



HOLY TEARS

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1080

Matthew 5:4

Second Message

Gary Vanderet

August 25, 1996

Some years ago, Mike Wallace interviewed a survivor of the Auschwitz death camp on the television news show "60 Minutes." The man, Yehiel Dinur, had been a principal witness at the Nuremberg war crime trials. During the interview, a film clip was screened from the 1961 trial of Adolph Eichmann. It showed Dinur entering the courtroom and coming face to face with Eichmann for the first time since Dinur was sent to Auschwitz almost twenty years earlier.

On the film, Dinur stopped cold and began to sob uncontrollably; then he fainted. Wallace asked him what was going on inside him that caused such a reaction. Was he overcome with hatred? Was it fear, or horrid memories? Dinur said that it was none of these. He explained that all at once he realized that Eichmann was not the godlike officer who had sent so many to their deaths; this Eichmann was just an ordinary man. Dinar continued: "I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. I am...exactly like him."

Wallace's summation of Dinur's discovery, "Eichmann is in all of us," is a horrifying statement, but it captures the central truth about our nature. As a result of the fall, sin is in each of us. And it is not the just the susceptibility to sin, but sin itself.

In the face of everyday temptation we fall; we stumble voluntarily and repeatedly. The same old flaws and failures pursue us all our lives; new vices awaken and dominate us. We blunder again and again into bad judgment. Every now and then we set out to restore ourselves. We resolve to deal with our jealousy, our lust, to put an end to our self-pity, defensiveness, self-indulgence and all of the other expressions of self-love that separate us from God and from others. But, more often than not, our periodic brushes with morality fade with time, and no enduring changes result. Sin remains our sullen master. We may try to blame bad genes or dysfunctional families, but in the end, we have to admit that no one has to push us into wrongdoing; we go all by ourselves.

Theologians have terms for this syndrome. They talk about "original sin," and "total depravity." "Original" sin does not mean that we sin in novel, creative ways. There aren't any innovative ways to sin; it has all been done before. Original sin simply means that we are sinful in our origins. We come into the world with a proclivity toward sin. We are a like a baseball with a spin on it. Sooner or later we break, and the break is always down and out. "Total depravity" means that sin affects

our total being. If sin were blue, we would be a shade of blue all over.

There is something in our makeup that is dreadfully wrong, something that causes us to do evil. Even when we try not to do wrong, sin makes it impossible for us not to think about doing it.

But we don't need to be told we are defective. We know what we are like; we need only to be reminded of it. We don't want to expose that side of ourselves to others, but God has a way of not allowing us to keep it hidden. He permits us to do the most embarrassing things at the most inopportune times. He allows us to experience the depths of our depravity, to see the miserable stuff of which we are made.

Sin is an atrocity. We have to realize how monstrous and scandalous sin is, and how desperately we need God's forgiveness. We will never appreciate the magnitude of God's acceptance until we comprehend the measure of our sins. It is at the point of depressing failure that we hunger for grace.

That is why Jesus began his great Sermon on the Mount with the words that we looked at last week: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" Or as one translation puts it: "*Blessed are the desperate!*" This first beatitude has to do with our attitude toward ourselves. Simply put, a Christian is a person who has declared spiritual bankruptcy. He is man or woman who understands that spiritually his or her need is not partial, it is total. A Christian is one who in his spirit, feels his need, and is willing to admit it. He is not self-sufficient. He has submitted himself to the lordship of Jesus Christ and is content to be dependent on God.

Today we come to the second beatitude. As we will see, it is closely related to the first. In fact, these first two beatitudes work as a pair. Matthew 5:4:

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (NASB)

These words of Jesus have to do with our attitude toward sin. They speak of personal grief with respect to personal sin. Mourning is the emotional counterpart to understanding that we are poor in spirit. This is the second stage of spiritual blessing. It is one thing to be spiritually poor and acknowledge it; it is another to grieve and mourn over it. Or to put it in theological terms, confession is one thing; contrition is another. When we see ourselves for what we are, our emotions will be stirred to mourning.

Right away we have to point out that Jesus is not saying, “Blessed are the grim, perpetually down, morose, cheerless Christians.” He does not mean that Christians are to be morbid and joyless. Humor and laughter are wonderful gifts—and very necessary to life. Solomon says, “a merry heart acts like good medicine.” No, Jesus is not talking about an individual whose face looks like it should be the frontispiece to the Book of Lamentations. He is not talking about those who believe that in order to be spiritual, they have to be miserable.

But we are not to avoid our sorrow, either. Life is not one big party. We should take it seriously. We are not playing life for nickels and dimes. We should be moved by the hard facts of life. The people to whom Jesus was speaking were in desperate straits. They were living in grinding poverty. They had seen one oppressor after another march across their land. They were a humiliated people. For them, life was tough and hard.

It still is today. We can’t deny that. Life *is* hard. There are things that cause us to mourn, weep, and be sorrowful. It is foolish to try and escape the hard facts of life. And becoming a Christian doesn’t erase those hard facts. The Christian life is not all joy and laughter. Some Christians believe that if they are filled with the Holy Spirit they must always have a grin on their faces and be bubbly all the time. But there is such a thing as Christian tears. It would be good if more of us knew about them.

This word for “mourning” is the strongest word that Matthew could have chosen. It means “passionate lament.” It is a rare thing today to find anyone who passionately laments over his sins. This word speaks of the sorrow of a broken heart, of a passionate spirit of contrition. This is how the apostle Paul felt when he cried out in Romans 7: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Paul was weary of stating the truth and living wrong. He was a struggler in the pursuit of righteousness.

Jesus, too, knew sorrow. The book of Isaiah says that he was a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” He wept over the sin of others. He wept openly at the tomb of Lazarus. He wept over the remorseless city of Jerusalem that would not receive him. He grieved over sin’s bitter consequences in judgment and death.

There is something quite basic about mourning. The word Matthew uses for mourn is a participle: *mourning*, implying that we are doing it now. It is not something that we have done or will do; it is always part of us. Sometimes it is not admitted, other times it is not faced, but it is always there. Mourning is part of our fallen humanity. We come into the world crying, and we leave it either crying or watching others around us crying. Mourning is basic to who we are. That is why Jesus calls attention to it and legitimizes it. It is not only all right, it is *blessed* to mourn.

We mourn because we have a keen sense of loss. We feel cut off. We have lost the womb—and things will

never be the same again. To put it theologically, we are “East of Eden.” We have been kicked out of the garden, banished from Paradise, and we are unable to make it back on our own. We are incomplete and damaged. But the fact that we know that and we feel that is evidence of a memory, an innate desire we feel inside for wholeness. We were designed to live in a better world than this. And until that better world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have. An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity, but of the way things really are.

Animals, with the exception perhaps of domesticated dogs, don’t mourn; they are fine just the way they are. A bear does not feel cut off from some Grizzly Eden. But we have been cut off from our Eden. We sense this deep within, and our tears are a sign of this loss. We want wholeness, we don’t have it, and so we cry.

We puzzle over this, and we ask, How can this be good? It is “blessed” because we need God. That is our basic need. If we deny that, then we are really in trouble. The ability and the willingness to mourn is an admission of our lostness—but it is that very willingness that puts us in a place where we can be comforted. That is why it is blessed.

Eugene Peterson translates this verse 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.” But that is hard for us to admit. We go to such lengths to deny and avoid and pretend that there isn’t any loss. We come up with cheery band aids to cover our wounds. We take a pill or drug or alcohol to help ease the pain. We smile and try to give the impression that everything is under control. We see the attractive, smiling people gazing down on us from the billboards, and though we know that their products won’t make us happy, we are taken in because that is a lie that we are ready to embrace.

But we face loss at every hand. We lose our jobs, our health, our parents; we lose our children, one way or another. Our stocks fall, our retirement plans fail, our dreams go belly up. We labor long hours with fragmentary results. We’re disregarded and ignored, slandered and maligned; we get trampled on by insensitive people. Some days we fall flat on our faces. Our best efforts meet with disaster. We put our best foot forward only to meet with bitter embarrassment. And yet we suppress the evidence! We do so because being human means being vulnerable to God. Human is the one thing we have a chance of being, but we avoid that at all costs so that we can play at being God, (which we are no good at at all), trying to keep things under control, manipulating, calling the shots.

Life is hard. Life is difficult and demanding. As Ray Hobbes said in the movie, *The Natural*: “Life just didn’t turn out the way I thought it would.” It rarely does. But we don’t want to be vulnerable and have our pain and shame exposed. That is why there is so much denial of

pain and loss.

This beatitude is a call to stop hiding and come openly to God. He is the Father who ran to his prodigal son when the young man came limping home. God weeps over us when shame immobilizes us. Yet as soon as we feel that way, we run to cover. We use Adam and Eve as our role models, and we hide. Why? Because we do not like what we see. It is uncomfortable, even intolerable, to confront our true selves.

Simon Tugwell, in his book *The Beatitudes*, explains:

And so like runaway slaves, we either flee our own reality or manufacture a false self which is mostly admirable, mildly prepossessing, and superficially happy. We hide what we know or feel ourselves to be (which we assume to be unacceptable and unlovable) behind some kind of appearance which we hope will be more pleasing. We hide behind pretty faces which we put on for the benefit of our public. And in time we may come to forget that we are hiding, and think that our assumed pretty face is what we really look like.

But God loves who we really are—whether we like it or not. God calls us, as he did Adam, to come out of hiding. No amount of spiritual makeup can render us more presentable to him. As Merton said, “The reason we never enter into the deepest reality of our relationship with God is that we so seldom acknowledge our utter nothingness before him.”

And our recovery begins with shame. George MacDonald said: “to be ashamed is a holy and blessed thing. Shame is shame only to those who want to appear, not to those who want to be. Shame is shame to those who want to pass their examination, not to those who would get to the heart of things . . . To be humbly ashamed is to be plunged in the cleansing bath of truth.”

Those who mourn will be comforted by the only comfort which can relieve their distress, and that is, the free forgiveness of God.

Horatio Spafford knew about loss, pain, tears and comfort. He lived in Chicago at the turn of the century. He was a dynamic Christian man who was influential in the founding of the Moody Bible Institute. Following the great Chicago fire in 1871, he put his wife and children aboard ship and sent them to Europe. He wanted to get them out of the city while it was being rebuilt. As they were crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the ship was struck by another vessel and both ships sank. This mother saw her four children drown. She herself was struck by a falling mast, but she was miraculously saved. She fell on some floating debris and later was rescued and taken to Wales.

While she was in a hospital there, she telegraphed

back to her husband the two words: “Saved alone.” Horatio Spafford took the first ship to Wales. As it neared the area in the Atlantic where the other ship had gone down, Dr. Spafford was walking along the deck, contemplating all that had happened. It was then he was moved to write the song we are going to sing to close our service morning, *It Is Well With My Soul*:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

That is the message Jesus wants to communicate to us today. Whatever my circumstances, you have taught me to say, “It is well with my soul.” Joy is not the absence of suffering but the presence of God.

Perhaps you are wondering, “Why would God want me? He knows my sin, my wanderings, my long-standing habits of yielding.” And you think, “I’m not good enough. I’m not sorry enough for my sin. I’m not able to not sin.” You are right! Our waywardness doesn’t have to be explained to God. He sees everything about us at a single glance: what is, what could have been, what would have been apart from our choices.

But our sin and incorrigible weakness only draw out God’s love. It is his nature to love; he can do no other. “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8). God’s love creates the only safe ground on which we can give up our search and surrender to him. He is the one, says Pascal, “before whom we can humble ourselves without despair.” What’s the use of holding out when we have found, or rather have been found, by the very thing we have been looking for all our lives—infinite love?

As one man has written:

Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream.
All the fitness he requireth,
Is to feel your need of him.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

© 1996 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino