase for now. He explains to us in the Bible that the war that we now have will not be the last of wars, the problems we have will not go away and the world will not get better — for now. But God guarantees hope for the future: God will judge and punish sin; he will send his Son

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Jesus Christ back to rule the world with perfect peace and prosperity unlike anything this earth has ever known; and he will give us a sinless heaven forever, where there will be no more grief. We are told that God “*will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain*” in his heaven (Rev. 21:4).

So let us seek God, hate sin and accept help. Listen to Jesus who says, “*Blessed are you who mourn, for you shall be comforted.*” Amen.

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