

Matthew 5:4
Spiritual Sorrow: the Key to Joy
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, TN

We are today continuing our study of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. The beatitudes are Christ's description of the blessed man, the truly happy man.

Let me remind of an incident where Christ tells us who the truly happy man really is. Jesus had sent out a group called the seventy to preach the gospel of the kingdom. When they returned, they rejoiced that even the demons were subject to them in the name of Christ. And Jesus responded by saying, "... do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven." Who is the truly happy man? The truly happy man is the man whose name is written in heaven. The truly happy man is the man who has been saved from his sin. And that is the person Jesus is describing for us in the Beatitudes.

Jesus is not here explaining how to be saved. Jesus is not giving us here a list of things we can do or feel in order to earn or merit our salvation. That would be contrary to a salvation that is by grace through faith. "By grace" means that salvation is totally a gift and not something we earn through our own efforts. Jesus has already done all the work necessary to earn salvation for all of God's people. "Through faith" means that we are looking not to ourselves for our salvation, or even partly to ourselves and

mostly to Jesus for our salvation. "Through faith" means that we are looking to Jesus alone for our salvation. We are depending on His life of perfect obedience and His death as a finished sacrifice for our salvation. Salvation is by grace through faith, and the Beatitudes properly understood are consistent with this. The Beatitudes are not an explanation of how to be saved but are instead a description of the person whom Jesus has saved and is saving. The Beatitudes are a description of that progressive heart transformation which occurs as the Holy Spirit applies to us the cleansing and quickening power of the redeeming work of Jesus.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd, and I know My sheep" (John 10:14). Jesus knows His sheep, and His sheep are those to whom He has given eternal life. Here in the Beatitudes Jesus describes His sheep for us.

Don't think to yourselves, "I'm going to make myself into the sort of person Jesus described in the Beatitudes, and then I will be saved." No, that is a dead end street that will lead nowhere except to frustration and defeat. Only Jesus can make you into the sort of person described in the Beatitudes. What you need to do is to abandon any and all hope of ever saving yourself. You must look to Jesus alone for your salvation. You must throw yourself at His feet, and cry out to Him for mercy. The Beatitudes testify to the type of person you will become as you experience His grace and mercy.

I'm not saying that the Beatitudes are talking solely about what happens **after** we come to Christ in faith. The spiritual

transformation described in the Beatitudes surrounds the faith experience. Faith from its very beginning bears fruit. We are justified through faith alone, but the faith which justifies is never alone. We are justified only by our looking to Jesus, we are justified only by our faith relationship with Jesus, but we can't look to Jesus, we can't have a faith relationship with Jesus without being affected by it. Our faith relationship with Jesus is why God accepts us and the only reason why God accepts us. God's forgiving us and God's accepting us as perfectly righteous is based solely on what Jesus has done for us through His sacrificial death and His perfectly obedient life. Yet our faith relationship with Jesus also transforms us. God doesn't accept us because Jesus transforms us, but everyone God accepts will be transformed as well.

Jesus as an act of sovereign grace pours out His Holy Spirit upon us. The Holy Spirit comes upon us and puts us into a mystical covenant union with Jesus. We experience that covenant union as faith. Faith inwardly is a heart disposition to believe. Faith outwardly is the act of belief. Faith as our experience of our covenant union with Jesus immediately is both an inward heart transformation and an outward action. Logically, the inward transformation precedes the outward action. Our faith relationship with Jesus also immediately begins to bear the fruit of a definitive and progressive inner heart transformation and a definitive and progressive outward life transformation. Jesus affects who we are and Jesus affects what we do.

The immediate fruit of faith are repentance and new obedience. As we turn to Christ as Savior and Lord, we are also turning away from a life dominated by sin and turning to a life of obedience under the Lordship of Christ. The early beatitudes describe the repentance which accompanies faith in Jesus. When the Holy Spirit calls us to Christ with efficacious grace, He convinces us of our sin and misery. The early beatitudes describe that aspect of the faith experience.

As we trust Christ alone for our salvation, we recognize our own spiritual poverty apart from Him. -- Blessed are the poor in spirit. -- As we trust Christ alone for our salvation, we not only acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy but we also grieve over it. -- Blessed are those who mourn. -- As we trust Christ alone for salvation, we set aside our pride and acknowledge that we do not have the power to save ourselves. -- Blessed are the meek. -- As we trust Christ alone for salvation, we desire that heart and life righteousness which only Christ can provide for us. -- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. --

The fourth beatitude is the hinge beatitude. The early statements describe our recognition of our sin and misery as the first fruit of our faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit convinces us of our spiritual poverty. We mourn with grief and hatred of our sin. We recognize that apart from Christ, we can do nothing. We hunger and thirst for the new righteous life which only Christ can enable us to live. Then we have the hinge statement: "they shall be filled." "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." Then the beatitudes begin to describe what we are filled with. Then the beatitudes

begin to describe that positive new obedience which also immediately begins to result from our faith relationship with Jesus. When we come into a faith relationship with Jesus, one of the immediate results is a full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience. The good works may come later, but the desire for them is an immediate consequence of faith in Jesus. As we look upon the Savior with the eyes of faith and are transformed into His image, we become the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers.

Now let's look specifically at the second beatitude: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

That certainly sounds paradoxical. It is saying in effect that the truly happy are those who are sad. It sounds paradoxical, but it is true, and here is why.

The book of Ecclesiastes says that there is a time to weep and a time to dance. What would you think of a person who was dancing when it was a time to weep? Think of the American soldiers in World War II who first went into the German concentration camps to liberate the prisoners. They would have seen the gas chambers, the piles of corpses stacked like wood waiting to be burned, the prisoners on the verge of starvation. That was a time to weep. And what would you think of some soldier who in that context began dancing a jig? You would say that something was seriously wrong with that person.

I. The Need for Sorrow

There is a time to weep.

There was something seriously wrong with us before we experienced the grace of regeneration. We had sinned against a holy God. We had earned His righteous displeasure, His wrath. We were in bondage to sinful living and could not free ourselves. That was surely a time to weep, but we did not. The dead do not weep, and we were dead in our trespasses and sins. Here is Paul's description of the lost in Ephesians 4:17-19:

- 17 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind,
- 18 having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart;
- 19 who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

Why are these people here described by the apostle Paul not mourning over their sins and their sinfulness? Because their understanding is darkened, their heart is hardened and they are past feeling.

Someone once told me that one day he was talking to a brick mason, and he began smelling burning flesh. He wondered where this odor was coming from, and then he noticed that the brick mason was holding a lit cigarette between his fingers. The cigarette had burned down, and it was burning the man's fingers. Yet the man's hands were so calloused that he didn't even notice it.

Apart from God's regenerating grace, our hearts are calloused. We sin, and we feel no remorse, no regret, no sorrow over having broken God's laws and offended Him. We have what Ezekiel calls a heart of stone, a heart that has no feeling.

At regeneration, the new birth, the Holy Spirit replaces this heart of stone with a heart of flesh. He brings us to spiritual life and our feeling returns. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says,

- 10 For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; ...
- II. Godly Sorrow, or the sorrow of grace, the sorrow that comes from grace.

We see an example of godly sorrow on the day of Pentecost described in Acts chapter 2. The climatic statement of Peter's sermon is found in verse 36:

- 36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

The response of the audience is found in verse 37:

- 37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

This response was prophesied and explained in Zechariah 12:10:

10 “And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they have pierced; they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.”

The Holy Spirit came upon these people in regenerating power, and the result was that these people recognized their sin and grieved over it. Of course, this spiritual sorrow led to a repentant faith which resulted in salvation and rejoicing. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. God first discomforts the comfortable and then comforts the discomforted. We are comfortable with our sins and God convicts us and makes us uncomfortable. We see our sin and our guilt. We recognize that we deserve to go to hell. And at that point, God comforts the discomforted. He enlightens us to the grace and mercy and saving power of Jesus, and we experience forgiveness and deliverance. As the hymn "Amazing Grace" puts it:

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

The hymn "Lord, with Glowing Heart I'd Praise Thee" expresses this same thought this way:

Praise the grace whose threats alarmed thee,
Roused thee from thy fatal ease;
Praise the grace whose promise warmed thee,

Praise the grace that whispered peace.

We also experience this beatitude when we wrestle with indwelling sin. In Romans 7:24-25, verse 24 describes the sorrow:

24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Verse 25 describes the comfort:

25 I thank God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord!

We experience this beatitude when we as Christians fall into sin and then repent and renew our fellowship with God. In Psalm 32:1-5, verses 1 and 2 describe the comfort:

- 1 Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
- 2 Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Verses 3 through 5 describe the sorrow:

- 3 When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long.
- 4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah
- 5 I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

III. Sorrow of the world

Now not all sorrow is this sorrow of grace. Look again at 2 Corinthians 7:10:

- 10 For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.

Examples:

Judas regretted his betrayal, but did not apprehend the mercy of Christ. His was the sorrow of despair.

Esau

Hebrews 12:16-17

- 16 lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.
- 17 For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.

Esau's sorrow was the sorrow of lost opportunity

rich young ruler

Matthew 19:21-22

- 21 Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."
- 22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

The rich young ruler's sorrow was sorrow that coming to Christ meant abandoning his sin; in this case, the idolatry of materialism, the loving of possessions over God.

Beloved, when God works His grace in our hearts, we are delivered from that callousness which feels no sorrow, and we are delivered from that worldly sorrow which leads only to death. We instead experience the sorrow that leads to comfort.

By the grace of Christ, we avoid both sinful despair and superficial giddiness. We are neither a stagnant pond nor a shallow, bubbling brook but a river of joy which runs deep. We are enabled to rejoice in the Lord with "a holy joy" and experience a "serious happiness."*

* page 1:62, **Studies in the Sermon on the Mount** by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones