

PROFILES OF DISCIPLESHIP

II. "The Blessing of Godly Sorrow"

March 12, 2006

Ken Peterson

REVIEW

Last week, we began our Lenten series of sermons on the beatitudes— eight paradoxical statements beginning Jesus' teaching ministry in the Sermon on the Mount. These are a concise, incisive summary of what it means to be a disciple, to follow Jesus. Remember, the word "blessed" is one of those hard-to-translate Greek words, but it encompasses a happiness that is not affected by circumstances— a blessedness that can only come as a gift from God.

While our focus this morning is on the second beatitude, I'm reading all of them to keep in mind the overall view. Notice as we read how the first four deal primarily with our interior life and the last four with the outward expression of Christian life.

Mtt. 5:1-12

TEXT: "Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted." (5:4).

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you.

Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. – The Message

INTRODUCTION

This beatitude is probably second only to the first one in sounding incomprehensible to our modern ears. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* This world says happiness is in avoiding sorrow and the unpleasant things in life. Certainly what Jesus is saying here is a puzzling paradox. How can mourning some terrible loss ever provide entrance into blessedness, a God-given deeper happiness and comfort? Everything within us wants to avoid sorrow and loss. And our culture provides countless ways to amuse ourselves, to run from feeling the tragedies of life, to cover over our losses with a thin veneer of denial. But Jesus is announcing here, that for those who have discovered life in Him, things are different. There is a blessing in mourning. How can this be?

I had an experience a number of years ago that helped me gain some insight into this beatitude. In Tel Aviv, there is a memorial to the millions of Jews killed in Nazi concentration camps. The memorial is very impressive and well-done. You enter it through a long gradual descent— down, down, down— so that you are underground in dimly lit rooms, knowing you are in the place of the dead. Your journey then leads you through displays containing the remnants of lives— letters, baby shoes, a pair of glasses, old photographs of families. Soon, these pathetic reminders begin to give you the feeling that these were real people, real families like ours. They had birthdays, grandchildren, and celebrations. They loved God, loved their communities, and worked hard,

just like you and me. And then photographs of the death camps and their horrible gas chambers. There were pictures of people, gaunt, living skeletons with hollow, empty looking-eyes from whom all hope has evaporated. Then more pictures of hundreds and hundreds of emaciated dead bodies piled in mass graves.

Quite unexpectedly, I experienced a deep sorrow— a mourning on three levels that I think are captured in this beatitude. It began **first** with a sorrow, a grieving for the Jews and all they had suffered. It is one thing to read about millions of innocent Jews treated so inhumanely and then murdered. But now that knowledge was becoming personal and grew into an empathy— identifying with them. Suddenly, I was there with them, experiencing the humiliation, the pain, and the injustice. Then, on a **second**, deeper level, I felt a sense of sorrow for the wrongness of the human race. It was not just the Nazis who were the personification of evil, but Stalin with the horrible gulags, Pol Pot and the killing fields of Cambodia, and all the ugly things we do to one another. It included all the hurtful things we do, the put-downs, the ways we destroy others. And, as a member of the human race, I felt contaminated— like I was a part of it all and needed to cry out to God on behalf of humanity: “O God, forgive us for the pain, the suffering, the injustice we inflict on one another. Forgive our hatred, and our hardness of heart.” And then on a **third** level, most alarming of all, I became aware in my own heart of some of the same sin-disease that contributed to the holocaust:

- my cowardly silence in the face of wrong;
- my insulating myself from other people's needs;
- and my failure to love those who are different or hard to love or seem like they are odd or misfits in society.

As the tears flowed, I was thankful for the dim lighting affording me some privacy in my grief. I was both the persecuted and the persecutor. I was both the victim and the cause of the pain. In prayer, I cried out, "Lord forgive me... and then, feeling like I was standing for the entire human race I cried out, "Lord, forgive us..." And then, beneath my tears, deep within I felt a purging, a cleansing, a catharsis. Now, I became aware of the Holy Spirit bringing comfort to my broken heart. As I walked out into the bright Israeli sunshine, there was a deep inner sense of blessing— yes, even a deep inner happiness. I knew somehow God had used my broken heart to do a work of grace in my heart, creating a deeper wholeness.

The whole experience was quite unexpected. And the deep inner happiness I felt as I walked out seemed incongruous— yet it was *very* real. Then, I thought of this beatitude, *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*, and I knew what had happened.

Let's think about why, for the believer, mourning losses can lead to this higher happiness, this state of the blessedness of His comfort.

SORROW FOR SIN

The first and primary application of mourning in this beatitude is sorrow for our sins. It follows the first beatitude,

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Entrance into the kingdom, the Christian life is to those humble-spirited enough to recognize their need and receive help from God. The Message paraphrase of that was particularly helpful:

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more room for God and his rule.

This “end-of-our-ropeness” is where we reach out in desperation and discover God in His love reaching down to rescue us. This letting go of our ways is the beginning of kingdom living, as we talked about last week. This is naturally accompanied by sorrow and repentance for our sins of rebellion against God and the way He’s called us to live. We begin to see ourselves as we truly are, beyond all our self-justification and rationalization. Thus, this second beatitude in the sense of mourning for our sins makes perfect sense.

You see how this is in the contrast between the two sons in the parable of the prodigal son. The younger rebelled, ran away, and squandered his entire inheritance on riotous living. But he returns poor in spirit, humble, mourning his sins. In contrast, the elder brother is self-righteous, and lacks any sense of sin. He can’t see his heart’s pride as he looks down on his younger brother for all the sins he would never do. Who ends up really happy? It is the humility and sorrow for sin that brings the younger son comfort and the blessed happiness of these first two beatitudes.

II Cor. 7:10 speaks of *"Godly sorrow that brings repentance that leads to salvation."* Feeling sorry for our sin and mourning that sin is the prelude to repentance. Repentance is a decision to turn from the way you are going, away from sin and begin going in God’s way. We won’t do that unless we’re truly sorry, truly feeling bad for our sin. This leads us to pray three words that spell happiness: "Lord forgive me." The Christian life continues with those three words. And, when we are in right relationship with Christ, we enjoy the abundant, happy life He promised.

I’ve often been a part of people’s fifth step in Alcoholic’s Anonymous (A.A.). The program is based upon twelve steps which incorporate Christian principles. In step four they make a “searching and fearless inventory” of themselves. That is followed by the fifth step in which they “admit to God, ourselves and another human being the exact nature of [their] wrongs. Many want to use a pastor as that "other human being." Countless times I’ve seen people walk in, filled with sorrow, the weight of the world on their shoulders for all their failures. Throughout the fourth step, which often takes many weeks, they’ve been mourning their sin. Then, as they confess “the exact nature of their wrongs” from their “fearless self-inventory,” for those who are Christians, we can offer it all to Jesus for cleansing. Immediately, the burden is lifted and they leave with deep joy in their hearts and a lightness in their step— forgiven by Jesus and comforted by the Holy Spirit. We all need frequent, searching, fearless, stop-at-nothing self-inventories.

I’ve learned, the happiness seems to be in proportion to the extent we’ve plunged the depths of our failings and sin. If our confession is only general, superficial, "Sure, I know I need to be more loving," it is hardly mourning our sin and the happiness is equally superficial. But, when we plumb the depths, dig out the specifics, get to the roots and name the hatred we’ve harbored, the bitterness we’ve nurtured in our souls, the festering jealousy, and the gossip we were a part of, we experience the comfort of Jesus that goes equally deep. Or, as Eugene paraphrases it in this beatitude, *you can be embraced by the One most dear to you.* That embrace can be a superficial squeeze or an enveloping bear hug, depending upon how deeply we’ve mourned the sin.

I John 1:8-9 says it so well:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

As repentance and confession go deep, so does God's comfort and forgiveness.

Now, let me caution you, this is not a continually beating ourselves up for our sins and failures. Certainly there can be a morbid preoccupation with our sins. What we're talking about here is dealing seriously with sin, not afraid to tease out as many of the roots as the Holy Spirit reveals, repenting whole-heartedly, and accepting Christ's offered forgiveness— then living in the freedom of His grace.

THE SORROW OF CIRCUMSTANCES

The second application of this beatitude is when suffering or tragedy comes our way. Any loss in our lives may be cause for mourning. Most of us are familiar with the grief of losing someone we love in death. But we also lose people in other ways— through moves, friendships lost, betrayals, divorce, to mention a few. Because we love them and they have filled a wonderful place in our hearts, when they are gone, we need to allow ourselves time to grieve and explore the loss.

But other losses in our lives also need to be mourned. When we lose some of our physical abilities so we can no longer do things we love it can be depressing, can't it? We can face financial reversals. Sometimes we feel we are no longer needed, important, or useful to anyone. Every significant thing that is stripped from us is worth feeling sorrow for. It is the avoidance and denial of feelings that get us stuck in depression. The healthy way of handling loss is to engage with the emptiness, the sadness, and the loss through prayer. As we see many things stripped away that we thought were crucial to our happiness, we are forced to lean upon God and learn to trust the adequacy of His presence and provision. Then, we experience a deeper happiness unreached by the circumstances we face. We discover the light of His presence in darkest nights of the soul.

Here we need to make an important distinction. Dr. Ralph Sockman, one of the great preachers of the 20th century writes:

What are we mourning for? Is ours grief or a grievance? Are we childishly crying over spilt milk or pettishly tearful over hurt pride? Is our sorrow rooted in self-centeredness or does it stem from the sufferings of others? Are we painfully penitent for our sins or merely bemoaning their penalties?

He makes a good point: moaning is not the same as mourning. But, when we move past our self-pitying whining, there is legitimate grief-work to be done with any loss.

Grieving our losses is not easy, but it is essential for our emotional health. We skip over it or do it only superficially to our emotional peril. Many are too fearful of those deep feelings and escape into drugs, alcohol, parties, or any other distracting activity they can find. We may find ways of medicating the pain or denying it. The edge of the pain can be smoothed off by time. But unless we really feel the loss and work through it, it is never resolved. It can lay like a buried

landmine in our soul.

Not infrequently in my counseling there are those who have to work through the pain of childhood events or other traumas. They thought it was all gone, taken care of, but now it all comes with fresh emotion triggered by some current situation. For the Christian, this beatitude is a wonderful assurance. I can tell them that this is the Holy Spirit at work, leading them to greater emotional health through facing the truth, including the pain. They are mourning, but there is a blessedness here, because on the other side is deeper joy than they've ever known. The happiness resonating with wonderful inner wholeness.

WOUNDED HEALERS

Dr. Ray Allen took the liberty of paraphrasing this beatitude to read: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforters." While the text doesn't support this, he is, nonetheless upholding a Biblical truth. This is God's remarkable grace. The very sorrow and healing we experience equips us for helping others. II Cor. 1:3-4 says it best:

*Praise be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble **with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.***

God calls us to get involved with spendthrift abandon in the lives of others— contrary to this world's thinking that urges us to protect ourselves, to save ourselves from sorrow. The way to blessed happiness is to give ourselves away to others. Jesus is the ultimate example. I believe that Jesus was the happiest, most fulfilled and contented man who ever lived because He lived perfectly within the will of God. He *really lived* the abundant life He promised us. Yet, He never held back. He immersed Himself in the messiness of our human condition, providing comfort again and again to those devastated by life's circumstances.

As we get involved, we find God uses our troubles and sorrows to bless others going through similar things. The empathy of those who have been there— been through that sorrow— is a great gift to those suffering. Cancer survivors can comfort others with cancer. Polly and I assisted in caring for my mother with Alzheimer's disease— and God has often used that to help comfort others dealing with that devastation. When I share that, you see with the other person a sense of rapport, an "Oh, you know then the pain of losing a loved one so slowly, seeing their mind gradually darkened, the daily-ness, the fears." There is a deep happiness in being involved in a way that Jesus can use to provide comfort to another.

CONCLUSION

The promise: "They will be comforted" is nothing less than a promise of the presence of the Lord through the Holy Spirit He gives us. The word here for comfort is the same root word Jesus uses in His teaching on the Holy Spirit in John 14 when he referred to the Spirit as "another comforter," or "counselor," depending on your translation. So, it is Jesus' special presence through His Spirit that brings comfort in the depths of our sorrow. When we feel him standing alongside us in our grief, there is a peace knowing it's all right.

In the spirit of this beatitude, let me say, “Congratulations to you when you embrace the sufferings of this world, whether your own or that of others, and when you feel deeply the depths of your own sin and need. For then, you'll discover the riches of His resources– the special comfort the Holy Spirit brings to our hearts and the joy of His presence in the devastation of our need.”

Our closing hymn is by Horatio Spafford who faced incredible loss in his life. While I've mentioned it before, it is good to remember what is behind this hymn. Horatio was a very successful lawyer in Chicago and also a strong supporter of the great evangelist D.L. Moody. Just before the Chicago Fire of 1871, he invested heavily in real estate on the shore of Lake Michigan. All his holdings were wiped out in the fire. A couple of years later, he wanted a rest for his family and himself with a European trip. And, since Moody was in England in an evangelistic campaign at the time, there would be the added opportunity to support his friend. Because of a last minute business development, Horatio sent his wife and four daughters ahead on a ship, planning to follow shortly. That ship sank with his four daughters all lost– only his wife survived. Receiving the telegram of the news, Horatio set off for England to join his bereaved wife. As he passed near the area of the ocean where his daughters drowned, he wrote the words of our text, “When sorrows like sea billows roll...” But, he also knew the incredible comfort of His Lord through it all, giving us that memorable refrain, “It is well with my soul.”