

Sermon File # 750

Scripture Text: Matthew 5:4

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-4

Sermon Title: *The Blessing of God's Comfort*

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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The Blessing of God's Comfort

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Matthew 5:4, as we continue looking at Jesus' Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount. We noted last Sunday that the Beatitudes are Jesus' declarations of God's approval and his "congratulations" for receiving the undeserved grace that he gives to those of who receive his desperately needed goodness and favor. To be blessed is to be given joy, which is much deeper and everlasting, compared to the fleeting happiness that comes with momentary good fortune that fortuitous circumstances in this mortal life can offer. The first Beatitude concerned the beginning of this blessedness, with the paradox of the riches of the kingdom of heaven being dependent upon our poverty of spirit. We must first acknowledge our desperate need for God, who seeks out those who are often overlooked or looked down-upon by this fallen world. Jesus surprises us unlikely, not-so-religious people with the gift of eternal life and joyful living in his kingdom.

We'll note that several of the Beatitudes are paradoxical in nature, and show the great reversal of fortune to those who experience God's grace. God reverses the fortune and circumstances of those who are open to his work of grace, which surprises not just the surrounding onlookers, but also surprises those of us who receive the gift of eternal life. This is certainly true for the one for today, in verse 4. Jesus says that those who mourn will experience God's comfort. For purposes of review and to remind us of the context of these Beatitudes, I will read, beginning with the first verse of this fifth chapter of Matthew.

Follow as I read **Matthew 5:1-4**.

Some of you here today have heavy hearts, and perhaps you are struggling with great sorrow and grief over some significant loss in your life. Perhaps few, maybe no one else except you, knows of your sorrow today. *The Message* paraphrases our text this way: "You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you." What our text says is that you who are grieving the most are the most likely candidates to leave this worship center the most blessed, comforted and filled with the joy that God alone can give.

The Beatitudes express the reversal of fortune that is the heart of the message and work of Jesus. He came preaching the accessibility of the kingdom to those who repent, who change mind and direction in life and turn to God (4:17). He also called disciples to follow him in a personal, life-changing relationship with him (4:18-22). And he demonstrated the reversal of fortune he came to give the sick, demon-possessed and spiritually lost people who received his preaching and teaching and entered his kingdom (4:23ff). Now on this Galilean hillside, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets forth the radically new and different life he came to give us. And he comes to give it to those of us who are the least likely to succeed in this world and to find true happiness on our own.

Here in this Beatitude Jesus is saying, "Congratulations to you who are most unhappy, who are in mourning over a great loss! God is about to reverse your fortunes and to give you happiness and joy that you've never known before!" As the great theologian of the Reformation, John Calvin, expressed it, nothing is more opposite to happiness than this mourning that Jesus blesses and transforms by his grace (Calvin, page 170). This mourning was more than simple gloominess. It was the deep kind of passionate grief (Greek "pentheo") that is expressed in Scripture with many tears and heavy lamentation and calls for God's "eschatological consolation" (Bultmann, pages 40-43). Yet Jesus does not wait for the eschaton, the end time, to give us his comfort, but offers it immediately and permanently.

The good news, the message of Jesus, is one of immediate reversal of fortune. This divine paradox in our text, says one commentator, can be expressed as "Happy are the unhappy!" (Stott, page 40). This great reversal of fortune of

Jesus' bringing happiness to the unhappy was prophesied in the Old Testament (Isaiah 40:1), expressed by the young virgin, Mary (Luke 1:51ff), hoped for by old Simeon (Luke 2:25), and announced by Jesus (Luke 4:18f; Isaiah 61:1f).

Whatever your circumstances and emotions today, this Beatitude is offered to you. You may not feel right now the need for God's comfort but some day you will. And you'll never know the full measure of his blessing until you experience grief and sorrow.

Jesus announces the blessing of God's comfort to all of us today, which means...

➤ **Sorrow comes to everyone**

In the prayer of Moses, he says that "the length of our days is around 70 or 80 years, but that "their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away" (Psalm 90:10). Sorrow eventually comes to everyone, even to those who seem to have good fortune, whose lives are "happy-go-lucky," and who may live in denial of any foreseeable misfortune. And sorrow also comes to Christians. Thus, we need to be aware of...

- *The many faces of sorrow*

I don't know what sorrow you might be dealing with or that you might experience soon, but you can rest assured that God knows. As Dallas Willard says, the risen Jesus has been "let loose" in this world to come to the brokenhearted and sorrowing. Willard quotes this Beatitude in Luke's version, which accentuates the amazing reversal of fortune that Jesus brings:

"Blessed are you who weep now,
For you will laugh" (Luke 6:21b).

This is Jesus' message of good news, says Willard, to any of the weeping ones. This is for "men and women whose mates having just deserted them, leaving them paralyzed by rejection." It's good news to "a parent in gut-wrenching grief and depression over the death of a little daughter." Jesus has a word for "people in the sunset of their employable years, who have lost their careers or businesses or life savings because of an 'economic downturn' or the takeover of the company in which they had invested themselves....There are so many things to break the heart," says Willard (pages 116f). And you can no doubt add to this list, out of your own experiences of sorrow.

Even when life is going well for us personally, we realize that we are surrounded by pain and sorrow and we cannot nor should we try to isolate ourselves from sorrow. Nor should we try to "sport a perpetual grin," as John Stott notes some Christians feel to be an obligation (page 41). In fact, as followers of Jesus we

realize that we are called to share in the fellowship of his sufferings as we follow him in the way of the cross. We begin this cruciform life by first recognizing that God sent his Son to suffer and die for us on the cross. Our redemption came at the price of Jesus' unspeakable suffering and sorrow (Mark 14:34). And then we, through the conviction of the Holy Spirit, experienced sorrow for our sin, which led us to repentance of sin and trust in Jesus (2 Corinthians 7:10). And in the life of following Jesus as Lord, we learn that fellowship with him includes sharing in his sufferings, both from the world and for the world (Philippians 3:10).

It's very likely that Jesus had in mind particularly the suffering and sorrow of those who had just begun to follow him as his disciples. They would mourn over afflictions and persecutions that were sure to arise because of their allegiance to him and the kingdom (Turner, page 150f). And we cannot forget that more followers of Jesus are suffering in today's world than have ever suffered, even unto death as martyrs, than ever before in the history of the Christian church.

We live in a broken world where we cannot escape pain, suffering and sorrow. Although we cannot have or understand the reasons for suffering and sorrow, we can know...

- *The root cause of all sorrow*

The sorrow of a lost and broken humanity is the reason the eternal Son of God was incarnated, taking upon himself the likeness of our flesh and coming to our rescue. Jesus' preaching repentance and the accessibility of the kingdom of heaven was God's answer to the sorrow of the world, which had its genesis in the beginning of the creation of man and woman in the Garden of Eden. Looking into those first chapters of Genesis, the book of beginnings, we see that God created us for paradise, to have perfect fellowship with him, in the absence of pain and sorrow. But when Adam and Eve decide to act independently of God and in defiance of his will, they were expelled from paradise and suffered the consequences of their transgression and rebellion. And we their offspring, inheriting their sinful nature, have continued to repeat the story of Genesis 3.

We will always, in this life at least, be at a loss to answer all the questions people ask about the why of suffering, especially the suffering of the innocent and those who seek to live a godly life. We know that none of us is exempt and we all must bear the consequences of the fall, and all are vulnerable to accidents, illness and other causes of pain and sorrow. And we know that God's Son came into this world in order to share our suffering as our sympathetic Great High Priest (Hebrews 3:5ff; 4:14ff). He came into the world to address this "problem" of suffering and sorrow by his suffering in our behalf and in bringing the reversal of suffering and sorrow, namely, this Beatitude of his comfort and redemption.

Sorrow has its roots in sin, even though your sorrow might well not be directly caused by your sinful actions. You and I are living in a world tainted and badly

damaged by millennia of sin and its consequences on the human mind and heart. Sickness and death are the “wages of sin,” but also those experiences of life that cause us sorrow are not what God created us to experience. And the message of Jesus is that he has come to “put the fallen world to rights” and to bring comfort to all who sorrow and grieve. And Jesus did confront and remedy the problem of evil. The cross and resurrection of Jesus has reversed and remedied the curse of the fall, and he has provided for the forgiveness of sin and has made possible our living as his redeemed, rescued people. God through Christ has come into this old, fallen world and is now at work creating a new world where there will be no cause for suffering and sorrow (Wright, especially pages 83ff).

And we may discover that the seeds of sorrow reside deep in the human heart. I know that God loves me and that, through faith in Jesus I have been forgiven my sins and am made right, justified before God. Yet I also realize that I’m just a sinner saved by grace, forever struggling against my old, sin-prone nature (Romans 7). Sometimes my outbursts of anger or unkind, even cruel words to those dearest to me shows what a sinner I am and what grace it took to save me and what a long way I have to go in the process of my sanctification, my growing in becoming like Jesus. I realize that I have made my contribution to the world’s suffering and sorrow by my sin and my sinful neglect of others, such as the poor and those who suffer the world’s injustice. Only by God’s grace am I spared sorrow and causing greater distress in others’ lives. I live in a fallen world of sorrow and I must look at myself when I ask why there is such grief and distress in the world.

This fact was pointed out by Kent Hughes, who related the story (as told by Chuck Colson) of Auschwitz survivor Yehiel Dinur, a principle witness in the Nuremberg war-crime trials. A film clip of Adlof Eichmann’s 1961 trial “showed Dinur entering the courtroom and coming face to face to face with Eichmann for the first time since being sent to Auschwitz almost twenty years earlier. Stopped cold, Dinur began to sob uncontrollably and then fainted while the presiding judge pounded his gavel for order.” Dinur explained to a television interviewer that he was not overcome by hatred, fear or horrid memories of Auschwitz. Rather, he explained, “all at once he realized Eichmann was not the godlike army officer who had sent so many to their deaths. This Eichmann,” noted Dinur, “was an ordinary man. ‘I was afraid about myself,’ said Dinur. ‘I saw that I am capable to do this. I am...exactly like he.’” The terrible discovery we make, when we look deep into our hearts, as Dinur’s interviewer said, is that “Eichmann’s in all of us” (Hughes, page 25).

As a result of the Fall, sin is in all of us and we all share the causes of suffering and sorrow. I know that I often confess with Paul, when my sinful nature has reared its ugly head, that “nothing good lives in me” (Romans 7:18). At such times I’m particularly amazed at the grace of God and is willing to comfort me with his forgiveness and the assurance of his love.

But the good news, the message of Jesus is...

➤ **God's comfort is available to everyone**

The Beatitudes are proclaimed especially to the disciples, those who decided to become his learning followers and team members. But, as we have noted, a larger audience gathered for the Sermon on the Mount, including many who were not yet decided about Jesus. Maybe they were curious or had other motives, but Jesus intended for them to hear what he was saying about life in the kingdom and would realize they he was inviting them to join in this kingdom life. After all, Jesus preached to everyone the accessibility of his kingdom to any who were repentant (4:17). And any who truly repented of their sins understood the meaning of sorrow. It was sorrow for sin. Thus...

- *Jesus seeks the sorrowing*

Jesus' preaching of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven (4:17) was in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah-Servant of the Lord would bring comfort to all who mourn, a prophecy that Jesus applied directly to himself (Luke 4:18f and Isaiah 61:1ff). The aged Simeon, taking the baby Jesus in his arms during his presentation/dedication in the temple, had been waiting for "the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25).

The eternal Son was incarnated to "seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10), and those who are convicted of sin and guilt before holy God are in desperate need for God's forgiveness, of the consolation and comfort of forgiveness. Even after we receive his forgiveness and receive the free and gracious gift of eternal life, we continue to need his daily forgiveness (1 John 1:9). And mercifully, Jesus continues to seek us as we grieve over our sins, which hurt others and disrupt our fellowship with God and his people. As Isaiah and Job realized, to be in God's holy presence is to be aware of our unworthiness and uncleanness before him (Isaiah 6:1-5; Job 42:5f).

Indeed, I doubt if anyone experiences saving grace apart from a genuine sorrow over sin. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, God's righteousness, and the judgment we deserve to receive but which was taken for us by Christ upon the cross (John 16:5-11). We mourn over our sin, for what it does to offend a holy God; for what it did to God's Son, who took our punishment for our sin; for what our sin did to our character and what it does to hurt others around us. In his saving grace Jesus seeks us in order to remove the grief of sin from us.

And Jesus offers his gift of the kingdom and eternal life to all who mourn for any and every reason. The Savior went about doing good, teaching, preaching, healing every disease and sickness, giving relief to the suffering and deliverance to the demon possessed, the epileptic and the paralyzed (4:23f). Everywhere

Jesus went he was moved with compassion when he saw and felt the suffering and distress of anyone (9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). In this Beatitude Jesus says he cares about everything that you care about, that gives you pain and distress. And our pain and sorrow may well also be the suffering of others, whatever causes hurt and pain to those we love and anyone we see in the midst of their pain and sorrow.

In one of her writings, Marva Dawn speaks about how our media-sated culture militates against our ability to feel sorrow and pain over the suffering of others. We are inured against feeling any real sympathy or distress when we watch reports and video captions of victims of bombings and other acts of violence and immediately are greeted with the smiling face of a beautiful news anchor who turns our attention to the weather or to a commercial. It's almost impossible to feel any sense of human solidarity or normal emotions of sympathy and sorrow for others, who seem so removed from us as we watch from our comfortable living rooms.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer sees this Beatitude as a call from Jesus to the disciple to mourn for those outside of the kingdom, those who Jesus says in Luke's gospel "who laugh now," and who will mourn and weep at the final judgment (6:25b). The disciple of Jesus sees "jollity on board," and he knows that the ship is sinking. Our witness and warnings to the lost in the midst of their merriment serves to disturb them and causes them to reject us. But, says Bonhoeffer, we are to continue to mourn over the lost as we bear the cross of following Jesus. Then we will know the blessedness of his fellowship and his comfort (page 108). Deep distress, concern and compassion for the lost is a God-like emotion, which we see in the intercession of Moses (Exodus 32:31f) and Paul (Romans 9:1-5), and in the tears of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 9:1) and of Jesus himself (Luke 19:41).

And we can certainly believe that Jesus seeks to comfort and encourage the hearts of those who are suffering persecution and facing martyrdom for their faithful witness before hostile enemies of the cross. Jesus seeks to comfort them and has prepared a special place for them in his eternal kingdom (Revelation 20:4). Certainly, the more we become like Jesus, the more sensitive, compassionate and prayerful we will be toward the suffering. Also, as a New Testament, Spirit-led church, I believe we will be more active in our intercession in behalf of the persecuted church and more involved in seeking justice for the oppressed.

Some of you here today have unimaginable sorrow. Although I've known deep hurt and sorrow and a measure of grief over significant losses in my life, I don't know the sorrow some of you feel, for example, those of you who have lost children through horrendous circumstances. And I know that I should have greater sorrow over my sins and sinful behavior and over the condition of those on the sinking ship of eternal condemnation.

Whatever our sorrow, Jesus seeks us today the good news is...

- *Jesus turns sorrow into joy*

This comfort (“parakaleo”) that Jesus promises is the comfort of the eschaton, of the consummated kingdom of the heavens, in the renewed heaven and earth. But it’s also the comfort that immediately reaches us with Jesus’ presence through the Spirit (pages 793ff, Schmitz). Again, Jesus says we’re blessed with the joy of life in the kingdom, which includes the comfort of God. It’s the permanent and transcending happiness that Jesus alone can give through the invasion by his Spirit. And this comfort comes only in the context of sorrow. Again, I love the way *The Message* paraphrases our text: “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.”

Whatever the cause of our tears today, it will be eliminated in the renewed heaven and earth. Just as the weeping at the cross of Jesus was replaced by the joy of the resurrection, so our weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5). As kingdom people, we exercise the discipline of kingdom thinking. People of faith are citizens of the heavenly city, with an eternal perspective and indomitable hope. This eternal perspective, that the sorrows of this world are not worth comparing with our future glory, is what sustained and strengthened God’s heroes of faith (Hebrews 11; Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 4:17).

As Michael Green aptly says, when Jesus comes to us in our grief and sorrow, he makes us “happier than guests at a party.” After we have seen the depth of the world’s suffering and of our own sin, it breaks our hearts. “When that is true of us, we are wide open for the comfort that God longs to give. Had not Jesus come to ‘bind up the broken-hearted’?” (Green, page 90). I think this is why the vision we see in Revelation of the new heaven and earth is the place where Jesus wipes every tear from our eyes (Revelation 7:17; 21:4). The beginning of this Beatitude blessedness is the sorrow that draws us closer to Jesus’ love. I don’t think of God’s intentionally hurting us in order to be able to comfort us, like a demented and cruel parent, harming a child in order to provide comfort from his or her pain. But in this fallen world, where we will suffer pain and sorrow, God longs to comfort us.

The truly repentant find the comfort of God’s forgiveness. Judas was only remorseful about his betrayal of Jesus and not repentant. Thus his life was destroyed and his soul lost. Peter was repentant about his denying Jesus, and thus he was fully restored to his love and service for the Lord Jesus (John 20:15). This is the distinction Paul makes between worldly remorse, when you regret only that you were caught in your transgression, and true repentance, when you are truly sorry for sin and turn in a new direction of love and obedience (2 Corinthians 7:10).

And God allows us to experience grief and sorrow, that we might know and experience his love in a deeper way and find grace to serve in a greater way. This was the reason that Paul yearned to experience “the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (Philippians 3:10). And, as part of his greater purposes, God makes our suffering and sorrow redemptive. We are comforted in the midst of our sorrow in a way that is commensurate with the degree of our suffering. And we emerge from our sorrow, not only with the comfort of the assurance of God’s presence and love, but as people of stronger faith and love, who are better able to live, love and serve. And certainly Jesus will sustain his faithful sufferers who may be called upon to witness unto death. I think of the stoning of Stephen, who seemed to experience ecstasy while his body was being pummeled by the stones. He was experiencing his Beatitude to the ultimate degree (Acts 7:54-60).

The peace that Jesus gives to his sorrowing ones is a supernatural joy, possible only to those who are born of his Spirit, are being filled with his Spirit, who is producing the fruit of the Spirit. As an inextricable part of the fruit of the Spirit is the joy that Jesus alone can give, the joy of Jesus himself, who has overcome the world and its sorrow (Galatians 5:22f; John 16:20; 33).

- *Jesus uses the comforted to comfort others*

The blessing of God’s comfort is to become, in the words of Dallas Willard, “better off than we were before (our) particular disaster” (page 116f). As Paul says, “we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:4). God’s faithful people often emerge from suffering and distress as better and stronger people; whereas, unbelievers often become depressed or embittered by trials. As Larry Crabb says, often it takes the shattering of our personal dreams to draw us deeper into God’s love. He says “audacious” things like “only broken people truly worship,” and often it’s only through shattered dreams that we learn to simply abandon ourselves to God’s mercy and perfect love. In our distress, he says, we learn to want God even more than we want godliness (pages 57, 107, 111, 145, 180, 182).

And we are now prepared to serve him better, as Paul says. We receive comfort in our sufferings and distress in order to comfort and encourage others in the midst of their suffering (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). John Piper says that as pastors we are not fully equipped to minister care and comfort to those who suffer until we ourselves have suffered and received God’s comfort (pages 137ff). Paul rejoiced in his tribulation because he knew his sufferings were an extension of those of Christ and an example and an encouragement to the church (Colossians 1:24). We emerge from our distress and grief all the stronger to minister to others. The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV) notation on this verse says that the word “comforted” implies strength as well as consolation. Those who mourn are

consoled but also strengthened to become God's servants of comfort and consolation to the sorrowing.

Conclusion:

These Beatitudes define the blessedness and joy of living in the kingdom, both in the present and with a future hope. So, even in the midst of our tears and sorrow, we can know and ought to know the comfort of the Holy Spirit, who even now is within us. And we also live as God's people on pilgrimage to the new heavens and earth, this creation that is currently in travail, awaiting its final redemption (Romans 8:22). So, we await that day when Jesus will wipe away all tears from all eyes (Revelation 7:17; 21:4). Simply knowing that someday we will all be safely landed "on the other side" is a source of great comfort. We know that all the causes of sorrow will be eliminated at the return of Christ Jesus.

So, "happy are the unhappy." If you are here today with a heavy heart, as one preacher said it, "Let God in through the broken places" (Allen, page 29). If you have a broken marriage, let Jesus in to heal your heart of sorrow over your abandonment. If you have broken hopes for your career, let Jesus in to assure you that you have a hope and a future as you seek and submit to him. If you have sorrow over the loss of your life's savings, you can trust that God is your provider. If you have a broken heart over the death of a loved one or the suffering and illness of the one closest to you, let Jesus come to you to give you his love and assure you that he is with your loved one and that he gives everlasting healing. If you feel you have no strength to carry on, just wait upon the Lord (Isaiah 40:31) and let his comfort also be your strength.

As one who has been a long time on this journey called faith, I realize that I need to grow in faith and confidence of God's love for me as much as I need to grow in my love for God. I'm one who needs to repent of the sin of pride that beclouds my need to let Jesus come into my broken places and heal me and assure me of my love. I need to repent of my proclivity to self-pity and instead open myself to God's free and lavish love, grace and comfort. As one who likes to be in control and even to minister to others for the stroking that ministering from strength gives to my ego, I need to repent of this ministerial pride and learn to let Jesus minister to me and love me through family, friends, and brothers and sisters in Christ.

The risen Lord Jesus is among us today to bring the consolation and strength of his comfort, to wipe away tears and to fill our hearts with hope. He looks for the most brokenhearted. The risen Lord Jesus walks among the church congregation today, to do the amazing work that he alone can do, to make happy the unhappy, to cause weeping to turn to laughter, to turn the dark hours of grief and sadness into the joy of a glad new morning.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Recall sorrow and grief experiences in your life. How did you find comfort and healing? (assuming that you did)
2. What is the root cause of all sorrow, since the beginning of time?
3. What has God done to provide comfort for all who mourn? How is that comfort received/experienced?
4. In what ways do we as followers of Christ share in his sufferings today?
5. How does the experience of sorrow and God's comfort strengthen us so that we emerge from sorrow as stronger people?
6. How can we become more sensitive and responsive to the suffering and sorrow of others?
7. One pastor noted that ministers are not equipped to comfort others unless and until they have experienced sorrow. Is this true for laypersons as well, and why is this so?
8. Is it possible that our pride keeps us from receiving the comfort of Christ? How is this possible? And how can we overcome this?

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