

The Beatitudes Part 2 - Isaiah 40:1-5, 57:14-21

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[0 : 00] Tonight, our reading is from Isaiah chapter 40, verses 1 through 5. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice of one calling, in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low.

The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all the people will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

And now Isaiah chapter 57, verses 14 through 21. And it will be said, Build up, build up, prepare the road, remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.

[1 : 12] For this is what the high and exalted one says, he who lives forever, whose name is holy. I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry. For then they would faint away because of me, the very people I have created.

I was enraged by their sinful greed. I punished them and hid my face in anger. Yet they kept on in their willful ways.

I have seen their ways, but I will heal them. I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners, creating praise on their lips.

Peace, peace to those far and near, says the Lord, and I will heal them. But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud.

[2 : 20] There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked. This is the word of the Lord. So our beatitude for this evening, as we think about these eight countercultural values of God's kingdom, is this.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. The beatitudes have always and will always challenge cultures, and ours is no different.

The whole Sermon on the Mount is a call on the people of God to live as set-apart people. After the beatitudes, Jesus says to those who are his followers, you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world, you are supposed to bring life and have that preserving function, you are supposed to reflect the glory of God, living differently to the glory of God.

And these beatitudes, then, are this call to revolution, to a different kind of culture, to the values of life and community under the gracious rule of God.

And these values, and I'm sure we'll see it as the weeks go by, challenge us at the same time as they are vital for every Christian, for those who are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus.

[3 : 48] They are ideals, but they are not easy. They challenge our hearts and our behaviours in so many ways. And this one is no different.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. I want to suggest, as we begin, that there are two huge challenges for us in our cultural moment, here in the Western world, in the 21st century.

Two different, but connected challenges. The first is that we live in what's known as the age of distraction. Before we go any further, I should say, if you want some helpful Christian commentary on this theme, there's a man called Tony Reinka, R-E-I-N-K-E, who's written a couple of really helpful books on this topic.

But he, along with others, make the point that technology has effectively rewired our brains.

Psychologists now talk about the new inner psychology of speed.

And what do they mean by that? They mean that our brains are being changed because we're constantly being bombarded by so much information. When you think about your daily life, how many updates do you get?

[5 : 08] How many texts and emails and alerts and news feeds come across your eyes, your mind and your heart? Our brains are having to process the sublime and the ridiculous.

And maybe you have that WhatsApp group where the ridiculous reaches highly. We are seeing it almost at the same moment. Things of great beauty and moments of great tragedy.

The pointless and the poignant come crashing into our lives all at the same time. And the age of distraction gives us very little time for reflection.

So in that setting, how will we, as Jesus calls us to, mourn? How will we mourn in particular for our sin and the effects of sin in our life and in the world?

When, as a general rule, it's so hard to think deeply. So that's one challenge, the age of distraction. But another cultural challenge for us is that we also live, at the same time, in the age of entertainment.

[6 : 20] So Ecclesiastes, that wonderfully realistic wisdom book of the Old Testament, says it's better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting. There, in that space of mourning, we are being reminded of things that matter.

Mortality, eternity, the reality of God. But, we have a multi-billion pound entertainment industry pulling us in a completely different direction.

Where it's geared for pleasure and fun and excitement and distraction. And it's telling us this is the way to live. If you remember the parable Jesus told of the rich fool, take life easy, eat, drink and be merry.

In some ways, that represents something of the entertainment industry. So Jesus, in his words, is challenging one of our cultural idols.

And that's going to be a challenge, perhaps, to us personally. From the outset, there is this reminder from Jesus that, as the people of God, we need to be serious.

[7 : 28] Not that we are without joy or without humour, but we need to be serious about certain realities about God. And about sin. And about eternity. And we also, at the same time, need to recognise where greatest and deepest pleasure is to be found.

And not that we'd be content with the snacks of the entertainment industry, but we're looking for the banquet of joy found in and from God. Found in life with God, favour with God.

And to get there, Jesus is saying we need to learn to mourn our sin so that we would enjoy his comfort. So there are challenges for us to confront as we think about this beatitude and its implications.

A question for us, as we think about this beatitude, what kind of mourning is in view? So we are still, as a nation, living with the effects of coronavirus.

And while now our minds are pretty much on the restrictions, we think back a few months and we had that national reminder of our own mortality. And even beyond that, our lives as we know them are surrounded by stories of grief and the loss of people we love.

[8 : 48] Now, while that's not the mourning that Jesus has in view here, it is true to say that God promises his presence. God offers comfort to his people as we mourn.

And he invites you to seek him in and through your tears. But what's in view in Jesus' mind here is a particular type of mourning.

And it's a mourning that is God-directed. It's a spiritual mourning. It's the sorrow of repentance. It's a grief caused by sin and its effects.

And there are two main ways this works itself out in the life of a Christian believer. One, we mourn the presence of evil in the world.

It is right that our hearts should feel weight and sadness. As we switch on our computers or our phones or our televisions and we see the cruelty and the injustice, the hate and the murder, the racism, the terrorism, the exploitation.

[9 : 58] Human misery caused by sin is a tragedy that we should mourn. And also, when we think about the presence of evil in the world, we should also mourn the rejection of God that we see in our society, in our world.

We see that in Paul's example as he travels to the great city of Athens in Acts 17. We're told he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

And so he determined to proclaim to them the unknown God that they didn't know. The one who was creator of all. The one who would be judge of all. And the one who had sent his son to be saviour for all.

But as we consider evil and misery in our world, that is and should be a cause for lament in our hearts and our souls.

It should drive us to prayer. And where possible, lead us to action. And so it is critical that we learn to slow down.

[11 : 13] So that we are seeing the connections between sin and misery. We're recognising the eternal consequences. So that we would respond in a way that would bring glory to God and that we'd love others well.

So if we find ourselves feeling news fatigue, if we find ourselves growing numb to suffering, on the one hand, it perhaps reflects the fact that we're taking in too much information and we can't possibly carry all the burdens of the world.

But on the other hand, it should make us pray to God that his spirit would help us to develop that compassion and sorrow for the sin and misery that we see.

But there's another kind of mourning over sin and that's mourning over sin in our own lives. Now we thought about it last Sunday morning. The theme of Psalm 32 was repentance.

But David recognises and reflects very honestly on the evil in here, in the human heart. That rebellion, that protest movement that does not want God to rule.

[12 : 25] Rather, we would rule. That falling short of God's perfect standard and falling short of God's glory. The way that, although there is a straight path for our lives to what we find crooked ways and our nature is twisted.

Again, drawing from Paul's own experience in Romans chapter 7, as he reflects as a Christian, we find him mourning the gap between his intention, what he wants to do, and the reality that he so often sees in his life.

There's great honesty here when he says, For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing.

We mourn our sin. We mourn the slow progress that we make in spiritual maturity. We lament our failure to be killing sin in our lives.

And again, part of the way we're going to have to do that is by fighting against the pool of entertainment and distraction. To make time to examine your own heart.

[13 : 39] To have no deceit before God, but instead to allow our hearts and lives to lie open before God. Because that kind of mourning, Jesus says, is the path to true comfort.

To help us to see why we should mourn sin and its effects, we could usefully ask a question. What made Jesus weep? When you think about the Bible, where do we see Jesus weep?

Well, there are two places that come to mind. In John chapter 11, as Jesus is standing before the tomb of Lazarus. He's seen the grief of Martha, the tears of Mary, the two sisters of Lazarus.

Hears the weeping around the tomb. And Jesus weep. And then in Luke chapter 19, as Jesus is facing the cross, we find him again weeping.

This time weeping over Jerusalem. Why is he weeping over Jerusalem? Because of their sinful rejection of their Saviour. And Jesus knows that judgment is certain to follow for that rejection, for that unbelief.

[15 : 12] And that causes Jesus to weep. So that's the kind of mourning that Jesus is calling us to. To mourn over sin and its effects.

To ask a different question, but a related question. What kind of mourning then brings comfort? Now there's a flow to the beatitude.

So our first beatitude. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Those who recognise they are spiritually bankrupt before God and utterly dependent on his mercy. And flowing from that blessed are those who mourn that reality.

Because to those who mourn their sin and their spiritual inability, Jesus promises comfort. For Jesus' first hearers, as he pronounced this beatitude, in their minds they would be drawn back to the ministry of one of the great Old Testament prophets.

That of Isaiah. So I want us very briefly to look at the book of Isaiah. To use his ministry as a guide.

[16 : 28] To see where Jesus draws his teaching from. To see how there is this pointer to sin and misery, but hope and comfort. In the good news of the gospel.

So Isaiah breaks down into two happy books. Big books, 66 chapters. The first 39 chapters. A lot of messages of judgment. Mixed with messages of hope.

The promise of God's saviour. That God's covenant promises will not fail. But chapter 39 ends with the certainty that because of covenant breaking, because of sin, the people of God will go into exile. But then Isaiah's focus shifts to a time in the future when restoration would come. So chapters 40 to 66. The message of comfort and hope because of restoration dominate.

To say to his hearers that after the exile, all God's promises would come true. The people were faithless, absolutely, but God would remain faithful.

[17 : 36] The promised saviour king would come. He would bring in the kingdom of God. The servant of the Lord would come to redeem by sacrifice. That he would establish the great hope of the new heavens and the new earth for the people of God.

All of that's there in the second half of Isaiah. So I want us to just dip into three short texts that help us to see what Jesus teaches.

Keith read a couple of them for us. First of all, from Isaiah chapter 40. As that second half of Isaiah begins, Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed.

The exile is done. That her sin has been paid for. There is forgiveness through God's grace. That she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

That though their sins were many, God's mercy would be more. A voice of one calling. In the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

[18 : 43] And the glory of the Lord will be revealed. Here's comfort because the Lord himself is coming. The glory of the Lord would be with and among his people.

And he would come to end their exile and to restore them to himself and to forgive their sins. That's comfort, but it requires the people to mourn their sin.

And there's a couple of places in Isaiah where that theme really dominates. Isaiah 57 is helpful. And again, Keith read this for us.

A couple of verses from verse 15. Now there's a promise of comfort.

For those who will humble themselves and acknowledge their sin, this holy and exalted God will come and live with his people. I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry.

[19 : 50] I have seen their ways, but I will heal them. I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners. To those who mourn the grief caused by their rebellion and their sin, God will bring healing.

He will not remain angry forever. There will be the comfort of forgiveness for those who trust in God and his promised salvation.

And that brings us to Isaiah 61. Now Isaiah 61, we mentioned this last week. Jesus, one time when he went to the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, he opened the scroll to Isaiah 61.

And there he read, the spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.

And Jesus, after a time, closed the scroll and said, all of this is fulfilled in your hearing. Jesus is the one who is anointed by the sovereign Lord. He is the one who is spirit filled.

[20 : 58] He is the one who has come on this mission to proclaim the good news of God, that salvation has come, that healing and comfort has come for the brokenhearted.

He comes proclaiming the good news. He announces that he himself is the good news. He is the living declaration of how God will act to save his people.

In the coming of Jesus, in his death as a substitute, paying the price for sinners, taking the wrath of God that we deserve, but taking it on himself.

In his resurrection, in victory and glory, there is forgiveness. There is eternal life. The kingdom comes in. We are adopted into the family of God.

Peace and joy are ours. There is comfort because the ultimate comforter, the saviour of the world, has come. It's this Jesus who is speaking to them in the Beatitudes.

[22 : 03] So, let's bring this towards a conclusion by asking another question. Why should you and I choose to mourn?

Against the pull of amusing ourselves today, entertaining ourselves today. Against the temptation to brush off sin and its effects, to tread lightly in our own hearts and not really to reflect on how things are between us and our God.

Why should we rather choose to mourn, to mourn our sin and its effects? Because to do so is to receive the life that we were made for.

There is another paradox here in this Beatitude. It's only those who mourn in this way who can truly enjoy life to the full. Because after all, what is the life of blessing?

It's peace with God. It's knowing God's smile and favour. And so there are two promises attached within this Beatitude. First of all, mourning promises salvation.

[23 : 24] Because this is comfort and truth from Jesus the Saviour. Blessed are those who mourn. They will be comforted.

This is the same Jesus who came announcing, I am the resurrection and the life. That to believe in Jesus is to live even though we die.

That there is a comfort that is unbreakable in him. Jesus announced, I am the good shepherd. He is our place of safety. He is the one with such love for us that he would die in our place to save us.

And he is still on his mission of calling people into his flock. Again, a place of comfort and feeding and protection. So the faith that mourns sin and looks to Jesus.

Not just feeling bad about sin but taking it to Jesus. Taking it to the cross. Because we can know that we will be forgiven. That we are forgiven. That we are restored.

[24 : 31] That we are part of the family of God. Because he has won that victory for us. And again, attached to this is the promise.

That mourning promises future glory. So when we feel the weight of sin. When we feel its burden once again.

As we look around and we lament the state of the world. We are also encouraged in God's word to look forward. To look forward to that coming day.

When sin will be no more. When that burden of sin that we carry. That weighs us down so often will be gone forever. When our frustration over our inability and our failure will be done away with.

When our shame will be decisively ended. To return no more. When is that day? It's on that day when Jesus will return.

[25 : 31] When Jesus comes again. Satan and sin and death will be dealt with once and for all. And there will be no more grief. No more mourning then for the people of God. But only comfort.

If we have looked to Jesus now. In faith. For salvation. So that we have this wonderful picture of comfort there at the end of the Bible.

In Revelation 21. I saw the holy city. The new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. Prepared as a bride. Beautifully dressed for her husband.

The church is that holy city. The bride of Christ. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying. Look. God's dwelling place is now among the people.

And he will dwell with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them. And be their God. There's the comfort of his presence that is forever.

[26 : 30] And then this. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. For the old order of things has passed away.

Mourning. Mourning. It's painful for her. To have our hearts and lives exposed can feel very raw. But Jesus promises true healing.

And anticipates a day when there will be no more mourning. So we are encouraged to look deeply into our own hearts.

And to mourn the sin that we find there. And to take it to the Lord for forgiveness. And to look deeply into the heart of God.

That we see most clearly there at the cross. God loving us so much that while we were still sinners. While we were his enemies.

[27 : 31] Christ died for us. And that we find comfort there. So we put our faith in Jesus. Now and always. Let's pray about that together.

Lord. Our God. As you have once again. As a church brought us to that place. Where we are called to consider. Sin and its misery.

We pray that you would make us. A people who would slow down. Who would reflect. Who would mourn over sin. And that sorrow over sin.

Would lead us to repentance. And Lord we thank you for that promise. That as we do mourn. We will find comfort. We thank you for that.

We thank you that because Jesus has come. And he has died for sin. And he has risen in victory over sin. And that he has triumphed over the grave.

[28 : 36] That he has guaranteed resurrection life. That we can have hope. And comfort. And peace. And joy. Lord help us to abide.

In those truths. Help us to fight. The temptations towards distraction. And entertainment. That would keep us. From enjoying our life with you.

Help us to walk closely with you. In this week. Help us to be praying. To you. This week. As we see sin. And its effects.

And may we pray. That you Lord Jesus. Would come. In power. To bring healing. And transformation. To many. And you would cause us.

To await with hope. And expectation. Your second coming. We pray. In Jesus name. Amen.