

Those Who Mourn

Jonathan K. Dodson | Matthew 5:4 | April 23, 2015

We're working through a Beatitude a week, Latin for blessing. It's Jesus manifesto on the Good Life. The reason we're doing this is to cultivate true character and get a sense of the greatness of God. "*Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted*" flies in the face of cultural norms. Happy are those who mourn? Can happiness and mourning go together? Even if we sprinkle spiritual pixie dust on happiness and call it "blessed," do we really think it makes suffering a pleasant affair? This Beatitude addresses something universal to the human experience—*mourning*—while promising what we universally long for comfort or *happiness*. But in his paradoxical way, Jesus is saying more than meets the eye. Let's see, one word at a time: Mourn, Comfort, Blessed.

Mourning Social & Personal Evil

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted is a saying we often hear next to the grave or close to a casket. It's poetic hope for those facing death. We invoke it when we encounter **social evil**. Our hearts go out to the families of 2000 mourning in Nepal. Think of a time you wept. What were you feeling? What was going on? Were you hurt, misunderstood, grieving a loss, in physical pain? When Jesus stands atop this mountain, sandals planted in rock and dust, he fulfills Isaiah's promise of comfort to Israel. The prophet of God speaks to a people in exile, stripped from their land, their city in rubble, relationships torn. He speaks of a year of divine favor, to bring comfort to those who mourn. How do you *deal* with mourning? Loss of job, rejection of friends, betrayal, physical disease, marital anguish, gnawing loneliness? Many of us **minimize** it. I have friends who simply work harder. Others throw themselves into a movie or vacation. I often eat sweets at night. For others, the sorrow overshadows you leading to depression and isolation. Either way, we sideline our suffering and miss the blessing. We forgo a great opportunity. What opportunity? The opportunity for Suffering to be a Master Teacher. Victor Frankl, author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, suffered in Nazi concentration camps. As he laid railroads, watched his friends suffer brutally and die, he came to the conclusion that suffering was a *moral task*, a vocation. It is something we are called to. Because of this, he counseled potential suicides that life had not stopped expecting things from them, that something in the future was waiting for them. He found a *why*: "[A man can endure almost any how if only he has a why,](#)" Nietzsche. Most of us will never suffer that badly, but Frankl shows us it is possible to suffer well. *Is this moral task how mourning becomes blessing?* By coming under the tutelage of suffering? Many memoirs are written for this reason, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, *Night*. How did Israelites do it? How did they reconcile blessing with mourning? To get there, deep into the why, we have to remember *why* they went into exile. Isaiah tells us, "[And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression](#)" (59:20). It was transgressing God that got Israel into exile. It's an old word for sin. They embraced disobedience to God in favor of obedience to Self. At the root of their suffering was **personal evil**. This beatitude addresses both. Jesus is promising a comfort to those who will mourn their not just social evil but personal evil. This where we have trouble as a culture. We are quick to condemn evil but slow to recognize sin. Instead of virtues we talk about values. Instead of sin, we make

mistakes. This softening of character and of sin leads to moral ambivalence, and as a result, we don't live morally before a holy God. Anything goes: sex, gender, money, power it's all malleable, neutral. If there is no holy God, then there is no sin worth mourning. If there is no mourning, then there is very little character change or holiness. But blessing comes when we mourn our *sin*. St. Paul says it this way, “[godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation](#)” (2 Cor 7:10). If we want blessing, salvation, we have to ask ourselves, “Do I have a category for godly sorrow?” When is the last time you wept over your sin, mourned the evil, not just out there, but in here? There is a time to weep, and you can choose it or it will be chosen for you, like Israel, like King David who said of his unrepentant sin, “[when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer](#)” (Ps 32:3-4). The heavy hand of the Lord will eventually come upon us if we tolerate sin. But mourning leads to repentance, and repentance to life, to reunion with God. But so often we tolerate our sin, don't we? This leads to mere confession, without repentance. It's popular in Christian circles to talk about unconfessed sin as a danger. **It's not unconfessed sin, but unrepentant sin that is dangerous.** Confession without repentance is like running the credit card through the machine over and over. It doesn't register with God. It fails to obtain his grace for change, repentance for life. **God is not counting your trips to confession; he is calling your heart to Christ.** We have to turn TO GOD not just run the card: “[I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin](#)” (32:5). This requires humility, and sometimes a humility imposed by suffering. [Example.] Paul Tillich said that [people who endure suffering are taken beneath the routine busyness of life to find out they are not who they believed themselves to be](#). Ever been surprised by what comes out of your mouth in conflict? Thoughts you contemplate in pain? So self-absorbed you want to take your life? Blessed are those who mourn their sin for they will be *comforted*.

Present & Future Comfort

We've looked at mourning, social and personal evil. Now to comfort. When Jesus says, “[they will be comforted](#),” it sounds like we have to wait for comfort. Mourn now, but be happy about it because one day you'll be comforted, which is true. We will exchange a worn out spirit for a garment of praise. But, Jesus is also using a special form of the verb called the divine passive. It's passivity means that we contribute in no way to the comfort. It's not earned, but it is received. And repentance opens us right up to unilateral—straight from heaven—comfort. So how do we get it? Remember the first Beatitude? “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.” If you humble yourself to receive Christ, you get some of the kingdom of heaven now. And that means all the promises that follow, we also get some of it. So if we mourn our sin, we get some of the future comfort in the present. How? When we are crying one of the most comforting things that can happen is to have someone put their arm around you and cry with you. [Mom] But you can't take that person with you. You can't carry their comfort around. It doesn't attach. Jesus is saying there is a comfort that transcends space and flesh. It comes from the future into the present; it is God with you and for you who can comfort you most. It's a sense upon the heart but also a promise that transcends our sensing. Sometimes we don't feel the comfort

or proximity of God and we have to trust the promises of God. I'll never leave you or forsake you. God is attached to us in Christ. Your comfort at his cost. His presence in your sin. He doesn't turn his face away. He's there. But you have to turn to him. [Example] We have to mourn, turn our regret upwards, and say with David, "Against you and against you only have I sinned." **In every sin the ultimate transgression is against God not others.** Repent and confess. Don't run the card through over and over without getting what he's paid for—heavenly comfort, forgiveness in sin and a loving Savior who is attached. See, Christ's comfort in suffering neither leaves you stranded in despair nor restores you to where you were before. When you encounter his embrace you fundamentally *change*. You emerge a different man/woman. *Having stared in the mirror, and looked up the mountain, you come out with character. Not just character, you come out with more of Christ; not just more of Christ more worship of Christ. It is in the crucible that character is formed; in godly sorrow God's comfort won. It's in the valley of mourning, in our exile, that tears of heavy conviction turn to holy joy.* Suddenly, we are more aware of what we already received. We recognize the blessing of friends and children, churches and mentors. We become grateful. That's present comfort. Future comfort is coming too. All evil will be undone for those who have been undone. Walls will be repaired, cities rebuilt. Christ will wipe the tear, and the terror, away. The justice of Isaiah 61 will roll on.

Blessing

Mourning, comfort, *blessing*. How is there blessing in our sorrow? Suffering certainly becomes a tutor. If we submit to her, taking up the moral task like Frankl, we will uncover more of ourselves, with opportunity for more character. But blessing is divine favor, and like divine comfort, transcends space and flesh. It is the joy of heaven on earth. How do you find it? Kreeft: "Every suffering can be blessed because it hollows out a place in us for God and his comfort, which is infinite joy. Finite sorrows fertilize the soul's soil so the plant of infinite joy can grow...The more we suffer, the more we appreciate joy." Suffering makes a place for more blessing, repenting a place for rejoicing. Less of us leads to more of Him. Exiled Israel exchanges sorrow for joy through their repentant suffering. And as a result, "they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified" (61:3). Suffering and godly sorrow is how oaks are made. Don't settle for sapling. To some, this is not enough warrant for suffering. Some may say, as the character in one novel, "No future bliss can make up for it," but they do not know that "Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. See: The remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven...the Blessed will say, 'We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven.' All of the heavenly comfort will be flush. Heaven puts earth in perspective: "What Satan intended for evil God superintended for good" (Gen 50). Good in what way? A place was hollowed out for more of him. Isaiah says *the planting of the oaks is for the glory of the Lord* (3). When our suffering is for his glory, for more of Christ, his blessing flows. Grace upon grace for every sorrow, and that river runs so strong and so true, that you'll find yourself on the other side of the sorrow and the pain saying, "I'd do it again, for you." Heaven will work backwards, agony will become a glory, as we are hidden in Christ's sufferings for us. Don't settle for meaningless mourning. Don't minimize your sorrow, distraction or depression. Do business with God. Run the card and purchase his grace. It's all paid for. Become an oak planted *for the glory of the Lord*.