

Matthew 5:4 A new attitude of heart

Introduction

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. In theory it is possible to translate the opening words of this verse as *Happy are those who mourn* (Good News Bible). There are Bible versions that use this rendering, but in our use of the English language today we associate this word almost exclusively with our feelings; like a little child skipping around happily playing with its toys. There may be adults in the room discussing weighty or serious matters, but the child is oblivious to the nature of their conversation. They are happy and secure in their own little world. In this context - is this how God wants us to be quite oblivious to what is going on in the world? I don't think so! We would need to stop watching the news on TV; certainly we would have to stop reading a national or regional newspaper, with the exception of the *Good News* newspaper that some of us distributed around the district in the weeks before Christmas. These sources can be full of bad news of one kind or another.

Imagine you are living in Ballater, Aberdeenshire, or Carlisle in Cumbria seeking to be constantly happy by refusing to hear or read about the bad things going on in the wider world would it work? No! For the obvious reason that these are two of the communities seriously affected by the serious flooding that has been at record levels in a number of areas of the country causing untold misery to thousands of households who have lost precious possessions; possibly some may even lose their businesses by being unable to trade for weeks at a time; Anyone wandering around such communities exhorting people to 'Be Happy' with their situation and feel good about it would be unlikely to receive a warm reception from those who have endured so much difficulty this winter. Even in a safe and secure community like our own this understanding of Jesus' words would seem problematic to many people. This last Christmas there were people experiencing a first Christmas without someone they loved dearly who had died. In other homes people would be facing a very different future as a result of a relationship or relationships within a family that had broken down with very little likelihood of reconciliation or restoration. In other homes medical diagnoses might have revealed illnesses with varying degrees of seriousness, which in some cases might naturally leave someone wondering about the possibility to a very different kind of future to the one they had been expecting only a few months previous. The list of scenarios that could be given here is lengthy but simplistic exhortations to 'Be Happy' would not only be misplaced, but in some contexts might actually be cruel and offensive to people struggling with life. So what kind of sorrow is it that Jesus is speaking about here to which He promises to bring comfort? John Stott answered this question with these words: those here 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** [John Stott, *Christian Counter Culture* pp.40-41]. Only when we grasp the context in which Jesus is speaking will we appreciate the message He wishes to communicate to us here in Matthew 5:4. In life there are different kinds of sorrow or grounds for mourning that we will view quite differently. A person might be overcome with tears of happiness because of some unexpected good news that they hadn't expected. It may be tears of relief because you were expecting bad news of some kind, but in such a context it would be inappropriate for someone to try to 'comfort' you! What kinds of sorrow are there?

1. Natural Sorrow

The verb ‘to mourn’ here is a strong expression of sorrow. It is not a mild term used of someone feeling under the weather; rather it is normally used in the context of someone bereaved who has lost a person they loved and really miss. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament it was used of Jacob when he was told by his older sons that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal in Genesis 37:34-36: *Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and **mourned** for his son many days.*³⁵ *All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.’ So his father wept for him.* The same word is used of the mourning of the Egyptians for Jacob after the aged patriarch died in Genesis 50:3: *And the Egyptians **mourned** for him seventy days.* The same verb is used in the New Testament in Mark 16:10 with reference to Mary Magdalene. It concerns her reaction to meeting the risen Lord Jesus. *She went and told those who had been with Him and who were **mourning** and weeping.* There are some Christians who have a theology that implies we should always be happy with a smile on our face and be almost effortlessly victorious over all our trials. This is not consistent with the teaching of the Bible! There are plenty of examples of commended figures with tears, mourning in the face of death or, for example, in King David’s case the needless death of his rebellious son Absalom (II Samuel 18:33-19:4). Jesus wept over the spiritual hardness of the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-42) and at the graveside of His friend Lazarus (John 11:35-38). In the long time of appropriate activities that are a part of the human experience Ecclesiastes 3:4 includes: *a time to weep...* Yet as Christians in the face of death our understanding of it was explained so clearly by the apostle Paul in I Thessalonians 4:13-18: ***Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.***¹⁴ *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*¹⁵ *According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.*¹⁶ *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*¹⁷ *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever.*¹⁸ ***Therefore encourage one another with these words.*** There is natural sorrow which we will all experience. May we never give anyone the false impression that we as Christians somehow escape or experience less natural sorrow than other people around us.

2. Unnatural Sorrow

(a) **Remorse but not repentance** It can be described as a despairing kind of sorrow in which a person bitterly regrets a course of action, but is unwilling to take the necessary steps to getting their life back on track. There are people who struggle to accept forgiveness for their own past wrongdoing and go on torturing themselves in their minds for past mistakes, long after other people have forgiven them and moved on. Judas Iscariot is a powerful and well-known example of a man who was remorseful about a course of action but unlike Peter was unwilling to do anything constructive about it. Matthew 27:3-5 records the sorry end to his life. *When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.*⁴ *‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’ ‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’*⁵ *So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.* We need to stress repeatedly that we believe in a gospel of grace to the undeserving –no-one is beyond the grace of God. The devil wants us

to live in condemnation for past failures even when we have been forgiven, but Romans 8:1-2 states clearly God's perspective to us. *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.* Do you need to hear that today?

(b) **Fake mourning** There are people whom you have met and I have met who say or do things that are wrong and appear to be deeply sorrowful at a course of action taken, again and again! We want to believe that 'this time' they really mean it –but when you have been there with them so many times before it is difficult to accept the sincerity of their confessions. In I Samuel 15 the spiritual leader of the nation, the prophet Samuel, was asked by God to go and tell the King Saul that God was removing him from his office as a result of his persistent failure to honour God. In I Samuel 15:30-31 it states: *Saul replied, 'I have sinned. But please honour me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord your God.'* ³¹ *So Samuel went back with Saul, and Saul worshipped the Lord.* The problem was that Saul was mourning the potential loss of his office not that he had failed to honour God as he should have done. The words and the posture looked good but there was insufficient desire to live in a manner pleasing to God. We can fool other people, but never the Lord. One day we will stand before the Lord to give an account of our lives so it is foolish to live in pretence.

(c) **Forced mourning** In the earliest chapters of Genesis we encounter two brothers Cain and Abel. In a shocking twist of events Cain murders his brother and hopes God hasn't noticed. How foolish! God passes judgement on him and explains the punishment he must bear for his wrongdoing. What is Cain's response? In Genesis 4:13-14 it states: *Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ Today You are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from Your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.'* Cain appeared to forget that there are consequences for wrongdoing. He ought to have thought about that before killing his brother! He was so focused on himself, feeling sorry for himself, that he couldn't see the bigger picture. His mourning was of the 'Woe is me' variety. It was not genuine repentance for sin –far from it- it was a selfish individual thinking only about himself. It was his punishment that troubled him far more than his sin. His tears might have deserved an Oscar but they didn't fool God!

3. **Godly sorrow**

Paul explained it this way: *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. ¹¹ See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done* (II Corinthians 7:10). The prodigal son in Jesus' story in Luke 15 has wasted his life, but reaches turning point where he faces up to what he has done and sets off for home to apologise to his dad. The forgiveness of his father was bestowed on an individual who knew there were no excuses to offer. He could only cast himself on the mercy of his father. At one level it was a risk. In real life when we have seriously hurt someone or caused them harm in some way there is no guarantee that if we apologise and offer to do our best to make restitution that it will be accepted. They might want to have nothing to do with us again. Yet the genuine follower of Jesus wants to have a clear conscience. In Psalm 38:15 David had been struggling with some sin issue that he didn't want to deal with but eventually he faced up to whatever it was. He wrote: *I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin.* We may ask the question: how long will God keep on forgiving me? I have been acknowledging my shortcomings so many

times! David's words in Psalm 51:17 are a reassurance to us: *My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart You, God, will not despise.* This was a truth that David came to after serious heart-searching after very serious sin had been committed. There would be consequences in his life and especially within the lives of other family members because we cannot forget that our actions have consequences. A colleague in ministry in one of the roughest areas of Glasgow led a drug-dealer to Christ. This man had been on the run for some time. After the pastor had led him through a prayer of repentance the man admitted that he needed to hand himself in at a particular police station in the city. He made the call from the church. The pastor offered to drive him there in his car. The police were quite insistent that they would come round and pick him up – and did so very soon afterwards. The pastor next met him during visitation time in prison! King David's pastor Nathan assured him of God's forgiveness (II Samuel 12:7-14) but explained what the consequences were with which he had to live for the rest of his life. In the New Testament there are some precious words for us to remember when we come to God to ask for forgiveness of our sins. I John 1:8-9 declares: *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* What wonderful good news for the one who seriously asks God to forgive their sin and give them a clean slate, a fresh start.

As we grow as a Christian and become more like Jesus, we also become more acutely aware of our shortcomings and failures. When this happens in a human heart a person who in the past might have been harsh and displaying a condemnatory attitude to someone who had failed in some way, now is acutely aware of 'but for the grace of God that might have been me'. If I had kept that company, if I had been born into those circumstances, if I... whatever it might be – it could have been me. We can thank God for the blessing of good parents who guided and directed us; for Christian leaders or teachers or others who gave us wise advice about how to live our lives. William Barclay (*The Plain Man looks at the Beatitudes* pp. 29-30) noted a progression in Paul's references to himself in his letters. In his earliest known letter written to the churches of South Galatia, in response to some serious doctrinal errors, he asserts right at the beginning that this letter comes from *Paul an apostle...*(Galatians 1:1); seven years later when he writes I Corinthians to another church with significant problems there is a different self-reference. In I Corinthians 15 he lists some of the people who were witnesses of Jesus' bodily resurrection. Last in the list he mentions himself before making this comment in I Corinthians 15:9-10a: *For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.* Then in the letter to the church at Ephesus a few years later he states: *I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ* (Ephesians 3:7-8). Later still in a private letter to the young pastor of the church in Ephesus, Timothy, he writes in I Timothy 1:15-16: *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His immense patience as an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life.* What does this progression of thought in Paul teach us? When we are very young we are asked by our parents not to point the finger at people because it is rude! Many a little person is puzzled by such an exhortation. Yet we as adults know that when we point one finger at someone else there are still three others pointing back to ourselves! It is a reminder that my biggest duty is to address the sin issues that

arise in my own life first rather than highlighting the failures of other people. Our graciousness or lack of it in response to the failings of others is a window offering insight into the level of progression we have made in becoming more like Jesus. We are not ignoring wrongdoing or pretending it doesn't matter, but instead, like our Saviour, are called to have compassion on other people who need to be right with Him. We will be delighted to see someone turning from wrongdoing not highlighting they have a previous history of failures! We are not called to be naïve, but eager to see someone make progress in their journey of faith as we trust they also will take pleasure when we have spiritual successes too!

4. Spiritual Comfort

Jesus said: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* (Matthew 5:4). In the Oxford English Dictionary there is a reference to the older sense of this word. When we go back to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries this word had the idea of 'to strengthen' or 'to give support'; in other words it was a stronger word than we understand today. What was Jesus was saying was not simply a form of words offering sympathy or a hug, but conveying a sense of encouragement to those who take their progress in becoming more like Jesus very seriously. Such a person is aware of their shortcomings but is making a real effort to make changes to do better! It is true that God will offer support to the people who love Him who have been bereaved, but this beatitude addresses the issue of a person genuinely sorrowful in heart for their failure to progress in their spiritual journey as they should. When this is the case as David noted in Psalm 138:3: *When I called, You answered me; You made me bold and stouthearted.* The Bible makes reference to different sources of comfort and encouragement.

(a) From God the Father In II Corinthians 1:3-7 Paul wrote: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,* ⁴ *who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.* ⁵ *For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.* ⁶ *If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.* ⁷ *And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.* These words were written immediately prior to a reference to a severe trial Paul had come through, which he had felt might even have been the end for him, in terms of this life. However, he sensed the encouragement and comfort of God to keep going with whatever lay before him. In I Samuel 30:6, in a context of a genuine crisis when all around him were 'loosing their heads', the Bible states: *But David found strength in the Lord his God.* Paul, in the wonderful words of Romans 8, gets so excited at God's encouragements to progress in his spiritual life that he exclaims in Romans 8:31: *What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*

(b) From Scripture In Romans 15:4-5 Paul wrote: *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.* ⁵ *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had.* In the ministry of Jesus there are various examples of people leaving His presence greatly encouraged. In Luke 7:48, 50, Luke at the end of the encounter of Jesus with an individual known as 'a sinful woman', records these words of Jesus: *Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' ...*⁵⁰ *Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'* In John 8:1-11, the authorities in Jerusalem wanted to trap Jesus by

asking him to pass sentence on a woman who with an unknown man had been caught in the act of adultery. The officials did not care on this occasion about the actual rights and wrongs of that encounter, rather they wanted to find a way to undermine Jesus' authority. However, He turned the tables on them and invited the one amongst them who was perfect and who had never done anything wrong to cast the first stone at her. It was a most dramatic moment, but this is how it ended in John 8:9-11: *At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.* ¹⁰ *Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'* ¹¹ *'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'* Jesus is not offering cheap grace. His words of comfort and encouragement are accompanied by an exhortation to a change of lifestyle. In the Bible there are many examples of lives transformed by the power of God.

(c) **From the Holy Spirit** Jesus gives quite a bit of teaching in John 14 and 16, in the context of His message at the Last Supper about the comfort or encouragement provided by the Holy Spirit. He is the one called alongside us to aid us in living for Jesus. In John 14:15-17a Jesus said: *If you love Me, keep My commands.* ¹⁶ *And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another **advocate** [encourager, comforter, Counsellor] to help you and be with you for ever –* ¹⁷ *the Spirit of truth.* We are never on our own as followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is there to assist you in your walk of faith.

(d) **From other people** Even the greatest apostles needed a team of willing volunteers to assist and encourage them through tough times. In II Corinthians 7:5-7 Paul stated that life had been very tough on mission in Macedonia: *For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within.* ⁶ ***But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus,*** ⁷ ***and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him.*** *He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.* Who might you be an encourager to this week?

Jesus said: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted* (Matthew 5:4). May we have that earnest desire to grow in Christ-likeness and genuinely mourn our failures but only in so far as it serves as an incentive to become more like our Saviour, for Jesus's sake Amen.