

God's Aching Visionaries

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[0 : 0 0] Our text today is from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 5, verse 4, wherein Jesus speaks the second of his eight Beatitudes.

As I've been emphasizing in this series thus far, it's important that we hear him speak in the original context. So let's read from Matthew, chapter 4, beginning at verse 12.

Matthew 4, verse 12. Hear the Word of God. When Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee.

Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebelin and Naphtali, to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah. Land of Zebelin and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people living in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. From that time on, Jesus began to preach, repent, turn around, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

[1 : 0 9] As Jesus was walking beside the sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, called Peter, and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of people. At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John.

They were in the boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

News about him spread all over Vancouver, Syria. And people brought to him, that was intentional. That's our prayer.

And people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.

[2 : 1 5] Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region across the Jordan followed him. Now, when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down.

His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Lord Jesus, we are so grateful that you enabled Matthew, the tax collector, to remember and then write down these words of yours.

And now we ask in your mercy and grace that you would help us understand what you are saying to us. We pray in your name. Amen.

Blessed are those who mourn. More exactly, blessed are those who are mourning. Jesus uses the present participle.

[3 : 19] Even more exactly, blessed are those who are in a state of mourning. Really? Jesus' second beatitude is probably the best known and most quoted of all eight of the beatitudes, rivaled only by blessed are the peacemakers.

Jesus' second beatitude is certainly the most jarring. The one that on first hearing simply does not make sense.

Blessed, approved, fortunate are those who are mourning. Congratulations, right on, in sync are those who are in a state of mourning.

Can you imagine me standing on a street in Port-au-Prince, Haiti today and saying those words? As writer J. Barry Shepard prays back to Jesus, Lord, you might as well say, full are the hungry, healthy are the sick, alive are the dead.

Or as philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff puts it, in the book he wrote after the death of his 25-year-old son, how strange. Cheers to those who weep.

[4 : 45] Hail to those whose eyes are filled with tears. Hats off to those who suffer. Bottoms up to the grieving. How strange. How incredibly strange.

What makes Jesus' second beatitude all the more jarring is that the verb translated mourn, *penthein*, is the strongest word for grief in the Greek language.

It's used of those who are grieving the loss of someone they've loved, shedding those tears that well up from deep within your soul. It describes piercing sorrow, which issues inaudible lament.

As one New Testament scholar observes, *penthein* does not have to be open lamentation, but neither is it the quiet sorrow of heart.

What is meant by this verb is passionate grief, which leads to corresponding action. Amazing. Blessed.

[5 : 51] Right on. In sync. Are those who mourn. Really? Are you sure, Jesus?

Now, as I've been stressing in this series in the Beatitudes, the qualities Jesus blesses are not natural human qualities. Rather, they are the result of the gospel grabbing hold of us.

They are the result of hearing Jesus' good news of the kingdom of heaven invading the earth. Jesus did not come into Galilee and Judea looking for Beatitude people whom he could call into his kingdom.

No, he first called people to himself. As a result of contact with him, the Beatitudes began to emerge in their lives. Therefore, the picture that the second Beatitudes suggests is not that of Jesus coming into our city, spotting people who are mourning, and then bringing them comfort.

He does that. Thank God. Bless his name. He spotted the widow in the town of Nain, following behind the funeral procession that was carrying the corpse of her son.

[7 : 14] Jesus spotted her and reached out to her. Jesus saw the tears flowing from the sisters of his good friend Lazarus, Mary and Martha. And so he reached out to them, and so much so that he himself began to weep.

But those events are not what is pictured in this second Beatitude. Rather, the picture is that of Jesus coming into our city, reaching out, calling people to himself who then began to mourn.

Yes, they and we began to rejoice big time. But they also began to mourn deeply.

Why? Why is piercing sorrow a sign that human beings have been grabbed by Jesus' gospel? Why does Jesus identify passionate grief as one of the marks of those upon whom the kingdom of God has come?

Before wrestling with that question, I'd like to make just a couple of preliminary observations about this second Beatitude. First off, this Beatitude gives us permission to grieve.

[8 : 37] It gives us freedom to grieve. We, in North America and in many parts of the world, under the influence of the West, need to hear this because we are not free to grieve.

Even in many Christian circles, we are not free to grieve. A wife breaks down in the middle of the funeral for her husband of 40 years, and from the back pew is heard, oh, I'm sorry, I thought she would be stronger.

Never. Jesus would never say that. Never. He himself was overcome by and expressed passionate grief.

Big boys do not cry. Who says so? Not Jesus, the man's man. Not Jesus. He gives us the freedom and space to grieve.

Another observation. Another observation. I think that he is saying in this Beatitude that we will not know the comfort he gives unless we let ourselves grieve.

[9 : 43] I think he's saying to us, comfort is found when you allow yourself to feel and express grief. I've walked through the valley of the shadow of death with many people.

I have conducted nearly 400 memorial services in my life. And as I observed, those who go through the valley of the shadow of the death most redemptively are those who do not try to stuff the grief.

Grief does not kill. Boy, there are times when you think it's going to. But grief does not kill. It's the stuffing of grief that might kill.

Jesus is saying to us, comfort is not found in insulating your heart. It's found in opening your heart. And one of the ways that we can serve one another better is to help each other grieve well.

Which many of you are helping me do. Another observation. Jesus is letting us know right from the beginning that living in his kingdom in the world is going to involve some sorrow.

[10 : 55] He does not promise unbroken happiness. Yes, there is great joy, right? And joy oozes from the pages of the New Testament.

The time is fulfilled. Rejoice. The kingdom of God has come near. Rejoice. The lover of our souls is in our presence. Rejoice. Our God reigns.

Rejoice. The Holy Spirit is here. Rejoice. Yet Jesus is saying that his coming also engenders sorrow. Heart piercing sorrow.

One final observation. I think Jesus is saying to us that this sorrow is part of the process by which we grow.

Keith Kroll and I were talking the other day about the Beatitudes. And he made this observation. He said to me, sadness is a launching pad to growth. There are times as we minister to one another when we try to anesthetize the sorrow too quickly.

[12 : 00] C.S. Lewis once observed in those famous words of his, God whispers to us in our pleasures. He speaks to us in our conscience.

And he shouts to us in our pain. Pain is his megaphone to arouse a deaf world. So we need to listen to our pain, our sorrow and sadness.

Because there are times when that is just part of the process by which he is causing us to grow. Blessed are those who mourn.

Why? Why is mourning a sign that we've been grabbed by the gospel? Why is passionate grief a sign that Jesus and his kingdom are getting a hold of us?

Well, I can think of three reasons. Number one. It's related to what we saw last Sunday when we looked at the first Beatitude. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

[13 : 05] Number one. Now, when we meet Jesus in all of his fullness, we are forced to face the reality of sin. And especially forced to face the reality of sin in our own lives.

Not that Jesus walks into our lives and calls us sinner. Not at all. Nowhere in the gospel does Jesus ever call a human being sinner.

It's just that in his presence we cannot but realize our sinful condition. I think this is part of the reason why we resist growing into deeper intimacy with Jesus.

Because we're afraid of what he will do with what is exposed as we get closer to him. In him, we see what humanity was created to be.

And when we see what humanity is created to be, we grieve over what we have become because of the power of sin. What was the apostle Paul's response to Jesus even after years of walking with him?

[14 : 12] Romans 7.21. Oh, wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of sin? Paul does not there have a problem with self-esteem. He's wrestling with the fact that even though he knows what is good, and even though he wills to do what he knows what is good, he keeps on doing the very evil that he does not want to do.

Anyone identify? I do. There are times when I'm appalled by my capacity to go against what I know to be the will of God.

In Jesus, we see and rejoice and mourn. Is the Anglican prayer book overreaching when it has worshippers say, we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sinfulness?

Now, I want to be careful here because this is not what we might call a worm theology. The theology that says that in order to know God, we first of all have to feel like a worm and squirm and wriggle in the mud a while before God will look at us.

God does not think of us as worms. Jesus never called a human being a worm. He did call some Pharisees snakes. But that's another subject.

[15 : 44] He never called them worms. So the second beatitude is not advocating a put-yourself-down kind of spirituality. It simply recognizes that in the presence of Jesus, the Holy One, we cannot but grieve over our unholy condition.

In His presence, we rejoice, yes, and we grieve. The wonder of the gospel is that the Holy One even chooses to draw near and to draw us near and then to live among us and then to live in us, unholy ones.

The wonder is that He does not wait until we are holy before He comes. He comes in all of His holiness into the midst of our unholiness. And then, automatically, our unholiness is exposed and we grieve.

Blessed, He says. Blessed are those who so mourn. Right on. It means that the Holy One has got a hold on you.

It means you're in sync with the really real. It means you are alive. Number two reason why mourning is a sign the gospel is breaking through.

[17 : 05] As we get closer to Jesus, we get closer to His heart and we discover that it is a broken heart. Oh yes, again, Jesus is a man of joy.

So much so that the stuffy religious folk accuse Him of being a glutton and a drunkard. But He is, as the prophet Isaiah says, a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief.

Again, He is the eternally joyful Creator who out of His eternal joy created us to enjoy His joy.

The psalmist is right. In His presence is the fullness of joy. In your right hand there are pleasures forever. But there's also in His heart this brokenness because of what sin has done, this great sorrow over the world and over the church.

How often in Scripture do we find the phrase and it grieved the Holy One? Matthew tells us that when Jesus saw the multitudes bringing the sick to Him, He felt compassion for them.

[18 : 17] The word is splankna or guts. It's the word you, Bob Marwick, like to use a lot. Jesus had compassion on them. Jesus' guts were ripped up in Him.

That too is the wonder of the gospel. That the living God enters so fully into all the wreckage that He feels it Himself, that He feels it as His own.

John tells us that Jesus wept at the grave of His good friend Lazarus. And the word that John uses means to be so overcome that one's chest heaves. Jesus stands by the graveside of Lazarus and He's overcome so much that His chest heaves with grief.

Why? Partly because He can feel the grief of Mary and Martha and He identifies with their grief. But partly it's because of the pain He Himself is experiencing. The heaving of His chest is the Creator's broken heart that is crying out before the grave, death ought not be.

Get close to that heart and you begin to feel what it feels. Luke tells us that as Jesus came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He wept over the city.

[19 : 32] And the word that Luke uses there means a spontaneous outburst, an uncontrollable weeping. Why? I mean, He's the King. Jesus is the King of glory. He's the sovereign King.

Why would He grieve? After gaining His composure, He says, because you do not know the things that make for peace. Get close to that heart and feel what it feels for any city.

And you cannot help but mourn. Number three reason why mourning is a sign that the gospel is breaking through. In Jesus, we see what the kingdom of God is all about.

In Jesus, we see what God's new world order is all about. In Jesus, we see what was supposed to be and what will be when the kingdom comes in all of its fullness.

And we grieve over what we see that is. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, the disciples of Jesus see that for all the jollity on board, the ship is beginning to sink.

[20 : 37] Oh, disciples began to see signs of the in-breaking kingdom all around them, as I do. I see all kinds of wonderful signs of the kingdom here at First Baptist in this part of the city.

And in those signs, I rejoice. Yet, the more we see of what can be, the more we grieve over what is. Jesus. Anyone with me there?

I look out at our city, I look out at our world, and my heart wants to cry out, it does not have to be this way. The poor do not have to go on being poor.

There's plenty to go around. Jesus' Father has seen to that. It's just that the systems of distribution are so unjust. And it does not have to be that way.

The world does not have to spend 1.8 million dollars a minute on building weapons. 1.8 million dollars a minute.

[21 : 42] That's over 3,000 times what we spend on health, education, and social services combined. It does not have to be that way. Domestic quarrels do not have to end in violence.

There are many more steps we can take before lifting up a knife or a gun. Racial tensions do not have to continue. We can learn how to overcome suspicion and prejudice.

Women and children do not have to go on being sexually exploited. Those who are profiting right now from prostitution and pornography, which are acts of violence against women, have made in this last year alone three times more profit than Google, Microsoft, and Apple combined.

And it does not have to be this way. Women do not have to be treated that way. 92% of those who are suffering prostitution want out. All of this, of course, is symptomatic of a deeper spiritual crisis of our time, the crisis of the lack of knowing of God.

Billions of people on our planet go about their daily lives, most in quiet desperation, unaware of the great fact of Jesus and His kingdom. And it does not have to be that way.

[23 : 02] Every person ought to know the good news. Tens of thousands of people in our city, right here in the core of the city, have not had the opportunity to know and follow Jesus.

The fields are ripe unto harvest, Jesus says, but the workers are too few, and it does not have to be that way. Earlier, I quoted the philosopher Nicholas Wolferstorff.

Wolferstorff. A number of years ago, he and his wife lost their 25-year-old son, Eric, to a mountain climbing accident. And in his book, Lament for a Son, Wolferstorff openly shares his grief.

And he agonizes in particular over the way the world is in light of the way the world is supposed to be. And in his chapter, where he reflects on the second beatitude, he asks, who then are the mourners?

Who are the mourners Jesus blesses? And Wolferstorff answers, the mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day and who ache with all their being for that new day to come and break out into tears when confronted with its absence.

[24 : 13] The mourners are those who realize that in God's realm of peace, there is no one blind and who ache whenever they see someone unseen. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm, there is no one hungry and who ache whenever they see someone starving.

They are the ones who realize that in God's realm, there is no one falsely accused and who ache whenever they see someone imprisoned unjustly. They are the ones who realize that in God's realm, there is no one who fails to see God and who ache whenever they see someone unbelieving.

They are the ones who realize that in God's realm, there is no one who suffers oppression and who ache whenever they see someone beat down. They're the ones who realize that in God's realm of peace there's neither death nor tears and who ache whenever they see someone crying tears over death.

The mourners are aching visionaries. Blessed, says Jesus, you ache because you're in sync with my gospel.

Your aching says you're catching my vision for the world and you shall be comforted.

[25 : 33] When? Well, clearly in the end. When the kingdom comes in all of its fullness. When, as the voice from the throne says, God will wipe away every tear from their eye, there shall no longer be any death, there shall no longer be any mourning or crying or pain.

But we shall also be comforted before the end. Even now. How? How? Well, the verb translated comfort is the Greek word parakaleo, a beautiful word, a very rich word.

And the primary meaning of parakaleo is to exhort or to encourage or to embolden. This is the word that's used of soldiers encouraging each other as they go to battle.

And this is actually the original meaning of the English word comfort. Comfort comes from the words comfortis. Com with, fortis, strength.

Comfort. Strengthened by being with. And Jesus is saying that as we open ourselves up to the pain and grief, we find ourselves strangely strengthened.

[26 : 47] How? Well, get this. From the verb parakaleo comes the noun parakaleo. Parakaleo. Ring a bell.

Loud bell. Parakaleo is the word that Jesus uses of the Holy Spirit. Upon whom and in whom he will baptize his disciples. Before the end.

