

Beatitudes 2: Mourning and Comfort

Matthew 5:1-12, Romans 7:21-25 [MW17-22]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Hakaru, Sunday 30 July 2017

The scene is an All Blacks training camp. The team was in practice session. They were running sprints for conditioning. One of the large props, Joe Moody, had surprisingly proven himself to be the fastest forward on the team. Moody walked up to coach Steve Hansen and asked if he might run sprints with the faster backs. Permission was granted. For the next several days Moody managed to finish last in every race with the backs. Nobody was surprised. The coach asked if he wouldn't rather be a winner with the forwards than a loser in the competition with the backs. Moody responded, "I'm not out here to outrun those other forwards. I already know I can do that. I'm here to learn how to run faster; and if you've noticed, I'm losing by a little less every day."

You know I learnt something this week?!

- something new
- this Beatitude, Matthew 5:4, is not what I have always thought it was

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted

- on the surface it makes even less sense, seems more illogical
- is more contradictory than last week's Beatitude
- basically it seems to be saying: "happy are the unhappy"

Now there is an idea out there that the Christian life, following Jesus

- sucks all the fun out of life
- Matthew 5:4 certainly seems to promise that
- on the other hand some Christians seem to have the idea that
- you should smile continually and always be bubbling with joy and laughter
- Matthew 5:4 surely confronts that head on!
- this Beatitude certainly seems to recognise that our life has bad patches
- really, really bad patches ... with weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth
- it also recognises that there is not only some value in being in that patch
- there is actually a blessing
- Matthew 5:4 is a strong statement, but you know what?!
- it still sounds to me very much like: "happy are the unhappy"

However things are not always how they seem on the surface

- Matthew 5:4 acknowledges followers of Jesus will indeed experience
- overpowering, overwhelming sorrow, grief and mourning
- the Greek for 'to mourn' here is the strongest word for mourning in the language
- it is the word used for mourning for the dead
- the passionate lament for one who was dearly loved
- in the Greek version of the Old Testament it is the word used of Jacob's grief
- when he believed his son, Joseph, was dead
- it is the kind of grief which takes such a hold on a person it cannot be hidden

Many of us have experienced for ourselves

- that gut-wrenching, tear-streaming, heart-squeezing grief
- of being suddenly separated from someone deeply loved
- and you can take this beatitude just like that
- this is indeed the way I understood it

The Arabs have a proverb: “All sunshine makes a desert”

- land on which the sun always shines will become dry and nothing will grow there are certain things which only the rains will produce
- certain experiences only sorrow can provide
- sorrow can show us, as nothing else can, the great kindness of other people and reveal to us the comfort and compassion of God
- “Blessed is the one who has endured the bitterest sorrow that life can bring” when things go well you can live for years 'on the surface' when sorrow comes you are driven to the deep things of life and a new strength and beauty can enter in because of it

You can take this beatitude just like that

- this indeed is the way I used to understand Matthew 5:4 and there is nothing wrong with that, nothing at all
- however when you look more closely there is nothing especially deep or essentially Christian about this perspective
- it is a recognition of life and experience more a kind of 'folk wisdom' which does not really even require God

I sensed there was more to it, and you know what – there is!

- John Stott notes in his Bible Study that Jesus wept over the sins of others over the bitter consequences in judgement and death and over the city which would not welcome him
- Stott encourages us to weep over the evil of the world as did the godly people of biblical times

Jesus lamented over Jerusalem

- *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those that are sent to it!* (Luke 13:34f and 19:41f)
- followers of Jesus are to lament the present condition of the world
- lament the way God's people are acting and living
- lament the way God's kingdom and God's purposes are stifled
- followers of Jesus are to care about the suffering, the sorrows the needs of others
- those who are actively involved in this will find a blessing this is a new angle to me
- “Blessed is the one who cares intensely for the sufferings, and for the sorrows and for the needs of others”
- but even this is not what I learnt

If you have ever mourned the loss of something or someone special

- recall if you can, if it is not too painful, just what that felt like: we are to have that same gut-wrenching, tear-streaming, heart-squeezing grief over our own shortcomings
- this is the new thing I have learnt

John Stott writes in the notes for the study on Matthew 5:4

It is plain from the context that those Jesus promised comfort are not primarily those who mourn the loss of a loved one, but those who mourn the loss of their innocence, their righteousness, their self-respect. It is not the sorrow of bereavement to which Christ refers, but the sorrow of repentance.

Further on John Stott wrote these words which made me really sit up and take notice:
We Christians who make much of grace sometimes thereby make light of sin

- let me say that again:

we Christians who make much of grace sometimes thereby make light of sin

Grace for me is a biggie, it is huge

- it is a defining characteristic of our faith

however here is the new thing I have learnt:

I diminish the value, the gift, of this grace

if I do not recognise my own state of sin

- grace is able to deal abundantly with it all

if I first rightly mourn my loss of innocence, righteousness, self-respect

While we rightly make much of Grace, amazing, boundless grace

- this does not overlook, whitewash or ignore sin

grace actually gives us the opportunity to deal with sin

and that is what this Beatitude is all about

- realistically facing up to our sin

admitting we are wretched, miserable, rebellious

grieving over our attitudes and behaviours and the hurt they cause

- it sounds all too much like the humbling and uncomfortable place of last week
and again, it is in just this place God is able to bless us

It is coming up against something which opens our eyes

- to what sin is and what sin does

like a child going their own way, never thinking of effects or consequences

one day something happens and the child sees a stricken look in their parent's eyes
and suddenly sin is seen for what it is

- the light bulb flicks on

there is a recognition that this includes me too

This why the Cross is so important

- as we look at the cross it says to each and every one of us:

this is what sin can do

sin can take the best life that ever there was and smash it

destroy it painfully and horribly

- the cross opens our eyes to the horror of sin

when you see sin in all its horror you cannot do anything else

but experience intense sorrow for your own sin

This why Paul wrote those desperate, despairing words in his letter to the Romans:

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (7:24)

- you can almost see and taste the anguish

What a miserable person I am

Who will rescue me from this body that is doomed to die?

- who will rescue him? who will rescue us?

the next verse has the answer:

Thank God! Jesus Christ will rescue me (7:25)

Blessed is the one who recognises they are stranded, abandoned, with no hope

- they will be rescued

For sure God is with us in our other sorrows

- the loss of a loved one, the evils of the world
yet it is this last perspective, grief over our own sin and shortcomings
where the real blessing is, so perhaps we might rewrite it like this:
*blessed are those who are intensely sorry for their sins
those who are heartbroken over what their sin has done to God and Jesus Christ:
those who have this experience will indeed be comforted*
- for this is having a broken and contrite heart
and the broken and contrite heart God will never despise
- the joy of forgiveness comes through the desperate sorrow of the broken heart

This coming week I encourage you to meditate on Paul's words in Romans 7:21-25

- Paul was a great, great worker for the Lord
perhaps the greatest missionary ever
he wrote more than half the New Testament
- yet he described himself like this: a wretched, miserable specimen
and note this is present tense, not past
Paul is not lamenting his previous behaviour, before he met Jesus on the road
- he is talking about the present, right now
in the midst of the great work we would think he is doing
he calls himself a miserable, wretched sinner

Paul mourns his fallen state

- and in the very next breath acknowledges the only way he can move beyond this
he says that Jesus Christ is the only one who can and does do anything to help
- if it is good enough for St Paul, it is good enough for us!

We too are to grieve, to mourn, to weep, over our fallen state

- and accept the deliverance God holds out in Jesus
the comfort of forgiveness, acceptance, welcome
- the blessing of new life

John Stott sums it up like this:

When we recognise our sinfulness, our shortcomings, our wretchedness; we are able to be delivered from those very same things and take up the life that Jesus promises

Ask yourself blatantly, honestly: have I mourned, have I truly grieved

- gut-wrenching, tear-streaming, heart-squeezing
over my sins, my shortcomings, the way I have hurt other people, wounded God?
- if not, give it a go
for the promise is when we do that
when we get to that place of desperate sorrow
we will experience a comfort and joy that is literally out of this world

Whatever the cause of our grief, our sorrow, the promise is that God will meet us there

- listen to how The Message puts this promise:
*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*

Let us take a moment to be still before God ...

[silence]

... Amen