

More Blessings

If you weren't able to be here last Sunday, I want you to go online and listen to the sermon. My goal last week was to set the framework for understanding the Beatitudes, the first few verses of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I spent the first half of the message last Sunday talking about the context for Jesus' sermon and on the meaning of some key words and I think you would find it helpful to know these things as we move on in the Beatitudes today.

The summary would be that the word "blessed" is best translated by a phrase like "in sync". "In sync with the Kingdom of Heaven are the poor in spirit", or "in sync with the values of God are those who mourn" are better translations than "happy are those". Jesus isn't describing our emotional state, but our spiritual life and the rewards that come from being Kingdom people. If you want the bigger picture, then check out last week's message online.

After that introduction, we only got to one of the Beatitudes last Sunday - blessed are the poor in spirit. This week we get to jump further into this passage and we start by looking at the blessedness of being a people who grieve, who mourn. Your NIV translates it like this:

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

This is a jarring statement, something that sounds and feels strange to us. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff put it this way after the death of his 25-year old son:

Blessings to those who mourn, cheers to those who weep, hail to those whose eyes are filled with tears, hats off to those who suffer, bottoms up to the grieving. How strange, how incredibly strange.

Even more stunning is that this beatitude uses one of the strongest words for grief in the Greek language. Penthein is used to describe the grief you feel at the loss of a loved one, with the gut-wrenching emotion that wells up from deep inside.

But we have to understand that the qualities Jesus blesses, these attributes that he congratulates us for, are not normal, natural human qualities. Jesus didn't come into Galilee looking for people who were already experiencing grief and then blessing them. He came calling people to Himself and once people became His followers and began to learn from Him, they became people who could both experience deep joy and profound grief. It is this kind of mourning that Jesus is referring to in this verse.

So then, the question becomes, "Why?" Why is the person who mourns somehow closer to the values of the Kingdom of Heaven than the one who doesn't?

Darrell Johnson, in his book, The Beatitudes, suggests three reasons:

1. When we get close to Jesus, we realize more clearly than ever before, that we are sinners, that we fall short of the glory of God, while Jesus doesn't. He is the glory of God and we feel ashamed at our failures when we draw close to Him. That's probably why many of us have a hard time in our devotional life, because it requires of us that we read the Bible and pray and try to hear God's voice and, as we

approach that process, we fear what it will expose in us. The Kingdom come teaches us to mourn, to feel grief over our capacity to disobey even the simplest of Christ's commands.

2. The second reason for Jesus' teaching about mourning is that we feel a little bit of what He feels for the human condition. Often as you read the Gospels you see Jesus weeping. When He wept at Lazarus' tomb, the word used means "uncontrollable weeping", "a spontaneous outbreak of sobbing". And when He wept over Jerusalem, Luke describes it with a word that means "the cry of a soul in agony". Jesus later explained that it was because they didn't know the things that make for peace and His heart was breaking over it. If we allow ourselves to come close to the heart of Jesus, we will undoubtedly be moved by the same things that move Him.
3. The third reason Johnson gives for grieving being a sign of the inbreaking Kingdom is that being close to Jesus allows us to see what the world could be like, should be like. We hear the news, we read the signs of the times, we see nations that seem to be in the grip of evil, determined to fight wars and entrench poverty among their own people, throwing aside the values of the Kingdom and embracing values of God-haters. If we are to draw close to Jesus and respond as He responds to these everyday tragedies, we will weep, too. Are the people of our day any more able than the people of Jesus' day to know the things that make for peace? It doesn't seem like it, and so, knowing that surrender to Jesus is the way to lasting peace, both between individuals and between nations, it's appropriate to mourn the current condition of our world.

Earlier I quoted Nicholas Wolterstorff who lost his 25-year old son in a mountain climbing accident. He wrote a book, Lament for a Son, in which he openly shares his grief and in one chapter addresses Jesus' second beatitude by asking, "Who are the mourners that Jesus blesses?"

The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for that day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence.

He then goes on to list the aches that the Kingdom person, the person who mourns, will experience. I'll pick it up part way through that list:

They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one who fails to see God and who ache whenever they see someone unbelieving. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one who suffers oppression and who ache whenever they see someone beat down. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm there is no one without dignity and who ache whenever they see someone treated with indignity. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm of peace there is neither death nor tears and who ache whenever they see someone crying tears over death. The mourners are aching visionaries.

(Wolterstorff, Lament, pp. 85,86)

So, Jesus is saying that when you ache for the pain of sin, for the destruction it has caused in the world, when you realize the pain in Jesus' heart because of it all and you

grieve along with Him, you are “in sync” with the Kingdom of Heaven. And, being “in sync” with God’s world, you will be comforted When?

There are at least two answers to that question, because it’s very clear from Scripture that ultimate and complete comfort comes only at the end, when God wipes away every tear, when there is no more death, and no longer any mourning or crying or pain. (Revelation 21:4)

But there is comfort that comes before that as well. The Greek word for comfort that is used here is the word *parakaleo*, which means to encourage and to embolden. The picture is of soldiers cheering each other on as they head into battle. “Come on, we can do this!” From this word comes a noun, *paraklete*, which I used over and over again in a sermon just a few months ago. The paraklete was promised by Jesus in John 14 and 16 - and He is the Holy Spirit.

So when we feel grief over our own stubborn sin and feel frustrated and guilty and ashamed of ourselves, the Holy Spirit comes alongside and says, “Your sin has been paid for, your guilt is removed; Jesus has covered it completely.” Or when we feel what Jesus feels at the immense pain that is in the world around us, and when we want to weep for the suffering of people we love, the Paraklete tells us that the Lord is still at work, that wounds are being mended, that sickness is being healed, that the Kingdom is advancing. And when we grieve because of what the world could be, but is not, because of foolish human pride and the destruction it brings, the Spirit speaks comfort. The Kingdom of Heaven is in you and through you and millions of others, it is slowly changing the world. Blessed are those who mourn; in sync with the heart of God are those who grieve over the right things, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth”, says the New International Version, while the New Living Translation says, “God blesses those who are gentle and lowly, for the whole earth will belong to them.” (Matt. 5:5)

Who are the meek? Unfortunately, the English word “meek” rhymes with the word “weak” and it has often been understood as referring to a person who is unsure, self-conscious, indecisive. Here are some of the synonyms offered by the online dictionary: submissive, yielding, compliant, tame, timid, deferential, unresisting. The quote they give with their definition is, “I used to call her Miss Mouse because she was so meek and mild”.

If I told you that there are only two characters in the Bible who are referred to as “meek” and given those definitions we’ve just seen, what two characters would you think of? The two are Moses and Jesus. Numbers 12:3 tells us that Moses was very humble - the word used there is “meek”, more than any man who was on the face of the earth. Yet he had just led over a million and a half people out of slavery in Egypt and was a man who had conversations with the living God on a regular basis.

Jesus once invited people to take His yoke on them, and offered as a reason for trusting Him in this way, “for I am meek and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29). So what does this word really mean?

Some scholars believe that Psalm 37 is both the source of Jesus’ third beatitude and the key to understanding what it means. Derek Kidner, who wrote a commentary on the Psalms says:

There is no finer exposition of the third Beatitude than this psalm, from which it is drawn. (Psalms 1-72, Kidner, p. 148)

Psalm 37 is one of those written by King David and in it he complains that the people who are pushy, power brokers, manipulators, controllers - they are the ones who seem to win, who seem to get what they want in this world. But he writes more about how to respond to this injustice, and in doing so, he reveals what true meekness is. Here are some verses to reflect on:

*Be still in the presence of the LORD, and wait patiently for Him to act. Don’t worry about evil people who prosper, or fret about their wicked schemes. (v. 7)
Stop your anger! Turn from your rage! Do not envy others - it only leads to harm. For the wicked will be destroyed, but those who trust in the LORD will possess the land (vv. 8,9)*

Those who are meek and lowly will possess the land; they will live in prosperous security (v. 11)

What do you see in those verses that would describe someone who is meek? - patient, trusting, content

Who are these godly ones and how do they show meekness? In verse 3, they are those who trust the Lord and who do good in the face of evil. In verses 4 and 7 they are people who delight themselves in the LORD, rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him. They don’t worry about people who choose to do evil (v. 1) and they refuse to get angry with them (v. 8) How can they do all these things? By trusting in the Lord rather than comparing themselves to others. By waiting for God’s deliverance or vindication instead of trying to prove themselves or defend themselves.

There is nothing weak about meekness. It requires great strength of character and a strong ability to trust in the Lord as your deliverer, your hope. Stuart Briscoe says this about the meek:

The meek roll their lives, their cares, their reputations onto the Lord and let the Lord worry about it all. The meek are those who, when offended, commit their wounded egos and the one offending their ego, to the Perfect Judge. The meek can say to herself, “What she did to me was wrong. But she is answerable to God, so I’ll let God deal with her. But I am answerable to God, too. So I’m going to concentrate on doing right by her.”

One of the classic illustrations of meekness comes from the passage about Moses that I referred to earlier, Numbers 12:3. Here’s the context:

While they were at Hazereth, Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because he had married a Cushite woman. They said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he spoken through us, too?" But the LORD heard them.

And, even though he had been publicly insulted by his own brother and sister, Moses didn't respond. Instead, God called them out and punished their arrogance and Moses interceded for his sister, asking God to release her from the consequences of her action. That isn't something you do from a position of weakness, but from a position of great strength.

The same thing happened when Jesus was being accused by the Sanhedrin, when they were asking Pilate to crucify Him, when He was whipped and mocked by the soldiers, when the crowds demanded that He be executed - He didn't say a word. He put all His trust and hope in His Father in Heaven. He knew what lay ahead, and there was nothing about that immediate future that was appealing to Him, but He endured it for the greater good, the good that He won for us.

Both Moses and Jesus demonstrated for us what "meekness" is all about. When we don't care as much about our own reputations as we do about God's reputation, or when we trust Him to make right the things that we see as injustices, or when we choose to be humble in the face of criticism, we are exercising the strength of meekness.

The reward for meekness is an intriguing one - the meek will inherit the earth. Again, we see that this is rooted in Psalm 37:11:

Those who are meek and lowly will possess the land; they will live in prosperous security.

Again, the urgent question is "when will this be true?" "When will the meek possess the earth?" And the answer, as it was for those who mourn, is that the meek will inherit the earth at the end. But there is a sense that, even now, those who walk humbly, who don't spend their lives grasping and demanding, are free to enjoy the creation, and the Creator, more than those who are focused on grasping and demanding. Add to that the fact that when we are adopted as children of the living God, we suddenly have access to everything that is His - we are children and heirs. As Creator, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. We enjoy all of God's Creation in a different way, both by knowing the One who made it and by knowing that He has made it for us to enjoy.

Quick applications, now, for these two Beatitudes:

1. When you look at the world, its physical beauty and the evil that has distorted it, try to see it as its Creator does, with vision and hope and a longing for the creation to be healed. And then remind yourself that He is going to heal it all. So, when things go wrong and there are wars and people are exploited and lives are destroyed, you can let yourself feel the Creator's pain and it will help you to pray for His Kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. That is the hope that

sustains us, allows us to mourn the pain of this world with grace and patience, and to keep believing, keep trusting, keep looking ahead.

- 2.** Sometimes we feel that we show our strength with an outburst of anger, with a strong comment that hurts, or with humour that cuts people down - but real strength is found in meekness, in gentleness. Jesus showed us great power under the control of a meek, or humble, or gentle, outlook. He didn't use power to control others, but to serve them. Here's what we can learn from His example of meekness: we can serve God's purposes best when our focus is on doing His will and trusting Him to lead us. That will mean worrying less and trusting more. It will mean learning contentment and letting go of the restless desire to resolve everything or to know the future. Practice making yourself aware of His presence with you when anxiety or stress seems overwhelming ... and know His peace.