

Matthew 5:1-16; 6:10
Isaiah 61:1-1
Psalm 37:8-17
Numbers 12:3

TO MOURN AND BE MEEK

If we do not drink deeply of the first beatitude – if we do not take the first step – none of the others will do us any good. They may, in fact, do us a great deal of harm. Like playing with a chemistry set, fooling around with the spiritual life without any notion of what we are doing can be quite dangerous.

I tried last week to lift up the humility step, the first beatitude: admitted we are powerless – confessed our absolute need of God’s presence and guidance, mercy and forgiveness. I did not do it well enough, but lots of you got it anyway, and that is what matters. But if you were not here last week, or if you forgot to remember our Lenten theme during the week, then I can do you a lot of damage today. Despite what a few of you seem to think, that is not my purpose or desire. Yet I do not have time to go over the first beatitude again today. So I want to warn you – a quick and simple, but earnest, warning.

If you try, for instance, to mourn when you are still in “pride” mode, not in “humility” mode, you will end up feeling guilty for the wrong things. You will try to correct by moving in wrong directions, and it will lead toward depression and despair. There is no doubt that some people stay out of the Christian Life – or make big problems in the church when they get into it – because they are unwilling to repent, to confess their sin(s), to take an honest look at their own faults, and so naturally it is impossible for them to grow or change in any good direction. That is a really big problem. But it is a big problem with maybe only ten or fifteen percent of the people, and only on rare occasion or in special circumstances with the rest.

A gigantic problem in comparison is the fifty or sixty percent of the congregation who are feeling guilty about the wrong things. So many of us are trying to recover from our best gifts; trying to feel guilty about our virtues; begging God to forgive us for causing trouble, when it was God trying to get us to cause that very trouble, only ten times more besides. If we “mourn” outside the humility place – outside the poverty of spirit which knows that only God’s wisdom and guidance can lead us aright – then we turn over the most tender and vulnerable places within us to our

own prejudices, willfulness, perfectionism, judgment, and hatred. Stop and think: If you were capable of loving yourself as you should, of forgiving yourself rightly, of healing and encouraging and affirming and inspiring yourself to anywhere near the level you truly need, then you would *be* God, or, at the very least, a very highly developed spiritual saint.

So, it is important to not try the second beatitude until you have genuinely and sincerely worked the first beatitude. Or, to use our most mundane imagery: If you take the second step without having taken the first step, you are going to fall flat on your face. Some people think they can manage if they just learn to hop. But it is only an attempt to cheat, and they fall twice as hard. In the spiritual life, there is no way to cheat. Pretend hope, pretend love, pretend peace, pretend faith ... simply do not work.

One more illustration: If we try to move straight to hungering and thirsting for righteousness without taking the humility step first, we only end up angry and hateful toward all those who make mistakes and fail to do righteous acts as we define them. Pretty soon we also start getting angry and hateful toward ourselves because we cannot be everywhere or help everybody either. Hungering for righteousness while we are still in the pride of life – still playing God instead of humbly worshipping (trying to serve) God – is a witches' brew. Satan uses it to undo the church every chance he gets, and the only antidote – because righteousness is such a wonderful motive – is taking the first step first.

Enough warning and preamble. "*Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.*" The second beatitude. Why is mourning so important to the spiritual life? Why is it important enough to be second on the list? There is no question about it: We all have a lot of grief and sorrow in our lives. We work hard sometimes to cut the awareness, to put it on the back shelf so we can go on. It is hard to drive through places in Santa Ana, never mind Tijuana or India, without being so struck by the magnitude of human desolation that one must literally shield – play mind games to numb the sensitivity – or it would simply overwhelm us. So are we supposed to open back up to this desolation so we can weep uncontrollably? I suspect at times we do need to do that, to get our humanity back. But I do not think that is the major meaning of this beatitude.

So, as is frequently true, we have a vocabulary problem. Mostly we associate mourning with funerals. Mostly we associate comfort with getting

a pat on the head or a reassuring hug, and somebody telling us they love us and things will be all right. So most of the impressions of this second beatitude have to do with our sadness when loved ones die and Jesus comforts us with the promise of eternal life. *“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”* (Revelation 21:4) Please do not think I have any complaint with that message. I deeply believe it. I am extremely grateful for it. I get it from quite a few places in the New Testament, but my suspicion is that the second beatitude is not talking about that.

I do remember that Jesus’ sermon, when He came home to Nazareth, was taken from the prophet Isaiah, the passage that said: *“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted ... to comfort all who mourn ... to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.”* (Isaiah 61:2, 3)

So it is not hard to assume that there is a direct connection between Jesus’ primary purpose, as He set it forth, and this second beatitude. I think it is responsible scholarship to point out that Jesus may have been saying to His followers that anybody who did not mourn over the plight of Israel, anybody who did not grieve because of Roman domination, anybody who did not live with a deep and abiding sorrow because God’s Chosen Nation was not free to carry on its true destiny and purpose, anybody so shallow or shielded that they no longer wept in anguish and sorrow for the plight of Israel ... had no place among the followers of Jesus. I would not find it hard to track and trace the meaning from there, to a sorrow we should all have for the alienation of this world from God, and all the ways it is expressed in poverty and disease, in tyranny and cruelty, in blighted lives and the callousness of unfair systems, in unjust and unloving people. The fact that none of us can escape from this reality does not make it any less real. And whatever comfort there is in this awareness has to be far in the future, and mostly in another realm, yet that is no reason to be lazy or to put off working in this realm.

Nevertheless, while it is legitimate exegesis and interpretation and it often reaches and moves me, mourning because we are not yet in Heaven is not my deepest understanding of this beatitude. Mourning for separations and losses here is something I do, partly because I cannot help it and partly because it is honest and helpful. And that mourning helps me to know what people really mean to me and what blessings they have brought by their lives and efforts among us.

But for me, deepest of all the layers of meaning in this beatitude is the mourning for my own condition – my own mistakes and alienation and blunders and evil. To mourn is to remember, to reflect, to look quietly and honestly – at who I am, at what I do and fail to do, at what my record is truly like – without flinching or excuse. To mourn is to see my motives as they really are, and to know how mixed they are. To mourn is to shy away from neither darkness nor light. We have the sayings: “Know thyself.” “The unexamined life is not worth living.” In AA it is called the fourth step: “*Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*”

It is a thing we all know we need to do. It is a thing we all tend to neglect. It takes too much time; it seems so self-centered; it’s often highly uncomfortable. But it is one of the needs we all have for the interior life – for sufficient time in prayer to keep up with what is going on behind the scenes, and reflect on what is going on out on the surface of life as well. Without it, we are soon strangers to ourselves, and uncertain about how we really feel about much of anything, or anyone. For years I have listened to people moan (not mourn) about how they (or someone else) do not spend enough time with the kids, with the spouse, with friends, or with God. But it all stems from insufficient time with ourselves. So many people have no real or working relationship with themselves. How could they possibly know what they really care about? How could they then reprioritize their lives to make consistent time for wife or children or God? Their survival levels of life are as far as they have awakened.

In AA, a proper fourth step is written, and takes most people several months. It is tantamount to writing your autobiography, only with no intention of publishing it or coloring it for anybody else’s consumption. In Jesus’ day, most people did not write as much as we do, and their memories were far better developed. But that is what I think the second beatitude is about: taking personal inventory, without running from any of it, without changing or coloring any of it. “*Blessed are they that mourn*” – those who remember, reflect, face themselves, get to truly know themselves.

“*They shall be comforted.*” The comfort is powerful and surprising. First of all, there is more than darkness down underneath. You were created by God – a very incredible God. And God has built into you motives, gifts, sensitivity, caring, and a special identity far greater than most mortals ever fully discover. And God has built into you the hunger and capacity for your spirit to connect with his Spirit. That connection awaits those who mourn. The comfort of that connection is beyond description.

In olden times, they called it *“the peace that passes all understanding.”*
(Philippians 4:7)

Of course, not all of it is beyond understanding. But we have to remember what “comfort” really means. What most people mean when they say “comfort” is solace, consolation. And that is what they want. Nothing wrong with solace; I like to be cheered up too, if it is genuine. Sympathy is a good thing. A hug, a pat on the head or wherever it will do the most good, is wonderful. Only, the beatitude promises something better than that. It promises COMFORT: *Com* = with. *Fortes* = fortified, fortress, to be made strong – to be strengthened. YOU WILL BE MADE STRONG. You will come out of your mourning strong – to engage in the battle again – as who you really are, and for what you really care about. Of course, “comfort” is English from Latin. But *parakaleo*, the New Testament Greek word, also means “strengthening.” And its root gives us a hint about how that comfort comes: *parakaleo* means “called near” – “called to one’s side.” Our mourning gets us honest and open enough that Christ can call us to His side, and we can then go forth with Him beside us. Humans do not get stronger than that. Watch the ones who have tried it. A change comes over them. Aurelius Augustine comes to mind, because we can still read his “Confessions” (of St. Augustine). He gave us a written record of his mourning. The strength that came from it, many historians suspect, saved the church when the Roman Empire fell to pagan invaders. An overstatement, no doubt, but Augustine was incredible. And who, before his conversion, would have expected him to be of moral fiber enough to support a wet noodle?

In any case, we can trust the inner structure of the Beatitudes. That is, if you think you have mourned but did not get strengthened, then whatever you did, it was not a genuine mourning. Either it was not honest, or it was not thorough, or it was laced with excuses, or something diluted it. Jesus is not just offering suggestions or positing untried theories. This is the core of His spiritual program. He really means it. *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”*

There is no question about it. You cannot do a genuine fourth step and not be strengthened by it. You cannot do genuine mourning and not be made strong by it. That is not the question. The question is: Will we take time to do it?

* * *

I am apologetic about doubling up beatitudes on a single Sunday. The second beatitude is more than enough for us to ponder and deal with at one time. But having the Beatitudes as our theme this Lent has wonderful possibilities for us, and we already established that the real discipline of Lent is not about a few minutes on Sunday morning, but about our letting the Beatitudes into our lives all day, every day, throughout Lent. Are you reading them over and over? Are they starting to stick?

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” The third beatitude. Actually, this is the eleventh step in AA, but most of my AA friends find it and do it in the third step, and renew it on a deeper level at the eleventh step. The third step reads: *“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”*

Does that sound the same as *“Blessed are the meek”*? Let’s see if I can cut through the haze a little faster on this one. First of all, the perception of the word “meek” is really misleading in our time and culture. What most people think of as “meek” could not inherit a used toothbrush, never mind the earth. Even Webster – the dictionary, that is – while still remembering a few traces of where the word comes from, has so lost the context that the meaning is reversed. It says: “lacking spirit, or backbone; submissive, compliant: mild: soft: gentle: kind.”

A distant trace is there, but clearly that is not what the Bible means by “meek.” Let’s change the subject for a minute and talk about Moses. Moses, as you know, was raised by an Egyptian princess in Pharaoh’s court. When he was a man, Moses slew an Egyptian guard who was mistreating a Hebrew slave. Not wanting to pay the penalty for this murder, Moses fled into the Sinai, met Jethro, married Jethro’s daughter Zipporah, and settled down to the life of a Bedouin. While tending sheep for Jethro on the side of a mountain, Moses encountered a burning bush. That theophany sent him back to Egypt, despite the price on his head – back to confront the Pharaoh, the most powerful man on the face of the earth. Into Pharaoh’s presence marched Moses – not once, but many times – not in supplication, but to demand in no uncertain terms that Pharaoh should let his slaves go free. Even Abraham Lincoln did not get away with that one without paying a terrible price – thousands of lives, including his own.

After all the startling confrontations and a miraculous deliverance, Moses led this disorganized band of frightened, superstitious, stubborn, often ungrateful people for forty years, surviving all manner of rebellion,

plots against his life, natural disasters, plague, famine, and drought. It flat-out does not seem possible that he could have done what he did. But – we want to know, the Bible wants to know – how was this possible? The answer comes in Numbers 12:3: *“Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth.”*

Moses was not what any of us would call meek, by today’s definitions. But yes, he was submissive, he was compliant, he was obedient – TO GOD. He was not submissive or obedient to Pharaoh, or to any other human being on the face of the earth. In fact, he could not have been submissive to anyone else *and* remained submissive and obedient to God. And that is precisely what the Bible means by meek: obedient to God, and God alone. *“You shall worship the Lord your God, with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength – and him only ... shall you serve.”*

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Why inherit the earth? To me, this is the most troubling phrase in the Beatitudes. Does it come from the apocalyptic dreams of the time – a day of righteousness when God will set all things right, and New Jerusalem shall come down out of Heaven and the righteous shall have their reward? That works. However, because of a number of other teachings and because of His death and resurrection, I do not think that was Jesus’ manner of thinking or believing. But I know His followers thought in this way for a couple of generations (and some still do).

I know that evil and its regimes do not last in this world nearly as long as it seems like they do. The thousand years of the Third Reich lasted about ten years, or maybe seven, or five, depending on when you start counting. We are not even sure of the name of the Pharaoh who defied Moses. Nero demanded that the whole world call him a god, but he only lasted for fourteen years. So the meek really are part of the ongoing threads and themes. While I believe that to be true, it is not strong enough for this beatitude.

The meek shall inherit the *ge* – the soil, the land, the place, the earth. I suspect Jesus meant that the meek shall inherit the Kingdom, and we went in the wrong direction with the euphemism.

In any case, the meek are obedient to God – and to no one and nothing else. What do *you* think that will allow them to inherit? More importantly, this week we concentrate on the second and third beatitudes: blessed are they that mourn ... and blessed are the meek. Are we among those who mourn? Are we among the meek?

PRAYER

O Thou, apart from whom all life disintegrates, disenchant our hearts with the ways of the world – and those ways in our own lives – which do not honor Thee.

When being responsible citizens of the world turns into a personal crusade against people we do not like or understand, call us back to Thee. When generosity shades into bribery for the glory or praise we can get out of it, call us back to Thee. When, in our work, we fall in love with what we earn ... when, delighted with Creation, we begin to love created things more than Thee ... when, gloriously in love, we forget the source and wellsprings from which it comes to bless us – O God, tune our hearts again to Thy Spirit, and call us back to Thee.

In the name of the One whose love is mightier than our sins, we pray it. And grant also that we may ourselves hear this prayer – and that as Thou answers it, we may remember and rejoice. Through Christ Jesus our Lord, we pray. Amen.