



## Blessed are those who Mourn

St. Matthew 5:4

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Have you ever seen sin in someone else and taken a superior attitude, knowing that that sin wasn't in your life? Maybe someone wronged you – they gossiped about you, stole from you, hurt you in some way – and you just couldn't image how they could have done what they did. You found yourself saying, "I could never do that to someone. I wouldn't have done that to them!" Maybe it was someone you saw who had committed one of the "biggies." Their sin was a real whopper and you found yourself looking down on them, knowing you'd never stoop that low. Being a minister I've begun catching my own thoughts when I see a story on TV or read an article in the paper about the latest pastor or church leader caught in adultery, leading a double life, or embezzling money from their church or ministry. As a fellow minister I realise just how easy it is for someone to stumble and fall into those kinds of sins. It's an eye opener to the fact that "but for the grace of God, there go I."

I was reminded of this earlier in the week as I was reading about the reaction of one of the holocaust survivors who was present at the Nuremberg Trials. This man had been a prisoner at Auschwitz, and when he entered the courtroom during the trial of one of the most notorious guards there, and came face to face with this man who had committed so many atrocities, he started to weep uncontrollably, then fainted. You might think that he was overcome by emotion as all the horrors of what he had seen and what had been done to him came rushing back to him. You'd think that in seeing that guard, he was probably overcome by hatred and anger. But when he was asked what happened in that courtroom, this survivor said that he was overcome, because there sat his former guard, not some terrible, god-like, beast as he had seen him years before; no, there he sat, an ordinary, normal man. And he was overcome as he realised that that German officer was no different from him. That

he himself, given the right circumstances, could have done the same thing. And when he realised that he began to weep and eventually collapsed.

I don't think that most people would be willing to admit something like that. This man was able to admit it, because he wasn't afraid to admit that he knew he was a sinner. I think he knew that there is something wrong at the core of every human being on the planet. As I said last week, most of us want to ignore our sins, or at least compare our sins to those of others so that we can feel better about ourselves. We rob our employers when we take a long lunch, come in late, or leave early, but when we think about stealing we don't think about what we're doing – we think about the guy who's in prison for stealing cars or robbing a bank. We men may spend a little too long on that second glance at the woman walking down the street, but when we think of adultery we think of the last pastor we heard of that was caught with his secretary or choir director. While we're hating our neighbour's guts, we think about the murder on death row who killed his. If you think about the terrible things other people do, you can almost write-off your own sins. Almost. But the fact is that all of us, on some level, know there's something wrong. David saw this "wrongness" and prayed for deliverance, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; yes, I would wander far off, I would lodge in the wilderness, I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest" (Psalm 55:6-8).

We're all looking for a way out. David found it in God. In the same Psalm he writes, "But I call to God; and the LORD will save me.... Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved" (Psalm 55:16, 22). The answer is there in those words, "call upon God." Last week we looked at the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That's where it starts – this recognition of our own inadequacy. Being poor in spirit means we acknowledge that we can't fix our own problems, that we can't save ourselves, and that we have no righteousness of our own. The man or woman who is poor in spirit turns to Christ, who alone can offer us a perfect righteousness.

And now Jesus says:

**Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.** (Matthew 5:4)

Mourning over our own fallenness is the emotional counterpart to being poor in spirit. This isn't just a promise that one day there will be an end to our suffering. It isn't just a promise of healing to the hurt. I think we can find those promises incorporated into this, but what he's really talking about is something far deeper. Just as he wasn't talking about the physically poor when he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he's not talking here about those who mourn because of the natural circumstances of life. Remember that he's talking about life in the Kingdom.

It's one thing to know our sin, and in acknowledging it, to be spiritually poor, but it's a whole other thing to actually mourn for it – to be truly sorry for what we've done and what we are. Confession is good, but confession without contrition is worthless. As Christians we have to learn to confess our sins, but it's not just a matter of confession – we have to be contrite too. We have to be sorry for them. We have to desire to be free of them.

When I was elementary school-age, I can remember sneaking goodies from the pantry that my mom had very clearly said not to eat. I knew it was wrong. I remember standing in front of the pantry, knowing that eating that cookie or piece of candy was wrong, but also thinking to myself that I could simply confess my sin to God afterwards and every thing would be fine. Yes, that's confession, but there was no contrition involved. In fact I remember at least once making my silent confession to God as I munched happily away, only to grab another cookie and make another confession. I wasn't sorry. I wasn't mourning over my sin. My confession was totally meaningless.

But when we each come to that realisation of just how bad we are – when we eventually do find ourselves to be poor in spirit – our first reaction is to grieve because of it. Grief is the natural result of seeing our own sinfulness in contrast to God's holiness and then realising that in his love and mercy he died in our place and took the penalty for our unrighteousness on himself. Grief is the natural response to knowing that we deserve eternal death and separation from God, yet that same God who could

terminate our very existence with a thought, truly loves us and wants to be reconciled with us. The Christian has to be of a different mind from the World. The world does everything it can to excuse its sins, to make light of them, to ignore them, and to redefine them as virtuous. You might be able to bottle up your feelings of guilt and temporarily forget them if you do those things, but the guilt of your sins is still there. The Christian acknowledges that guilt openly and mourns over it. The Christian cries out with St. Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” And in the following sentence the Apostle reminds us why it is that those who mourn are comforted: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Romans 7:24-25)

When Jesus talks about mourning, he isn't talking about being depressed – that's just another manifestation of pride. He's talking about the natural result of a face-to-face encounter with the Holy One. And he's talking about the grief that comes from knowing that Jesus died in our place. I cried when I saw the movie *The Passion of the Christ* a few years ago, not because it was hard to see another man so brutally treated and killed, but because it grieved me to realise that what I saw being done to the perfectly righteous Son of God was what *I deserved*. He suffered so that I could be reconciled to the Father. That's the kind of mourning that Jesus is talking about.

We stand not on our own, but by God's great mercy. If you have your Bible or Prayer Book, turn over to Psalm 130. Look at what David prays there:

**Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?** (Psalm 130:1-3)

This is the grief of a man who knows his own sin and who knows that a holy God cannot tolerate it. He knows his offence. And yet it's through being in the presence of that holy plaintiff, that David, the unrighteous defendant finds his deliverance:

**But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.** (Psalm 130:4)

As a sinner, David grieved over his sins – he desired an out from his fallenness more than anything else. This is the man who wrote that more than anything else, he wanted to dwell in the Lord's house forever so that he could be in God's presence. He knew that his sin separated him from God. He grieved over that, but even more so he grieved in the knowledge that the God whom he had sinned against was also the one who had forgiven him and provided an out. If there's anything that a lot of us have trouble understanding as Christians, it's the fact that grace is what makes us mourn. The Law convicts us. The Law shines it's bright spotlight on all of our flaws and shortcomings. But it's grace that then melts our hearts and brings us to the point of feeling sorrow and shame for our sin.

Every Sunday morning we kneel before God in prayer and confess our sins, but we don't just throw a trite “I'm sorry” heavenward. We acknowledge with shame the sins that we've committed. We earnestly repent. Why? Because we are heartily sorry for all of our misdoings. In confessing our sins we also express to God our contrition and ask for mercy through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Do we just pray that or do we really mean it? Are those just words or are they the conviction of our hearts? If they're just words, if they're nothing more than the “liturgy,” if they're nothing more than “tradition,” then we can take no comfort in the absolution and comfortable words that follow them. St. John reminds us every week that “if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins.” We're able to claim John's words when we've first humbled ourselves before God and have come to him mourning what we are and what we've done. In keeping with King David's psalms, Richard Lenski writes, “The greatest of all comforts is the absolution pronounced on every contrite sinner.”

This is the ministry of the Messiah that the Old Testament prophets described. Isaiah wrote of him that he was to comfort the broken-hearted and declare liberty to the captives. This was why the godly Simeon spent his days in the Temple waiting for

the “consolation of Israel.” The consolation of Israel came bearing a cross, and on that cross we find our comfort. We who are unrighteous to the core find undeserved righteousness in him. He makes us acceptable to his Father, and in doing this he fulfils what the angels proclaimed to the shepherds in their heavenly chorus over the fields of Bethlehem on the night he was born:

**Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.** (Luke 2:10-11)

But there's more to the comfort that God gives as we mourn than just saving us from the penalty of our sins. Remember that David was truly looking for a “way out” – not just from his guilt, but from the domination of sin. Part of our comfort is deliverance from the power of the sin that's in our lives now. If we are truly in the Kingdom, then the Holy Spirit is truly in us. The work of the Holy Spirit is to unite us to Jesus Christ. When Jesus rose from the grave he rose victorious over sin. Remember that we who have been buried with him have also risen with him. His victory is our victory! As long as we live here on earth, we will always struggle and fight with sin, but we shouldn't be defeated by it. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” We have victory *now!*

And we also have the comfort of knowing that we have a future victory waiting for us too. Someday Christ will remove all sin and all its effects. St. John wrote,

**Beloved, now we are God's children, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that, when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.** (1 John 3:2)

St. Paul tells us “that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

In telling us that those who mourn their sins will be comforted, Christ reminds us of the gracious reconciliation he offers. And yet being reconciled to him ourselves, we still have so much to mourn in the world around us. We need to

understand the whole idea of mourning as individuals, but what about when we come together as Christ's Body? What does this mean for us as the Church? What would the Church look like if it understood its poverty of Spirit and mourned its sins?

Our tendency is to look at the world with a condemning eye. We're more than happy to walk with Jesus as we hear him pronounce judgement on the Scribes and Pharisees: "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees!" When we hear his condemnation of the hypocritical behaviour of those religious leaders we cheer Jesus on. When he calls them blind guides and whitewashed sepulchres we take pride in him as if he's scored one for the team. We think, "All right, we're gonna follow this guy all the way." But when we see Jesus mourning the sins of his people, weeping over Jerusalem, we stop short. This isn't what we expected. We like to read about his condemnation of the Pharisees, but we forget that he mourned for them too. We need to mourn more for the sins of those around us. I think that if we did, the Church would be doing a better job of reaching the lost in our world.

I think that if we truly mourned, we'd approach the lost people of the world not just with righteous fervour, but with compassion. How often do we rail about the evils of sin, but have to deliberately stop and insert into the conversation the old "hate the sin, but love the sinner" line. It's true, we are called to hate the sin and love the sinner, but if you have to explain that in your conversation with a sinner, it's probably because you don't really love them – you're just indignant over their sin. How self-righteous is that? One of the greatest problems the Church has is this self-righteous attitude. True evangelism is something that's awfully hard for self-righteous people to do. Self-righteous people do evangelism because they know they have an obligation. Or self-righteous people go out with the mistaken notion that proclaiming to the unsaved, "Woe to you...(insert applicable sinful behaviour here), is actually evangelism when it's not. The person who is poor in spirit and who mourns does evangelism because they want to. I think that if we truly mourned, we'd go out into the world and meet people "beggar to beggar" to share the Good News with them, instead of going out to make loud and angry tirades.

The Church as a whole needs to recover what it means to mourn. We've lost it. We think that the Church is okay and that all we have to do is go out and evangelise the world. But it doesn't work that way. We need to mourn first. Our evangelistic efforts should grow out of our mourning.

There have been times when Christians truly understood all this, and out of that grew a true and genuine piety. I think that the last great wave of real pietism was probably that of the Puritans. The problem is that generation after generation has tried to mimic that pietism with a false piety – a false Puritanism. I think we've seen a lot of this in the last 150 to 200 years. Christians deliberately went around acting sad and dour, not because they really were, but because they thought that was what it meant to be poor in spirit, to mourn, and to be meek. Christians often equated salvation with avoidance of "worldly" activities like drinking, smoking, dancing, going to movies, or listening to certain types of music. Eighty or ninety years ago there were a lot of Christians who treated the signing of a temperance pledge card as if the person had just professed Jesus as their Lord. The world sees through those sorts of shenanigans. People aren't stupid. They know when we're genuine and when we're fake. And so the Church has responded to that culture of false piety by doing the opposite and becoming slap-happy all the time – never mourning. Evangelism is now all about telling people how life with Jesus is one big perpetual party. Even as individual Christians we do the same thing. We think that people will only be attracted to us if we're happy all the time. We've collectively forgotten what sin is. We've got a defective view of it and a defective doctrine of it. We've also got a superficial understanding of joy.

If Christians are going to be Christians and if the Church is going to be the Church we need to mourn before we find the joy of salvation. We can never find true joy without first being convicted of our sins. For Christians to really be Christians and for the Church to really be the Church, we need to be realists. We need to see sin in the light of God's purity. We need to see this all as a matter of life or death, pardon or condemnation, heaven or hell. That's what will make the

difference not just in our own lives, but in how we see and reach out to the world.

Please pray with me: Almighty and everliving God, you hate nothing that you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that as we mourn our sinfulness, we may also be open to your great outpouring of grace and mercy. Fill us with a gratitude for that grace and mercy, that will move us to serve you with joy and share your Good News with the world. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.