

## **Blessed Are Those Who Mourn**

Matthew 5:4

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning was an English poet of the late 1800's.

In one of her poems she tried to capture what it must be like to be a person that cannot feel joy, love, hope, fear, grief, surprise, or even sadness.

Of course, this would be a serious psychological problem. It could lead to mental illness or even suicide.

Browning saw such people as if they were statues.

She wrote:

Most like a monumental statue set  
In everlasting watch and moveless woe  
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.  
Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet:  
If it could weep, it could arise and go."

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/how-everyone-became-depressed/201404/the-inability-cry>)

Did you catch that?

She likened people who cannot get in touch with their emotions to marble statues that cannot weep because they cannot feel anything. She said if people could only weep, their tears would set them free. (Ibid)

In his own poetic way, Jesus said: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4 NRSV).

Luke, who also recorded this sermon of Jesus in another setting, said that Jesus used the word "weep" instead of "mourn."

He said Jesus put it like this, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:21 NRSV).

To help us understand this beatitude, let's step back one verse to verse 3 where Jesus laid down the foundation of discipleship for us. Jesus said we need to have a poverty of Spirit.

This uncommon sense of Jesus pairs words that don't seem to belong together. "Blessed" and "poverty" mix about as well as oil and water.

Yet we learned last week that our blessedness doesn't hinge on our goodness but on our realization that apart from God's grace and mercy our righteousness is as filthy rags.

We are blessed if we come before God with a humble attitude realizing that we need God to show up and bless.

Nothing we have, nothing we've done, deserves the love of God. We hold out our cups and God fills them up.

Now Jesus builds on this foundation. He says if we know that we need God, when we come, we should come with some tears in our eyes.

But how does this make sense? If "blessed" is translated as "happy," how are we supposed to be both happy and weepy at the same time?

What are we mourning about?

When we decide to be disciples of Jesus, should that make us happy?

Jesus wants us to care enough about our sins and the sin of the world that our hearts are initially heavy.

Now Jesus is not proposing that Christians should walk around all the time like we are going to a funeral. Some do. I've met them.

I want to tell them, "Hey, it's time for you to move on to another beatitude. You've got this one covered."

"Blessed are those who mourn," is a part of our discipleship process. It is not a destination, but by the looks of some Christian's faces, I'd say they think it is the destination.

However, we cannot deny that when we realize that our sin separates us from God and that the sins of the world are the cause of great pain and suffering in the world, this should cause pain in our hearts.

We should be brokenhearted for the world around us. It should affect our hearts when we discover the part we play in this brokenness.

Think about the last major purchase you made.

If you discovered it was broken when you got it home, would you take it back to the store if you could? Certainly. Would the fact that it was broken have caused you some grief? Absolutely.

We send back any products that arrive to us broken. We want them repaired, replaced or we might want our money back.

If our bodies become broken. we want them healed.

When our cars are broken, we want them repaired.

Any time something is broken that we have an emotional attachment to, we grieve about it.

So, if we mourn the brokenness of things, how much more should we mourn the brokenness of people?

If we had the same detachment about relationships as we do about an appliance that didn't work or some food that was spoiled, what kind of hope for meaning or purpose would there be in this world?

It is because we mourn that there is hope for healing and hope for relationships to form. It says that we are human. It says that there is a heart inside of us that empathizes for the weak, the poor, the wounded, the lonely, the homeless, the lost, and the refugee.

When we mourn and enter the pain and the suffering of others, Jesus says we will be blessed.

When we refuse to mourn and get in touch with the pain of others and we simply seek to do what is best for us, we run the risk of isolating ourselves on an island where we constantly see a mirage of self-sufficiency.

That is where sin began, when Adam and Eve believed they could be self-sufficient. They thought they didn't need God. What resulted is that they lost their Eden.

I asked Rev. James Blay, who graduated from McAfee School of Theology in May and is now the Vice President at the Liberian Baptist Theological Seminary, what this verse means to him and this is what he wrote:

“A few years ago, I lost my eldest sister to breast cancer. It was a difficult time and I struggled to internalize and lean in to this verse. It made little sense to me. I then began to reflect on my larger life journey through wars and my life as a refugee. I began to see even in the face of great suffering and uncertainty I experienced meaningful growth in and understanding of my faith.

“Make no mistake, I still moaned and groaned at the brink of despair and hopelessness during these times. However, I did not tip over. I was blessed in my moaning because it provided space to grow and develop a deeper faith.”

“As I think about my people and all the hardships we have endured because of war and the Ebola crisis, I cannot help but see Jesus' uncommon sense playing out. You would think that Liberians would have given up by now and would have sunk into despair and hopelessness. However, the truth is we are a resilient and persistent people. We have hope in the midst of suffering and frustrations because we have seen the goodness of God. This hope is our blessing and comfort as we mourn.”

The blessing from mourning comes when we look and find God deep within our Spirits as we honestly deal with what we have lost.

We are good about living in denial. Part of living out an authentic faith is to be honest with God and honest with one another about what we have lost. When we are comfortable enough to weep around each other or to at least share our pain with one another, Jesus says that is when we are going to find a blessing.

The Psalmist wrote: “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” Psalm 34:18

The times that we feel the center of our being has been crushed and hurt, the Psalmist says this is the time that the Lord specializes in being near to us. Many times God will use others to show love and empathy to us.

Empathy is the connective tissue present between Christians who have love for one another and love to a lost world.

We should always be on the lookout for those who are hurting and need support.

Dr. Rick Wilson, Chair of Religion at Mercer University, has been the President of the Liberian Baptist Theological Seminary for the past three years. He saw firsthand how Liberians mourned as Ebola devastated the economy and killed about 1500 people in their country.

Dr. Wilson wrote to me and said, “I have learned in Liberia that the cycle of life is more visible and intimate than it is with our sanitized culture of health care and mortuary science.”

“Mourners in Liberia often are physically engaged in the whole spectrum from health to illness to decline and, then, death and burial.

“What is learned in the process is that caring for the sick and dying models the same for everyone in the community.

Everyone knows that when someone becomes the sick and dying one, there will be caregivers.

“Empathy.”

“Caring for the sick and dying is a way to care for yourself. You model the caregiving so others will learn how to do it.

“I find Liberians, generally, to be more empathetic than the people I live with in the States.”

Then with the next paragraph he pivots and asks me: “You may remember Jacob, the woodcarver, from Ricks Institute? He was my friend for nearly ten years. I found small work for him at the seminary and, too, often carried his work to Macon, where I displayed it and took orders.”

“Earlier this year he was murdered. When I returned to Liberia I learned that Marweh, his widow, wanted to sit with me.”

“And, so, she came, with her brother-in-law, Jacob's older brother. And . . . we sat.

“We sat for a long time in silence. She grieved and we mourned and we were comforted.”

Empathy nudges Liberians to choose to be in the places where mourning happens. Because of that, people are blessed.

What was it Jesus said? “Blessed are those who mourn.” Why? Because they shall be comforted.

What is Jesus saying to us? Jesus is telling us to be real. He is telling us to stop faking and to be authentic if we want to find some peace in our hearts.

Perhaps the reason so many of us act like statues is that we know everyone around us is so busy that no one has time to sit with us. Just get on MARTA in Atlanta and you get a good example of what this looks like.

So, when people ask how we are doing, we are like ships that pass in the night. We are not authentic because we know they don't want to know.

If our relationships are real, if they are authentic, that must change.

When we've mourned for our own sin and when we've mourned for the sin of others; when we mourn for the hardships this world is placing on people...disease, poverty, crime, displacement from war, profiling, terrorism, hate, prejudice, abuse, domestic violence, broken relationships, hunger, Jesus says, “They will be comforted.”

When we are comforted, we are then able to sit with others. We will be able to listen to the pain of others.

If people are comfortable with us and find that we have empathy for whatever they are going through, then we have helped create space for them to embrace God.

That my friends is the beginning of real happiness.

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