

“Godly Grief”

Matthew 5:1-12:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

As we mentioned last week in the beginning of our sermon series on the Beatitudes, these words are Jesus’ profile of who we are called to be as his disciples. These are the dispositions that will grow in our lives as the Holy Spirit works in us to make us look more and more like Jesus. Another characteristic of these Beatitudes is that they build on

one another like building blocks. Last week we considered what it means to be poor in spirit. We saw it meant recognizing our own sinfulness as we come face to face with God. We recognize our emptiness, our inability to offer anything to God except our need for God's forgiveness. This is the beginning point in our journey as disciples and the promise Jesus offers is we will receive the kingdom of heaven. When we admit our sin, we are brought into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and we begin to experience his rule and reign in our life.

Today we consider the Beatitude "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (Matt. 5:4) We have probably all heard the saying "you are closer to God in a garden than anywhere else on earth." While gardens are wonderful places and we can experience God's presence there, it may be more accurate to affirm that when we face mourning and sadness in our lives, we are closer to God than at any other time.

Presbyterian pastor and teacher Dale Bruner said "in deep sadness human beings are more in God's hands than at any other time." We have all experienced, I trust, the comfort and presence of God during these times of sadness and mourning in our lives. When we experience the death of a loved one, we mourn and grieve and receive God's comfort to get us through the valley of the shadow of death. We remember in Jesus' own life that he wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. I think he mourned the loss of a dear friend, but I believe he also wept at the reality of all that death brings into our world – the sadness and loss and mourning God never meant for us to experience in the first place before sin entered the picture. So when we mourn we are open to receive the blessing of God's comfort.

But we also mourn the things in life beyond our own personal circumstances. We mourn tragedy as we experience it in our daily lives. Who of us didn't shed tears as we lived through the days surrounding September 11, 2001 and the heinous terrorist attack on our country. As we read of and see stories of earthquakes, tsunamis, famine, and injustice we

mourn over the price they exact in human suffering. As we deal with the daily experiences of life's losses and struggles and heartaches, we mourn over the human sadness so prevalent all around us. As we grow more deeply in our faith and become more the people God wants us to be, we will feel these things with even greater depth as these are the things that break the heart of God as well.

All of these things are certainly part of the picture in Jesus' mind as he pronounced blessing on those who mourn and promised comfort for them from the hand and presence of the living God. But I believe Jesus' conception of mourning goes far deeper than these things as well. Remember, these beatitudes are the description of the essential nature and character of a disciple of Jesus Christ. As we grow more in the grace and likeness of Jesus Christ, as we take on more and more of his likeness and character and nature within ourselves, we will be led to mourn deeply all those things we experience which fall short of being what God desires and intends for them to be. We will sense more and more the picture of what God's rule and reign in our lives and world is meant to be, and we will learn to mourn all those things which compromise that rule and reign in any way.

Today's supplemental Scripture readings illustrate well this concept of mourning that which compromises God's rule in our lives and world. We read Paul's anguished confession in Romans 7:14-25 that he is not able to do what he wants to do and that he does the very things he hates. Who of us has not had that experience of knowing the right thing to do but seeing ourselves do the exact opposite thing? We see, as Paul says, there is a war being waged within us between our flesh and sin nature on the one hand, and the teachings of God's kingdom on the other hand. We live as believers who are still struggling to put sin to death and live the life God desires us to live. And we mourn over the slowness of our growth in grace and the way that sin continues to cling to our thoughts and actions. This is the kind of mourning Jesus identifies as characteristic of his

disciples. They mourn their own brokenness and long for God's comfort to minister to them and lead them to a more faithful obedience in grace.

Paul's agonized self-confession culminates in a cry from the depths of his heart – "Wretched man that I am – who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24) That is the cry of a mourning disciple! We along with Paul must have many times when we grieve over our fickle and stubborn hearts when they fail to follow the path that we know pleases God. Yet as we acknowledge our need, God comforts us with the good news which Paul also affirms: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25) Paul's comfort comes from knowing God's grace offered in Jesus Christ to himself and to all who bewail their spiritual brokenness. We confess our sin and ask for God's grace to lead us in repentance and newness of life in Christ. Our mourning motivates us to grow in grace, to die more and more to sin and live more and more to righteousness as our Confessions put it. And so God hears our cry and offers us the comfort of his presence to strengthen us in more faithful discipleship.

Jesus' heart was not just broken by the realities of personal sin, however. Throughout his ministry, he was also burdened with heaviness of heart over a world so broken and sinful. He encountered over and over those suffering from the consequences of poverty, hunger, injustice, and human hard-heartedness. Like Jeremiah in our other Scripture reading today, Jesus heart was broken for the people of Israel and for all humanity.

Jeremiah cries out over the sin and idolatry and rebellion of the children of Israel and he mourns "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has overtaken me." (Jer. 8:18, 21) Beyond the heartache of individual sin is the burden of what our corporate sin and guilt mean in the life of the world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived through and died at the hands of the heartache that was Nazi Germany, said of those who mourn – "Such people mourn for the

world, for its guilt, its fate, and its fortune. They see that for all the jollity on board, the ship is beginning to sink.” This is mourning on a grand scale which necessarily balances out our mourning over personal sins. It is feeling the pain in the heart of God as God looks at the world through holy and righteous eyes. It is the pain God first expressed in Genesis when he mourned that the thoughts and imaginations of human hearts were only evil all the time. It is the mourning and pain that drives us to do something in response so that God’s comfort may be experienced in some small way in this sinful world.

God’s comfort for this kind of reality comes as we become instruments or tools in God’s hand to minister peace and comfort and healing and grace to hurting people in a hurting world. It is the motivation that has driven the church through the ages to minister to widows and orphans as the first apostles commanded in the early days of the young church. It is the ministry of the people of God through the ages that has built hospitals to bring comfort to the ill and dying and to build schools to bring knowledge to those needing to learn. Disciples mourning over sin and brokenness in the world have been sent out in countless ways to minister the comfort of God to the hurting and the needy.

Perhaps you have heard of Bob Pierce. He was an evangelist who travelled the world, especially the countries of Asia, following World War II and the Korean War. He saw thousands of orphaned children in dire circumstances following the ravages of war. His prayer became “Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God.” And from that prayer came the organization known as World Vision which has sponsored thousands of children since 1950 and now ministers to human need and suffering around the world. All because one man mourned over the sin of humanity and became a channel for God’s comfort to be known. Or there is Mother Teresa whose broken heart for suffering people led her to found the Sisters of Charity and minister to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India. Or perhaps you know of Millard Fuller, a successful banker and businessman who felt complete emptiness in his life in spite of great material blessings.

He moved to a faith community in Georgia searching for new meaning and purpose in life, aware of his own brokenness and sin. Soon he began seeing the horrendous housing conditions in which many poor Southern families lived. His heart was broken and he began to work to provide decent living accommodations to families in need. Thus was born what has become Habitat for Humanity, the largest builder of homes in the world today. All because he mourned over the need of people and did something about it.

So we too are called to have our hearts broken by the things that break the heart of God. First, in our own hearts and lives to mourn our own sinful nature and with God's help and grace work to put sin aside and lead lives of deeper faith and obedience to the ways of truth and righteousness. Then to have our hearts broken by the things which break God's heart in this world and to offer our lives and service in ministry to others wherever God would burden our heart to make a difference – feeding the hungry, ministering to others as a Stephen Minister, being a Deacon caring for those in need, serving in any of a myriad places and ways where we can help meet the needs of those experiencing less than what God intends for them.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” May be it so, Jesus. Amen.