

Introduction

It has been a violent and bloody week in America. I was in Georgia earlier this week not far from where two prisoners disarmed and shot and killed two guards to break out of prison. The next day a man opened fire on a group of congressmen in Alexandria, Virginia wounding several before officers shot and killed him. And later that same day a UPS worker targeted three fellow workers before turning his firearm on himself. Moreover, in the last several weeks there have been crashes on our nations highways which have taken a number of lives. Looking worldwide a couple weeks ago terror struck in England at a concert, resulting in a number of deaths. And this very week there was a tragic apartment fire resulting in 17 deaths. The tragedies mount. So do the deaths. And in their wake is left a trail of mourners. Most people hurt very deeply when their loved ones die. Even Christians who have eternal hope for fellow believers legitimately grieve when brothers and sisters are taken home by the Lord. There is a deep sorrow which grips the soul often producing involuntary sobs and weeping. So it is especially striking, what we read in Matthew 5:4 this morning.

[Read Text and Pray]

All the world appreciates words of consolation and assurance spoken to one who is grieving. In fact, this declaration made by Jesus, "blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," when taken out of context is one that most would love to own for themselves and others. We have all known grief of one kind or another. If we have ever lost a loved one, we have known the grief I talked about earlier. If we have ever had our hopes shattered, we have known a level of grief. The thought that God would be able to comfort us is a welcome one, especially in a culture like ours. This culture looks at God primarily from a man-centered point of view. The prevalent belief is that God exists to help me. God is the friend who will never judge you and never fail you. He just wants to make you to be happy and help you get the most you can. Just don't forget to thank him and give him some credit. In this culture just about everybody can cozy up to the statement "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

However, as with the rest of the Bible, this statement must be understood within its context, lest it be misunderstood. This declaration of Jesus communicates something much more specific than the general idea that God comforts the broken-hearted.

So let's set the context. We are coming back to the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes in particular. Two weeks ago we looked at the perplexing declaration of Jesus that it is the poor in spirit who inherit the kingdom of God. In order to get back into the groove of Matthew's presentation of the good news of the king, I want you to recall with me that this sermon comes in the early part of the ministry of Jesus. At this point in Matthew's gospel, he has introduced us to Jesus through the narratives of his birth in Bethlehem, his flight to Egypt, and the return to Nazareth. Matthew fast-forwarded then to the ministry of John the Baptist nearly 30 years later. It was during those days that John baptized Jesus, and God formally introduced him to the multitudes as his beloved and well-pleasing son. From that moment Jesus was led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness where he was triumphant over the temptations of the devil. He began making disciples and soon withdrew from the vicinity of Jerusalem to the north country, to Galilee, and began his public ministry in earnest.

Matthew 4:17 sums up the message of Jesus. From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The Sermon on the Mount stands as an expression of the teaching Jesus was doing about the kingdom. Jesus introduces the great sermon with the beatitudes. These beatitudes the "Blessed are" statements characterize the citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Of first note is that they are poor in spirit. They recognize that they have no spiritual merit before God whatsoever. Each one sees himself as an impoverished and debilitated beggar lying before the gate of God. The only hope for them is to receive mercy from God. And on the heels of this first characterization comes the second. Blessed are those who mourn. Jesus is not trying to win people by appealing to their felt needs. He is not preaching a feel good message. He does not appeal to fleshly desires. No but Jesus is brutally honest. His concern is with truth. So neither are we going to sugar coat his message. This morning we are looking at this

beatitude under three headings. First and taking most of our time, we are considering the nature of this mourning. Second, we will address briefly some ways in which we can cultivate this characteristic. And third, we will look to the comfort that is promised for those who exhibit the spiritual characteristic of mourning.

I. The Nature of Spiritual Mourning.

A. The mourning about which Jesus speaks is spiritual mourning. The context leads us to this important understanding. It does so in several ways.

First, it corresponds to the summary of Jesus' central exhortation to repent. Repentance is a change of mind towards God and sin against him that involves a change of heart as well as a change of behavior. It is a matter of the heart. It works its way outside from the inside. God speaks through the prophet Joel about the coming day of the Lord that it is a day of darkness and gloom, of devouring fire, and of earth quaking and heaven trembling, of God executing his powerful word. And he says, "Yet even now . . . return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments."

In those days when people were distressed, when they mourned, they tore their clothes as a display of sorrow and brokenness. But the Lord says, don't merely tear your clothes, tear your hearts!

In the New Testament, James calls for the same kind of brokenness in drawing near to God. Chapter 4:8-10 say, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord."

The mourning about which Jesus speaks is spiritual mourning that has sin as its occasion. Repentance involves mourning over sin. Repent. Turn. Mourn.

But not only is there the exhortation to repent with which to reckon. There is also the surrounding context of the sermon. In the context of the beatitudes, we need to observe that they are a package deal which together characterize those who are a part of the kingdom of heaven. If you place books on an open shelf, you need bookends to hold them up and keep them together. The beatitudes are kind like books on a shelf. They are a library of characteristics. And on each end keeping them together and holding them up are a pair of bookends. The bookends are marked by their likeness. The likeness is this phrase, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The first beatitude is "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The last beatitude is "blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The bookends then indicate that from start to finish, these are the ones to whom the kingdom belongs. They are kingdom citizens. These are the ones who enter the kingdom now and the fullness of the kingdom future.

So these characteristics are true of kingdom citizens in a way that is not true of the rest of the world.

And there is one other indicator that this mourning is spiritual in nature. It is the close connection between this beatitude and the first one. The first beatitude is poverty of spirit. The reference is not merely to poor people but to people who recognize their spiritual poverty before God. They see themselves as possessing no merit of their own with which to obtain the favor of God. This is the apostle Paul saying, "I know that in me, that is in my flesh dwells no good thing." This is Romans 3:19-20. "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world become accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin."

This mourning is spiritual in nature because its occasion is the total and complete inadequacy to please God in myself as well as the hostility toward God that is evidenced by my disobedience against him. It is the emotional reaction that accompanies my admission that I am spiritually impoverished. It is the cry of Paul, "who will free me from this body of death?"

B. So, to say that this mourning is spiritual in nature is to assert that it is not worldly in nature. Jesus is not talking about mourning the death of a loved one or the experience of depression or the disappointment of rejection whether it be personal or occupational. It is not sorrow over an earthly circumstance.

David grieved over the death of his rebel son Absalom to the degree that he was insulting all those who had been faithful to him while the wicked son led a revolt.

Ahab mourned the fact that Naboth had the vineyard he wanted but would not sell it to him.

Spiritual mourning is not sorrow over an earthly circumstance. And it is a sorrow that results in repentance.

Paul write the Corinthians, "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret whereas worldly grief produces death."

Judas mourned over the deed he had done in betraying Jesus. He was so full of remorse he hung himself, but there was no repentance, no seeking of God.

C. So to distinguish what Jesus is talking about from other concepts of mourning, we must say it is spiritual mourning. It is kingdom-focused. It is God-focused. And it is sin focused. It is the rending of the heart over my spiritual inadequacy and over the hostility of my actions against God and his kingdom. The sorrow and mourning over the loss of a loved one may exemplify the depths of the sorrow I should experience, but spiritual mourning that characterizes the citizens of the kingdom is for an altogether different reason.

D. Spiritual mourning is vividly exemplified in the Bible in a number of cases. But I am going to point you to two.

Luke (7) tells of an occasion on which Jesus went to the home of a Pharisee. Now remember the Pharisees were an elite group of Jewish law keepers. To the law of God they added hundreds of other laws and thought

highly of themselves and trusted in themselves that they were righteous. Accepting the invitation to the Pharisee's home, Jesus reclined at the table. Learning that he was there, a woman of ill-repute brought with her an alabaster flask of ointment. She washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair before anointing them with the ointment. The text declares three times that she was a sinner. She came to Jesus in mourning over her sin. This Pharisee could not believe that Jesus was actually letting this woman touch him. But Jesus declared to the Pharisee, "her sins, which are many, are forgiven." And he looked at the woman and said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Truly does David say in Psalm 51, a broken and contrite heart he will not despise.

Another such person is was a tax collector, scoundrels that they were. Jesus gave the illustration of two men who went to the temple to pray. The one was a Pharisee. He brought to the attention of God how good he was, especially that he was not like the tax-collector. Standing far off, the tax-collector would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus said, "This man went down to his house justified, rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

E. These examples set before us vivid examples of the beauty of spiritual mourning. But spiritual mourning is more than just beautiful and desirable; it is demanded. It is necessary. If you would be justified; if you would be declared righteous; if you would be reconciled with God; if you would enter the kingdom of God; you must humble yourself before God. You must mourn. There is not a path to the kingdom of God that sidesteps spiritual mourning.

At last, I am going to give you a concise definition of spiritual mourning. It was crafted by Don Green, Pastor of Truth Community Church, Cincinnati. Spiritual mourning is a humble grief over sinfulness that leads to repentance and the conscious pursuit of righteousness. This is something that if you are taking notes you might want to put down for future reference. Spiritual mourning is a humble grief over sinfulness that leads to repentance and the conscious pursuit of righteousness. You see, it moves from being poor in spirit to hungering and thirsting for righteousness. It is a humble grief over

sinfulness that leads to repentance and the conscious pursuit of righteousness.

And you cannot get to heaven without it. Later in the sermon on the mount, Jesus declares that there is but a narrow way that leads to life. Few are those who take it. There is a broad way and many take the broad way, but its end is the way of death. The narrow way is the path of the beatitudes. It begins with an impoverished spirit. It proceeds to spiritual mourning. No one ever came into the kingdom of God who did not mourn over their sin. The implications of what Jesus is saying here are enormous. Do not miss this! No one ever came into the kingdom of God who did not mourn over their sin. The faith by which men and women are saved is a faith that mourns over sin. Listen to me carefully. If you do not know anything about personal guilt, you are not a Christian. The path of ultimate exaltation is the path of humility. It beats its chest in anguish. It says with Paul, "Who will free me from this body of death?"

I was visiting my mother last week and it seems something is going on down there in South Carolina. Week after week she is telling me of people who are coming to faith in Christ. Most of them are adults. And they are church goers. In fact, get this, many of them have been church members for years! What is the deal? What is going on? Well, it would appear that most of these are turning from religion to relationship. They are getting off the broad road and getting on the narrow way. Most of the accounts are of people being convicted of their sin so much that they can't speak. They can only weep. It would seem they responded at some time past to a broad road feel-gospel that skipped over the beatitudes, that put little emphasis on spiritual poverty and repentance of sin.

Perhaps there are some in this very room this morning that have convinced yourselves you have done what it takes. But down in your heart you know you are just playing religious games. You come to church to keep up appearances with people and with God, but truth be told, you are not really part of the kingdom, you have never really humbled yourself before God. You responded to a message that assured you that if you prayed a prayer you would not go to hell but to heaven. But you've never really dealt with your sin. You haven't grieved over it. And you haven't turned from it.

Well, do not wait any longer. Do it now. May God give you a new heart to see yourself for what you are and abandon yourself for him, to beat your chest and say, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" To trust in Jesus Christ the way a beggar takes bread from a merciful giver. And here is the declaration of Jesus: blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

II. The Cultivation of Spiritual Mourning.

Spiritual mourning is not a once-and-done proposition. The word here is a verb, and it is in the present tense. This means it is an ongoing experience for those who receive the blessing of the kingdom. Now we all know that entering the kingdom does not mean the end of sinning. Those who have come to Christ are in a battle. The desires of the flesh are against the desires of the Spirit. These are in conflict with one another to keep you from doing the things you want to do. We wrestle with the rulers and authorities, with the cosmic powers over this present darkness. At times we sin. Every sin is an occasion for mourning. We need to cultivate proper spiritual mourning.

- A. Look at God.
- B. Look at his law.
- C. Look at yourself.

Carefully consider your thought life, your jealousy, your swiftness to anger, your selfishness when you do not get what you want, your pursuit of lustful temptation. See it for the hostility and rebellion of holy and faithful and merciful God.

- D. Read and re-read Psalm 51.

III. The Comfort for Spiritual Mourning. Conclusion.

A. The blessing is the reason for gladness. Divine favor rests on those who humble themselves before the Lord. Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up.

B. The world runs from mourning because it sees mourning as a destroyer of true happiness. But Jesus says embracing it is the only way to happiness that is genuine and eternal.

C. Spiritual mourning sets us on a path to the only one who can comfort us. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free? Thanks be to God

through Jesus Christ our Lord! There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!!!! Dwell on that and dwell in him. This is the only way to be rightfully grieved yet genuinely glad.