

Mourning Each Morning

SERIES: THE LIFE GOD BLESSES

There is nothing like a Band-Aid. Every kid loves the comfort they deliver. It's more than an adhesive strip; it's a feeling of security that even a pill or a trip to the doctor can't give. My kids go through a box of Band-Aids faster than most of us adults go through a bottle of aspirin. Sometimes I find Band-Aids over practically invisible scratches and imaginary "owies." Ask a child why they like them so much and they will probably say something like, "Because they make me feel all better."

If that's true, it's really too bad we have to grow up! What would we not trade for a box of something we could attach to real life pains; not of the skinned-knee variety, but of the wounded-heart variety. Oh, for an adult -sized Band-Aid that would fix the pain of a divorce, or the death of a child, or the shame of an addiction. It would take a big Band-Aid to bring comfort to adult-sized pain.

This morning as we study the second Beatitude of Jesus, he seems to offer such a source of comfort. In Matthew 5:4 he proclaims, "**Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.**" Jesus seems to be saying that there really is the promise of adult-sized comfort for adult-sized pain. I wonder if we really believe that? The statement raises as many questions as it answers. Who is he talking about here? What kind of mourning is he referring to?

I. Who are those who mourn?

When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn..." he is not saying we should always be sad or depressed. He's not saying that by being miserable we earn brownie points with God. There are Christians who seem to believe that. But Scripture tells us to rejoice always. Jesus prayed that his joy would be made full in us. Whatever Jesus means by "Blessed are those who mourn," it has to take that into account.

Nor is Jesus pronouncing a blessing on those who mourn over the loss or lack of certain things in this world. Some people mourn because they don't have more money, or they can't buy a house, or they fail to get the job they wanted. In 1 Kings 21 King Ahab of Israel mourned because Naboth wouldn't sell him the vineyard next to his palace. Scripture says when Naboth refused his offer, Ahab "lay down on his face and turned away and ate no food." He mourned, but his mourning was more like childish pouting.

That's not what Jesus is talking about. He is not even talking about those who mourn over the loss of a loved one. The grief process is normal and even healthy. Certainly God can and does comfort those who grieve in that way, but that's not what Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus is talking about a kind of spiritual mourning. It's a mourning which follows naturally from the first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." We are poor in spirit when we recognize our own spiritual bankruptcy and cry out to God for mercy. Mourning is the emotional counterpart to being poor in spirit. Those who mourn are those who grieve over sin. It's moving from confession to contrition. Confession is to acknowledge sin; contrition is to mourn over it.

It's not just to feel bad. It's not just to feel a little pang of remorse. There are actually nine Greek words that are used for mourning or grief and Jesus chose to use the most intense of all nine. It conveys a deep inner agony; a passionate lament; a desperate ache of the soul.

We should mourn over what is wrong in our own lives. Let me give you a few examples. After David committed the twin sins of adultery and murder he tried to cover it up for a year. Finally, God sent the prophet Nathan to confront him. David confessed his sin and Nathan announced his forgiveness, but David still went through a time of mourning; a time of contrition. He later wrote Psalm 51 where he expresses a grief stricken heart. He prays, "Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. For I recognize my shameful deeds; they haunt me day and night..." David mourned over what was wrong in his own life.

The apostle Paul mourned for the same reason. In Romans 7 Paul is reflecting a spirit of weariness over his own battle with sin. Tell me if this echoes the cry of your own heart,

"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish."

Paul sees his own heart as a great battlefield and he's acutely aware of his own inability to win. Finally, in v. 24

he cries out, **“Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from the body of this death.”** Paul, the one time Pharisee, is mourning over his own twisted nature.

For years I have been intrigued by something in the book of James. James is one of those writers with a hard edge. He makes me uncomfortable. In chapter 4:9 he tells us to, **“Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom.”** That always seemed a little strange to me. But then I read the verse that comes before it. In v. 8 he says, **“Cleanse your hands you sinners; and purify your hearts you double minded.”** James is speaking to believers who were flirting with the world and thinking nothing of it. They were laughing when they should have been weeping! Sin had become “no big deal.” To them, and so he says, “You ought to be miserable. You ought to mourn.”

The man we call St. Augustine lived about 400 years after Christ. He grew up as a very worldly man. He was a professor of rhetoric. He lived with a woman and together they had a child out of wedlock. He also had a godly mother named Monica who prayed for him faithfully. As a young man, he says “I indulged in every fleshly passion.” Yet it wasn’t these things that finally convicted him of his own sinfulness. It was rather the memory of something that happened when he was 16 years old. He and his friends were out looking for a good time and so they went and robbed a pear tree. Later, he said, “I stole that which I had in abundance, and of much better quality. I did not want to enjoy that which I had stolen. I rather took joy in the theft and the sin itself.” It was the realization that he had taken joy not in the pears but in the sin that brought him to a place of mourning. He later prayed, “Look on my heart, God...Let my heart tell you what it sought there, to be bad for no reason, and that I should be evil for no other cause than the evil in me. It was foul evil and I loved it...” Its funny, contemporary critics, though impressed with Augustine’s literary genius, mock him for his obsessive guilt over a harmless prank, but Jesus says he is blessed. Blessed are those who mourn over what is wrong in their own lives.

But we don’t stop there. We also are to mourn over the sins of others. We should mourn over what is wrong in our church, our communities and our world. Jesus is the best example of this. In the final week of his life, as he approached Jerusalem and saw her rebellion and rejection, Luke tells us he wept over the city (Luke 19:41). We like to think of Jesus as a happy man. I think there were times he was happy. Though the Bible never says it, I think there were times he laughed with his disciples. But one thing the Bible is clear about, he was a man who mourned. The prophet Isaiah called Jesus “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” Jesus didn’t have any personal sin to grieve over, but grieved over us.

Paul was the same way. Paul loved his Jewish brothers and sisters, even though as a whole they had rejected Christ. He longed for them to know Christ. In Romans 9 he says, **“In the presence of Christ I speak utter truthfulness, I do not lie...my heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed, cut off from Christ, if that would save them”** (Rom. 9:1-3). Paul had an unceasing ache in his heart for the salvation of the Jews. This is the ache of Augustine’s mother, Monica, as she prayed for her son. This is the ache of moms and dads today who would give up their own salvation to save their daughter or son. We mourn over what is wrong in others.

There are times we should mourn and we don’t. The Corinthians had a person in their church who was sleeping with his stepmother. They were a lot like us; they were a rather enlightened, tolerant people, and so they didn’t make it an issue. Paul comes to them with a whip and says, **“You’ve become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who has done this deed should be removed from your midst”** (1 Cor. 5:2). They were laughing and they should have been weeping.

This week at the New York Academy of Art a new exhibit was displayed. It’s called “Yo Mama At The Last Supper.” The artist portrayed herself as Jesus at the Last Supper. She stands completely naked over the disciples, ready to pass out the bread and the wine. We should mourn that we live in a country that considers that art.

My 14-year-old daughter traveled to Washington D.C. this week with her eighth grade class. She called on Tuesday and said they had visited the Holocaust Museum. She said they had lined up the shoes of the victims. She said, “Mom, I was moved.” The fact that not much over 50 years ago six million Jews - men, women and children - were executed, ought to make us mourn.

When Jesus says blessed are those who mourn, he’s talking about those who not only acknowledge sin but grieve deeply over it; they grieve deeply over what is wrong with them, and they grieve deeply over what is wrong with others. But the good news is Jesus promises they will be comforted. But how will that happen? What kind of comfort is Jesus talking about?

II. How will those who mourn be comforted?

A. We are comforted by God: One thing is for sure - it is God himself who is doing the comforting. The Greek verb here is passive. We are not doing the comforting; someone else is comforting us. When the NT writers wanted to express God’s activity, they used the passive. Scripture calls him **“the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort”** (2 Cor. 1:3). In the OT the coming Messiah was also seen to be One who would comfort his people. Isaiah

says he will **“comfort all who mourn”** (Isa. 61:2). It’s also significant that Jesus called the Holy Spirit “the Comforter.” The night before he was killed, he said to them, **“Don’t worry. I will send you another Comforter”** (Jn. 14:16). So we see that together, Father, Son and Holy Spirit all comfort us.

Do you view God that way? If I were to ask a good counselor what it takes to comfort someone who is mourning, I’ll bet they would say, “Well, she has to be one who really does care, and one who is gentle and tender, and one who is willing to come to you, to draw near to you and sit with you. She doesn’t say much, but when she does speak, she speaks words that give hope.” There is no Comforter like God. He cares. He is tender. He draws near and sits with you in your pain. He gives hope through his Word.

B. We are comforted by God’s forgiveness: And what does he say? God comforts us as we mourn over our own sin by forgiving us and pouring out his mercy and grace. This is what David experienced. After grieving over his sin he wrote, **“How blessed is the man whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sin is covered”** (Ps 32:1). Paul experienced it also. After he cried, **“Wretched man that I am...,”** in the next breath, he said, **“Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord”** (Rom. 7:25).

Over 26 years ago, as a teenager who never had a second thought about God, I began to feel the weight of my sin. I felt dirty and ashamed, and I really didn’t know where to turn. One night I remembered something I had said in church as a boy, “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” I knelt down and cried out for Jesus to take away my sin. I fell asleep in my tears. The next morning I woke up, and I felt the sweetest comfort I have ever known. I knew I was forgiven. I knew I was loved. And I knew nothing or no one could ever take that away. When we mourn over our own sin, God comforts us with his forgiving grace.

And it doesn’t just happen once. The Christian life is a cycle of sensing our sin and failure, turning to him, and then receiving his comfort and grace anew. Paderewski, the great Polish pianist, had a young woman training with him. She was playing in a recital, and in the middle of her piece, she forgot her music. It sounded as if she were playing bed springs as she hit one wrong note after another. When it was over she just sat at her piano and wept. Paderewski then came near to her and leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. He hugged her and comforted her. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about how she played, but he knew that comforting her in her failure would motivate her to try again; her pain was a sign that she sensed her need for more study. And because of his comfort, she wanted to please him

even more.

Blessed are those who mourn, about their own sin, about their own failure, about their own lack of faith, about the way they keep blowing it in the same area, because they shall be comforted. And in being comforted we are motivated because we want to please him even more.

C. We are comforted by the blessed hope: Not only are we comforted by God’s grace, we are comforted by the hope of heaven. In 1 Thess. Paul talks about what he calls “the blessed hope.” It’s the hope that Jesus is coming back for his own. Paul says he will come down from heaven with a shout. And those who have died trusting in Christ will be raised up out of the grave, and those who are alive trusting in Christ will join them to meet Jesus in the air. And we will be with the Lord forever. Then, Paul says, **“Therefore, comfort each other with these words”** (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Why is that such a source of comfort? Because, as Revelation tells us, it is then that **“he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more mourning or crying or pain...”** (Rev. 21:4).

We mourn over the sin in our world. That will never really go away this side of heaven, but a day is coming when Jesus will shout, “That’s enough! Enough sin! Enough suffering! Enough injustice! Enough poverty! Enough cruelty!” Then, and only then, there will be no more mourning.

But we won’t know his comfort unless we know the pain of grieving over what is wrong with us and what is wrong in the world. God’s comfort is reserved for those who mourn in this way. Why is it then that we so often don’t? Why is that we are often laughing when we should be weeping?

III. What should we do about it?

Perhaps we need to deal with some things in our own thinking. Maybe we’re in reaction to a false kind of religiosity where the “spiritual” thing was to be miserable and serious and depressed. If you laughed you were viewed with suspicion. If you were having fun you felt pangs of guilt. And then you discovered that all that was baloney, and indeed it is. But perhaps you’ve overreacted, and you don’t mourn at all.

Or maybe you don’t mourn because you think that if you do others who don’t know Christ will be turned off. You think that to be a good witness you have to wipe a smile on your face. You don’t realize that unbelievers can see through your phoniness, and if Christ is ever going to be attractive to them, it will be because they see he’s real to you in the midst of the harsh realities of life.

Or maybe you don’t mourn because you have found other sources of comfort than God. It might be a drug or a

career or a car or a lover. There are plenty of man-made Band-Aids to soothe the pain and as long as you use them, you can't know God's comfort.

Most of us don't grieve simply because we have a defective view of sin. Our sin is just a little bump in the road on the way to heaven; an unfortunate hiccup in life's journey. All we have to do is confess it and move on. But let me tell you, our sin was serious enough to send us to Hell for eternity, and to send Christ to the cross for payment. Confession without contrition is not confession at all. Confession without contrition is counting on forgiveness but avoiding repentance. Confession without contrition is cheap grace.

If we're going to know God's comfort, we have to learn how to grieve. We have to grieve over what is wrong with us and we have to grieve over what is wrong in the world. And in our grief, we need to turn to God. So often we don't turn to God because in our grief we think he's angry at us. It doesn't honor God to grieve over our sin and never turn to him. It honors God to turn to him because he loves us.

CONCLUSION

Haddon Robinson tells about a couple who took in a messed-up young girl. She lived with them for a year and had all kinds of problems. Every night after dinner they did something that ultimately made a difference in her life. They had her repeat, "God does not love me because I am good. He loves me because I am precious, and I am precious because Christ died for me."

When that dawns on us, that God does not love us because we are good, he loves us because we are precious, and we are precious because Christ died for us, we will mourn over our what is wrong in us and in the world. But in our mourning we will turn to God and God will comfort us. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

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