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The Mourning and The Meek

Matthew 5:4-5

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Last week when we began our series on the Beatitudes, I said the Beatitudes are about the availability of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is addressing people with all kinds of needs and conditions, such as poverty and grief, and telling them that they are invited to a life of blessing in the kingdom of heaven. The first 12 verses of Matthew 5 seek to answer the question, *“Who is really well off in life?”* with the surprising answer, *“Anyone who is in the kingdom of heaven, regardless of their conditions or circumstances.”* The first 12 verses are statements of blessing and being, not so much verses that demand action on our part. Following the Beatitudes, the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is about living in the kingdom, and those verses and chapters are very much about doing.

So today we turn to the next words of blessing from Jesus as given in Matthew 5:4-5,

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

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

As with all the Beatitudes there is a relationship between the condition or need of our lives Jesus mentions, and the promise of blessing in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus doesn't say those who mourn may be comforted or that the meek may inherit the earth. He says, “they will.” Jesus says it is a promise, a given, it is something we can count on. When we are mourning or when a person is meek, humble, or gentle and perhaps being taken advantage of – it is helpful to know **that God promises us comfort and an inheritance.**

Most of us would not associate blessing with mourning because when we mourn we are in some of the darkest days we go through in life. Psalm 23 talks about *“walking through the valley of the shadow of death.”* That valley is deep and dark and the only way out of it is by walking through. **To mourn is to express or feel grief or sorrow** usually about three things – **first about the condition of the world with all of its injustice and violence.** Each week there are things that happen in the world that cause us to mourn – whether large scale events such as the bombings in London, the devastation caused by war, the corruption, greed, and indifference of those in positions of great influence, like the former CEO who was convicted this past week of stealing and defrauding people out of billions of dollars. Isaiah 59:11 says, *“We all growl like bears; like doves we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but*

it is far from us.” On a smaller, more personal scale, there are things we mourn such as the presence of drug dealers in our community or neighborhood, we mourn that there are people who harm children. I read yesterday the unbelievable story of a youth tee-ball coach in Uniontown, PA who paid one of his players \$25 to throw a baseball at the head of a mentally disabled, 8-year-old teammate so the boy wouldn’t be able to play in a game.¹ Unbelievable.

We not only mourn the condition of the world and all its injustice and violence, secondly, we also mourn the death of loved ones. All of us have or will experience the pain and grief of the death of a loved one. Whether death comes at the end of a long full life or after a just a few days, it is difficult. My father taught me that when we lose our parents, we lose our past. When we lose our spouse, we lose our present. When we lose a child, we lose our future. How we grieve will also depend on our relationship with the person who died and how much of the emotional capital of our life we have invested in them.

God also knows about the death of loved ones, since God is the Creator of us all and God’s Son Jesus died on a cross. Zechariah 12:10 is part of a prophecy about a time when Jerusalem shall be cleansed from its sin and it says, *“And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, **they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.**”*

Jesus tells his followers in John 16:20 that their mourning over his death will turn to joy at his resurrection, *“I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will be turned into joy.”*

We mourn the injustice and violence in the world, the death of our loved ones, and

Third we mourn our own sins that hurt us, harm others, and grieve the heart of God.

If there are things we are doing that we should not do, or if we’re failing to do things we should be doing, it is appropriate for us to mourn our failure and to ask God for help. James 4:8-9 exhorts us *“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. **Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection.***

¹ Associated Press, Boston Globe, page 2, 7/16/05.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

Isaiah 61:1-4, which we read earlier in the worship service, identifies much of what Jesus would do in his ministry, including that God sent Jesus **“to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”**

After Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount we can see what he did with people who were mourning. In Matthew 9:18-27, a leader of the synagogue whose daughter has died asks Jesus to come lay his hands on her so that she might live. Jesus arrives at the house to find a crowd of mourners *“making a commotion”* and he tells them to *“Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.”* In Luke 7:11-17, Jesus approached the gate of a town just as a funeral procession for a widow’s only son was leaving. “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Jesus said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. And the people glorified God saying, “God has looked favorably on his people!”

Perhaps the best-known story of Jesus comforting people who mourn is in John 11 where Jesus raises his friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, who had died. The Apostle Peter had a similar experience as his master when he prayed for Dorcas who had died and she was restored to life.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 says there is, “A time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” **Through the person and power of Jesus we may be comforted when we mourn,** *“so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died (1 Thessalonians. 4:13).”*

Jesus promises comfort to those who mourn, and an inheritance to the meek. The definition of meek is “Showing patience and humility; gentle. Easily imposed upon; submissive.” Or “Non-violent people, who are humble and gentle in their dealings with others because they have humbled themselves before the greatness of God.”² The downside of meekness is that it may enable people to impose themselves upon us. An old commercial for a basketball sneaker showed a strong man banging others around and then sneering, “The meek may inherit the earth, but they won’t get the rebound.”

² Interpretation, 39.

A poll a number of years ago revealed the percentage of Americans earning less than \$30,000 who believe that “the meek will inherit the earth” was 61 %. The percentage of Americans earning more than 60% who believe that the meek will inherit the earth was only 36%.³ Our culture does not admire or lift up people who are meek but rather dismisses them as weak. In Jesus’ day and our own, those who are meek, who are humble or gentle are not likely to be pushy, outspoken, demanding, opinionated, or insisting on getting their own way. The meek are not the type to fight, and whine and grasp for an inheritance.

The Greek word (“*praus*”) translated as meek is also used as a description of Jesus in Matt 11:29 where the Lord says, “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*” It is used again in Matthew 21:5, when Jesus is entering Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, he is described in the words of the prophet, “*Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.*”

While the world for the most part, looks down upon the meek, the Bible sees meekness, humility, and gentleness as admirable qualities and there are promises for the meek that might surprise the pushy. Actually in this Beatitude as with much of Jesus teaching, he is not saying anything new so much as he is reminding the people gathered around him on the mountain of what they should already know from their religious tradition but may have forgotten or neglected.

In Psalm 10:17-18, we hear this promise, “*O Lord, you will **hear the desire of the meek**; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.*”

In Psalm 37, which is directed much like the two beatitudes we’re discussing today, to those discouraged by the injustice, violence, and wickedness that seem to dominate the world, verse 11 says very closely to Jesus’ beatitude, “*The meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.*” I recommend reading Psalm 37 for the guidance it provides for living in response to wickedness and evil. The psalm suggests trusting the Lord, being still before the Lord and waiting patiently for him, refraining from anger, and forsaking wrath, and not fretting which leads only to evil. Of course these Biblical words don’t carry much in a culture that rewards confrontation and bombast and self-centeredness far more than meekness. An article by Ronald Kernaghan in a Fuller Theological Seminary publication that I receive noted, “*At the*

³ Harper’s, March, 1996.

*beginning of the 21st century, reasoned discourse [is imperiled]. Reasoned discourse is increasingly giving way to in-your-face sound bites...Hardball is the dominant metaphor for American public life. Our interchanges are confrontational, divisive, and dismissive. **Truth is not something we expect to emerge from a conversation. It is something we hope to impose.** Balance and fairness are casualties on evening news shows as two, three, and sometimes four voices contend simultaneously for dominance. Volume and intransigence are the new civic virtues.”⁴ The illustrations of this each week in our culture are too numerous to mention.*

While it may not be admired by the world, the Bible expresses the belief that there is strength in meekness and that it is a characteristic of Christ and his followers. In defending his approach to ministry in 2 Corinthians 10:1, Paul writes, *“I appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ,”* which was apparently somewhat out of step with the power grabbing, divisive environment in the church of Corinth. In Colossians 3:12 we’re told to clothe ourselves with *“compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”* James 1:21 advises us to rid ourselves of all wickedness and to *“welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.”*

While the meek are not likely to be constantly pushing for their own way or more for themselves, Jesus is reminding God’s people that the meek shall inherit much from God. Jesus clearly knew and was greatly influenced by the work of the prophet Isaiah. He read and taught from Isaiah 61 when he had the chance to preach in his hometown. In Isaiah 11, a passage we usually read around Christmas and which Christians interpret as being about Jesus, verse 4 describes the Messianic king, with the words, **“With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and **decide with equity for the meek of the earth.**”** Later (29:19) Isaiah would tell of a time when, *“The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.”* Clearly we see this in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Sitting on the mountain that day, teaching the people, Jesus is announcing a promise of comfort to those who mourn and an inheritance for the meek. Comfort that death would not always have the final word because the power of God at work in Christ is stronger even than death so death did not have the power to keep Jesus in the grave. Those of us who put our trust in Jesus believe death is no longer the end of life. The inheritance of the meek is the promise that terror will not always strike fear, the wicked will not always prosper, but there will come a time when the meek, the humble, the

⁴ Ronald J. Kernaghan, “Speaking the Truth in Love,” *Theology, News and Notes* (Winter 2003).

gentle, the poor, the orphan and the widow may live without fear of being abused or taken advantage of by ruthless people.

Our hope is in the Lord that one day we may say with Psalm 30:11,
“You have turned my mourning into dancing;
*you have taken off my sackcloth and **clothed me with joy***
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.”

Blessing: **“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.”**
2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

See also Isaiah 61:1-4, and Psalm 37, especially verses 7-13.