

Sermon preached at 9:00 and 10:30 AM at the Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, January 9, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:4

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM #2
GOOD GRIEF!

The first time that I ever remember seeing my Dad cry was when he found out that his best childhood friend had succumbed to a long battle with cancer. I don't remember how old that I was. I couldn't have been more than ten. But, I'll never forget the scene that played out in my family's kitchen. My Dad was weeping. And, my Mom stood there by his side, with her arm around him, speaking words of comfort and just loving him. It left an indelible mark on my life because it showed me that it's okay for a man to weep and that there is something beautiful that comes in the act of comfort.

Welcome to week number two of our series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Last week, we talked about the historical background and setting of the Sermon on the Mount and the first of Jesus' eight beatitudes that He spoke to those who had gathered to listen to him preach so many years ago. The Beatitudes are those beautiful attitudes of the Christian life. The first four Beatitudes speak about our relationship with God. The second four have to do with our relationship with others. All of them have to do with life as citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Beatitudes, we said last week are paradoxes. They seem to make no sense at first glance. "Blessed are the poor in spirit? Blessed are those who mourn? Blessed are the meek? . . . Really?" "G. K. Chesterton once defined a paradox as 'truth standing on its head calling for attention.'"¹ There are deep truths, spiritual nuggets of gold found when we mine in the Beatitudes.

We also spoke about the fact that the Greek language shows that the rewards that are spoken of in the Beatitudes are for they and they only who are poor in spirit, mourn, etc. So, if you want to inherit the kingdom of heaven, then you must be poor in spirit. Remember, to be poor in spirit means that we recognize our spiritual poverty. There is nothing in us that deserves the grace of God. We can't receive that grace until there is an intellectual acknowledgement that we are spiritual beggars in need of the grace of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Everything in the Sermon on the Mount has to do with being a holy people, who have been set apart by God for a special purpose. Listen these words from John Stott:

¹ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 26.

“No comment could be more hurtful to the Christian than the words, ‘But you are no different from anybody else.’ For the essential theme of the whole Bible from beginning to end is that God’s historical purpose is to call out a people for himself; that this is a ‘holy’ people, set apart from the world to belong to him and to obey him; and that its vocation is to be true to its identity, that is, to be ‘holy’ or ‘different’ in all its outlook and behavior.”²

“The Sermon on the Mount, then, is to be seen in this context. It portrays the repentance (*metanoia*, the complete change of mind) and the righteousness which belong to the kingdom. That is, it describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God.

And what do they look like? Different! Jesus emphasized that his true followers, the citizens of God’s kingdom, were to be entirely different from others. They were not to take their cue from the people around them, but from him, and so prove to be genuine children of their heavenly Father. To me the key text of the Sermon on the Mount is (Matthew) 6:8: ‘Do not be like them.’ It is immediately reminiscent of God’s word to Israel in olden days: ‘You shall not do as they do.’ (Lev. 18:3) It is the same call to be different. And right through the Sermon on the Mount this theme is elaborated. Their character was to be completely distinct from that admired by the world (the beatitudes). They were to shine like lights in prevailing darkness. Their righteousness was to exceed even that of the scribes and Pharisees, both in their ethical behavior and in religious devotion, while their love was to be greater and their ambition nobler than those of their pagan neighbors.

There is no single paragraph in the Sermon on the Mount in which this contrast between Christian and non-Christian standards is not drawn. It is the underlying and unifying theme of the Sermon; everything else is a variation of it.”³

Okay, so last week, we saw the contrast between the person who recognized their spiritual poverty, and the person who didn’t. It’s a contrast that in the end leads one to heaven and another to hell.

Let’s take a moment to read all of the Beatitudes. If you have your Bibles turn to Matthew 5:3-12.

- ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
- ⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
- ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

² John Stott, *The Message of The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), p.17.

³ Stott, pp. 18-19.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Kent Hughes has written the following statement, “The Beatitudes are preparatory in the sense that they slay us so that we may live. They hold us up against God’s standards for the kingdom so that we can see our need to fly to him. They cut through the delusions of formula Christianity and expose the shallowness of evangelicals who can give all the ‘right’ answers but do not know Christ.”⁴

Have you ever met someone who wanted to play the role of judge of your eternal soul? Maybe they weren’t speaking of you at the time that they were talking to you, but they were certainly speaking about others. “Oh, there is no way that John can be a true believer. Have you seen the way that he spends his money, or treats his wife, or the weekends that he spends away from church or the people that he hangs out with?” It’s a sickening thing. You and I have no right to judge the spiritual condition of anyone’s heart. We might make assumptions, because we are human beings and we are flawed. But, what Christ Jesus gives us in these words later on in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, serve as good warning for today:

1 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

3 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

Now listen, we do not have the right to judge others, but we must certainly look at our own life and recognize that God, who is the Judge of all, is also looking at our life.

In the first Beatitude we are told that ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. We need to recognize our spiritual poverty.

⁴ Hughes, p. 26.

In the second Beatitude we are told, “⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Remember last week we said that one interpretation of the word “Blessed,” is “Happy?” We talked about how it’s not the best translation because our understanding of the word *happy* in the English language falls short of what it means to be blessed. To be blessed is to experience the approval of God in our lives. But, we also said that the only people who will experience true happiness in this world are those who live under the blessing of God, who experience His approval. With that in mind, think about that word “Blessed,” as “Happy,” today and how much of a paradox that it is.

“Happy are those who mourn? . . . Really?”

Yes, really!

Okay, how can we understand this?

Let’s begin by taking a look at that word mourning. What is Jesus trying to communicate to us? Because when I think about mourning, the word happiness is not usually the parallel word that comes to mind.

In order to understanding mourning, we need to first look at what it is not.

Blessed are those who mourn is not

1) Somber Christians

Mourning, in this Beatitude does not refer to somber Christians who have no joy or cheer in their lives. Some Christians live their lives that way. (SAY IN FUNNY VOICE) “Oh, I’m a Christian. I can’t do what everyone else does. Woe is me, you sinners.” Please! If that’s what the Christian life is, keep it! Robert Lewis Stevenson once wrote in his diary, “I’ve been to church today and am not depressed.”⁵ He was actually surprised because he was so used to getting preached down upon that he would leave church feeling absolutely depressed about his condition in life. I wonder how Stevenson would have felt if he had heard Jesus preach about the blessings that come from mourning. I think he would have understood that Jesus wasn’t telling His followers to be joyless Christians.

2) Grieving Over Difficult Issues

There is a second thing that many Christians often times confuse the mourning that is mentioned in this passage with. They believe that Jesus is speaking about grieving over difficult issues. Like my dad, when I was a kid, you lose someone you care about, so mourn, and you will be comforted.

⁵ Hughes, p. 27.

Oh, there is truth to the fact that the Body of Christ ought to be a healing and reconciling community. But, mourning over difficult issues isn't what Jesus is getting at in the Beatitudes.

So, what is Jesus talking about?

Blessed are those who mourn is – Mourning over sin

Kent Hughes writes, "A great day has come when we see our sinful state for what it is apart from God's grace and begin to mourn over its devastating dimensions in our souls, words and deeds as described in Romans chapter 3."⁶

I know that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for many things in our lives. But, Romans 3, is perhaps one of the greatest theological chapters in all of the Bible. For in this chapter we see our condition as we truly are, in the eyes of our Righteous Judge, and in light of that how great is His grace.

Let's look first at Romans 3:10-12 and see the reality of the condition of our souls.

¹⁰ As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;

there is no one who does good,
not even one.”

Last week showed us that only those who recognize their spiritual poverty will come into the kingdom of heaven. In other words the only true Christians are those who recognize their extreme need for God. Each of the Beatitudes builds upon the prior Beatitude. Jesus is telling us it's not enough just to recognize that you are spiritually impoverished, you need to act up on that truth. And that can't happen until we begin to see our sin for what it is. When we see our sin for what it truly is, we will mourn over it.

There is no one righteous. No one who understands. No one who seeks God. All have turned away. There is no one who does good, not even one. The reality of the condition of our souls is that left to our own devices, we will choose sin, and we'll choose it over and over again.

The late, Mike Yaconelli once wrote the following:

⁶ Hughes, p. 27.

"I live in a small, rural community. There are lots of cattle ranches around here, and, every once in a while, a cow wanders off and gets lost . . . Ask a rancher how a cow gets lost, and chances are he will reply, 'Well, the cow starts nibbling on a tuft of green grass, and when it finishes, it looks ahead to the next tuft of green grass and starts nibbling on that one, and then it nibbles on a tuft of grass right next to a hole in the fence. It then sees another tuft of green grass on the other side of the fence, so it nibbles on that one and then goes on to the next tuft. The next thing you know, the cow has nibbled itself into being lost."

Americans are in the process of nibbling their way to being lost. . . We keep moving from one tuft of activity to another, never noticing how far we have gone from home or how far away from the truth we have managed to end up."⁷

Why do we do that? Because there is no one righteous, not even one.

There is a second truth about us that should cause us to mourn. Our words reveal the condition of our hearts. Look at Romans 3:13-14:

13 "Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit."

"The poison of vipers is on their lips."

14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

You may say, "That's not me. I never speak poorly about others. I never use profane words. I never gossip. I never lie. . ." Never?

A man working in the produce department was asked by a lady if she could buy half a head of lettuce. He replied, "Half a head? Are you serious? God grows these in whole heads and that's how we sell them!"

"You mean," she persisted, "that after all the years I've shopped here, you won't sell me half-a-head of lettuce?"

"Look," he said, "If you like I'll ask the manager."

She indicated that would be appreciated, so the young man marched to the front of the store. "You won't believe this, but there's a lame-braided idiot of a lady back there who wants to know if she can buy half-a-head of lettuce."

He noticed the manager gesturing, and turned around to see the lady standing behind him, obviously having followed him to the front of the store. "And this nice lady was wondering if she could buy the other half" he concluded.

⁷ Mike Yaconelli, "The Wittenburg Door."

Later in the day the manager cornered the young man and said, "That was the finest example of thinking on your feet I've ever seen! Where did you learn that?" "I grew up in Grand Rapids, and if you know anything about Grand Rapids, you know that it's known for its great hockey teams and its ugly women."

The manager's face flushed, and he interrupted, "My wife is from Grand Rapids!" "And which hockey team did she play for?"⁸

Yeah, our words get us in to trouble all too often. They reveal so much about the condition of our hearts.

Jeremiah 17:9 says, "9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

In Matthew 12:33-37, Jesus spoke about the importance of our words.

33 "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. 36 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

Who was Jesus speaking to here? It was the religious leaders of His day. They were men who said all sorts of good things about God, but whose hearts were far from Him. Our words betray us. They reveal the condition of our hearts which left to their own devices are not pretty.

A third truth that Romans 3 shows us that we ought to mourn over is that our deeds are evil. Look at Romans 3:15-17:

15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood;
16 ruin and misery mark their ways,
17 and the way of peace they do not know."

Time and time again, we find ourselves running to that which we know is wrong. Sometimes we excuse it in our modern society as a "necessary evil." We have to do something that we know displeases God because of our job, or our financial situation, or any number of other excuses.

Former newspaper columnist, Sidney J. Harris once said, "Once we assuage our conscience by calling something a 'necessary evil,' it begins to look more and more necessary and less and less evil."⁹

⁸ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/tongue.htm>

We are to mourn over our sins. We are also to mourn over the sins of the world.

Jeremiah was called, “The Weeping Prophet,” because of the way that he mourned for Israel. He saw the actions of his nation as it related to God to be reprehensible. He also saw the judgment that was looming for his nation.

In Jeremiah 9:1 he says, “1 Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.”

In Jeremiah 13:17 the prophet wrote, “17 If you do not listen, I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the LORD’s flock will be taken captive.”

Do you ever look at the world around you and weep? Does the degradation of sin all around you make you hurt for those who don’t know Christ? That is the normative experience in the life of the follower of Jesus. Sin causes him or her pain. Our own sin grieves us, and the sins of the world grieve us, because we recognize the emptiness that a life of sin has to offer.

Now, mourning over sin doesn’t mean that we aren’t still a people of joy. Christians ought to be able to laugh as much as anyone. But the condition of our world should move us to tears, and to action.

So, what about you?

Have you dealt with the sin in your heart? Have you recognized it for what it is, or have you said like the proud person, “Everyone is doing it. If there is a God, He will just have to understand that this is the way that people are.”

Listen, as much as we don’t like to think about mourning, this is a good grief! Charlie Brown was famous for his pronouncement, “Good grief!” whenever something went wrong in his life. There’s a paradox many of us use every week. So when is grief good? When it produces godly character.

Kent Hughes writes, “If you have never sorrowed over sin in your life (not just its consequences, but sin itself), then consider long and carefully whether you really are a Christian. Genuine believers, those who are truly born again, have mourned, and continue to mourn, over sin.

For Christians, mourning over sin is essential to spiritual health. The verb used here is the most intensive of the nine verbs employed in the New Testament for mourning, and it is

⁹ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/sin.htm>

continuous. Godly believers, therefore, perpetually mourn, and thus perpetually repent of their sins.

It is significant that the first of Martin Luther's famous *95 Theses* states that the entire life is to be one of continuous repentance and contrition. It was the attitude in the Apostle Paul that caused him to affirm, well along into his Christian life, that he was the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15)."¹⁰

At the end of the Second World War, there were hundreds of Nazi officers who escaped to start new lives in countries all across the world. They changed their names, learned new languages, and did their best to avoid being caught. Adolf Eichmann was one of these men. Called the architect of the Holocaust, facilitated and managed the logistics of the mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in German-occupied Eastern Europe. He perfected the use of gas chambers as means of execution for prisoners. And, it was his idea to use ovens to dispose of the remains. He was as evil a man as has ever lived on planet earth.

In 1960, a group of Jewish operatives found Eichmann living in Argentina under a new identity. They arrested him and brought him to trial in Tel Aviv. It was called the trial of the century. I watched a documentary on the Eichmann trial this week. One of the men who testified against Eichmann was Yehiel Dinur. On the video you see Dinur sob uncontrollably and then faint when he comes face to face with Eichmann. Mike Wallace interviewed Dinur on the television show *60 Minutes*. He asked Dinur about his reaction to facing Eichmann. Chuck Colson describe it in his book *Who Speaks for God*.

“Was Dinur overcome by hatred? Fear? Horrid memories?

No; it was none of these. Rather, as Dinur explained to Wallace, all at once he realized Eichmann was not the godlike army officer who had sent so many to their deaths. This Eichmann was an ordinary man. ‘I was afraid about myself,’ said Dinur. ‘I saw that I am capable to do this. I am . . . exactly like he.’

Wallace's subsequent summation of Dinur's terrible discovery – ‘Eichmann is in all of us’ – is a horrifying statement; but it indeed captures the central truth about man's nature. For as a result of the Fall, sin is in each of us – not just the susceptibility to sin, but sin itself.”¹¹

Sin causes us to mourn, but the verse doesn't end there. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Take comfort that God knows the condition of your heart, and He loves you. He is crazy about you. So much so, that He gave His one and only son for you. But, we cannot be comforted until we mourn over our sin. We move from the intellectual acknowledgment that we are spiritual beggars to the heart coming to grips with how serious our sin is. Our comfort comes from three distinct gifts.

¹⁰ Hughes, p. 30.

¹¹ Hughes, p. 25.

- 1) Forgiveness - 1 John 1:9 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.
- 2) The Holy Spirit – Jesus promised us a comforter. The word for comfort in this text comes from the same root word, *paraclete*, where we get the word for Holy Spirit. God's comfort comes to us from God, in the context of relationship with God. He will personally comfort you as you come to grips with your sin.
- 3) Salvation – We need God to save us. Last week four people in our congregation began a walk with Jesus Christ. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. There is no way to live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven apart from Him. The paradox of mourning to comfort should lead us into the arms of Jesus.

Chuck Colson was one of Richard Nixon's most powerful allies. He served prison time because of his involvement in the Watergate scandal. It was because of coming to grips with his sin, that Colson recognized his need for salvation. He writes the following about his conversion, "That night when I . . . sat alone in my car, my own sin – not just dirty politics, but the hatred and evil so deep within me – was thrust before my eyes, forcefully and painfully. For the first time in my life, I felt unclean, and worst of all, I could not escape. In those moments of clarity I found myself driven irresistibly into the arms of the living God."¹²

Have you dealt with your sin? Have you mourned over that which grieves the heart of God? Do you continually deal with the sin in your life? Blessed are you, when you mourn because of the sin in your life, because when you do, God Himself will comfort you!

¹² Charles Colson, *Who Speaks for God*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1985), p. 138.