

Gladness in the mourning!

Rev. Dr. William M. Lyons

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The second in a Lenten series of sermons on the Beatitudes.

O you lucky person!¹ Congratulations!! Those words carry the energy Jesus conveyed when he described God's Realm dwellers. We've been taught to call those specific words 'The Beatitudes' - a title derived from the usual translation of the first word in each phrase: blessed. But blessed (from the Hebrew *ashrey*) "is far too sedate" says Philip Yancey, and I would add, a far too pious depiction of these statements of grace. They overflow with affirmation, love, and reassurance. They describe the inner spiritual values and their corresponding visible religious activities upon which the Realm of God is built. They speak to the depths of who Christians are.²

Truth be told we are far more comfortable trying to throw off some sin in the attempt to behave properly than we are comfortable actually receiving the gift and hope and encouragement and change that come with nurturing our identity as Jesus people. We are rarely successful at growing less of what we do not want; our best chance for transformation comes by growing more of what we do want! This Lent I am inviting you to set aside thoughts of what you want less of in your life, to let go of efforts against the sins that you want to overcome, in order to focus on and practice what you want more of, of what God wants more of in your living. I'm inviting you into the Beatitudes in the hope that they will lead you to outgrow sin by embracing qualities that Jesus congratulates God's Realm dwellers for embodying.

God wants us to live well - to really live the life that God created us to enjoy. Jesus' beatitudes or BE ATTITUDES - won't lead you to an easy life. But they will unlock for you the well-being that God hopes for every human being. It will be worth your effort in the long run, and for the ones who come after you!

Somewhere along the line I am guessing you've memorized some words that speak to your identity. How many of you know the Pledge of Allegiance? How about the National Anthem? Internalizing those words does more than get us through patriotism's public moments without embarrassment. The words we carry around inside ourselves, the tapes we play in our minds, shape how we look at the world, how we interact with other people; they grow a particular set of emotions and values inside us and really do determine how we will spend our time on earth.

We're going to spend 6 weeks diving deeply into our identity as God's Realm dwellers, listening to Jesus invite us to see ourselves, look at the world and interact with other people in a particular way. I challenge you to commit to memory Jesus' words recorded in Matthew 5:1-16. Use any Bible version you want. On Palm Sunday everyone who accepts the memory work challenge will stand at their seats and recite the verses together as our Scripture reading.

¹ Yancey, Philip. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. p. 105

² Stoddart, Eric. *Life Attitudes*. Kindle Edition Loc. 364/1509

Gladness in the mourning!

Rev. Dr. William M. Lyons

But you'll need more than sermons and memory work to experience the transformation these verses have to offer you. There are some small groups meeting this season and additional resources on our web page that will help you go as deeply into Jesus' 8 Keys for Wellbeing as you want to go. If anyone is interested in an afterhours Google Hangout about the Be Attitudes of Jesus, let me know and we'll set something up.

But sermons *are* a place to start. We considered the first beatitude during our Ash Wednesday gathering; that message is posted on our website's sermon blog. This morning let's take the plunge into the second of Jesus' keys for wellbeing.

Say it after me: Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.

"πένθος and πενθεῖν (the words in the GK NT translated mourning here, are frequently used in the LXX (Greek version of the Old Testament), mostly for derivatives from *av/* (the stem אבל.) Both ... denote the sorrow expressed in tears, lamentations and rites."³ These are the outward expressions of grief.

In English we tend to use the words bereavement, grief and mourning synonymously. But the three words have different meanings.

- **bereavement** - the state of having lost someone or something valuable or necessary
 - *"He was subject to fits, which bereaved him...of his senses" (David Hume).*
 - *"Cry aloud for the man who is dead, for the woman and children bereaved." (Alan Paton)⁴*
- **grief** - the crying aloud; the multi-faceted [emotional] response to loss; includes denial, sorrow, anger, relief, guilt, acceptance etc.
- **mourning** - the behavior in which the bereaved participate or is expected to participate. Customs vary between different cultures and evolve over time, though many core behaviors remain constant. Wearing [certain colored] clothes...withdrawal from social events and quiet, respectful behavior, ... religious traditions⁵ [and rites]

Jesus wasn't spiritualizing our losses. He wasn't saying, "I know that it hurts now but you'll get over it," or that time heals all wounds when clearly time does not have such power. Neither was Jesus saying losses don't hurt or hurt less when you're a Christian or because God is in your life. Nor was he implying that if losses do hurt you aren't spiritual enough, or that God isn't with you. None of those things is good news! And the bereaved people to whom Jesus preached heard his words as good news. After all that was his mission! Matthew tells us^{9:35} ... *Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.*³⁶ *When he saw the*

³ Kittel, G., Bromiley, G. W., & Friedrich, G. (Eds.). (1964-). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 6, pp. 41-42). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

⁴ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/bereavement>

⁵ <http://www.examiner.com/article/the-difference-between-grieving-mourning-and-bereavement>

Gladness in the mourning!

Rev. Dr. William M. Lyons

*crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless...*⁶ What other reason would they have had to embrace him and his message so enthusiastically? If the grieving people who heard Jesus first say these words had thought Jesus meant they somehow needed to accept bereavement as the will of God, or that he was being romantic about their grief, no one would have given him another thought.

Luke has a different version of this second beatitude; "*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*"⁷ And in the following verses, "*Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.*"⁸ Luke's pairing of blessing and woe helps us see the meaning in Jesus words.

Jesus' first followers were grieving the losses common to citizens in a land occupied by a foreign military oppressor (Rome). Jesus, in both Matthew and Luke, is speaking to those grieving people. Jesus has something more than their personal bereavements in view; "this is a cosmic weeping." The grief that leads to mourning in Matthew is the weeping of "strangers on the earth...who grieve for the terrible suffering that is in the world."⁹ This is Virgil's *sunt lacrimae rerum*¹⁰ - "They weep here/For how the world goes."

Jesus' words cut across our indifference and call us to far more than empathy in the face of the pain and suffering of other people. Bereavement and grief happen to us; I notice that Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are the bereaved, happy are the grieving." Jesus said, "O the gladness that comes with mourning!" Mourning is a choice. The mourning to which Jesus call God's Realm dwellers is the "choice to turn and face the pain and work through it to a better and more whole future."¹¹

And when we do, God is there to comfort us! So often we mistake comfort for the removing of pain. In the New Testament, four Greek words are translated 'comfort.' One focuses on soothing and is used only once in the whole New Testament. Two have to do with consoling. But the word used here - "the word used most frequently to bring the idea of comfort" in the New Testament, and "probably the strongest word of the four" means "to call alongside."

"[This] verb, *parakaleō* (παρακαλεω), refers to the act of calling someone to one's side" in order to help. "The noun *parakletos* (παρακλητος) refers to the one who is called upon to render aid, and is often translated 'Holy Spirit.' This word for comfort was used in the law courts referring to one who pleads another's cause before a judge, a counsel for the defense, an

⁶ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Mt 9:35–36). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Lk 6:21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁸ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Lk 6:25). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁹ Cantalamessa, Raniero. *Beatitudes: Eight Steps to Happiness*. Kindle edition p. 25.

¹⁰ Virgil. Book I, line 462 of the [Aeneid](#) in Cantalamessa, Raniero. *Beatitudes: Eight Steps to Happiness*. Kindle edition p. 25.

¹¹ Stoddart, eric. *Life Attitudes*. Kindle edition Loc 611/1509.

Gladness in the mourning!

Rev. Dr. William M. Lyons

advocate."¹² D.A. Nash explained the word's use in a nautical context - a capable vessel lashing itself to the side of a ship in distress and sailing together into safe harbor.

The deep comfort God provided to God's Realm dwellers who choose Gospel mourning is nothing less than God lashing the divine self to our cause, present to render aid in our struggle for a more whole future on behalf of others.

O the gladness that comes to the ones who choose to

- listen to the tragic sighing of a creation, of a humanity who groans under the violation of one's true nature, and the burden of disappointed hope.
- move through their own grief for these losses and their own culpability in their bereavement
- adjust to the world's brokenness by naming the losses for what they are, and
- working for a new, more whole future not just for themselves but for all who have lost their true humanity

for God will be at their side to help them change the world every step of the way!

"What a way to run a universe, start a new religion, and promote an alternative way of life for planet earth," writes Eric Stoddart. Jesus' words to us this morning are an invitation to enter deeply into mourning the bereavement of people around us, people half a world away, people so broken they think joining a group like ISIS is their best hope. We can engage the tasks of that kind of mourning with every confidence that God is right beside us joining our efforts of repairing the world.

What does Gospel mourning look like with skin on it?

- It starts by facing our own wounds and working toward our own healing, lest out of our own pain we bereave others. Our greatest power to heal the world or to help others find wholeness comes from our own brokenness and scars. No more denial.
- Being authentically present with other people in their pain. We had a saying the chaplaincy office at the hospital: 'Don't just do something, stupid, be there.'
 - "When we honestly ask ourselves which people in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares."

¹² Wuest, K. S. (1997). *Wuest's word studies from the Greek New Testament: for the English reader*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Gladness in the mourning!

Rev. Dr. William M. Lyons

— [Henri J.M. Nouwen](#), *[Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life](#)*¹³

- The world is filled with people who need such friends, who need us to be that friend!
- Gospel mourning with skin on it looks like one who feels and understands what's been lost in the tragedies around them, and who takes an intentional step toward restoring it.

Maybe it doesn't seem like on its own your deeply mourning the bereavement and grief of the people around you, will make much of a ripple in the sea of human suffering. But it's not for the impact that Jesus calls us to Gospel mourning. It is for the wellbeing of our own souls. We choose to

- listen to the tragic groaning of true nature violated and weight of hope disappointed
- move through their own grief aware of our own culpability in their bereavement
- adjust to the world's brokenness by seeing it for what it is
- work for a new, more whole future for ourselves as well as for others

the sake of the synergy that comes from 2 billion Christian people in today's world all living by that same value. *If God is for us, who can stand against us?!* Still it can't be 2 billion without you!

What will Gospel mourning look like in your life? Oh the gladness that mourning brings; God's very self stands beside you, with you, in your choice! Amen.

¹³ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/4837.Henri_J_M_Nouwen

Gladness in the mourning!

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The "Bee Attitudes"

Theme: We find true happiness in Jesus.

Object: A flower or a toy bee

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

Have you ever watched a bee buzzing around in a flower garden? As you watch that bee, you will see that he isn't worried about a thing in the world. He is too busy enjoying all of the beautiful flowers that God has provided for him. He is as busy and as happy as a bee can be.

If I were to ask you to tell me what makes you happy, what would your answer be? Would it be something like "happiness is scoring the winning goal in a soccer game" or "happiness is being the most popular person in my class?"

We all want to be happy, don't we? Does it surprise you to know that God wants you to be happy? Well, he does, but you might be surprised to find out that what Jesus said about happiness is quite different from what you and I might expect. Most of us think that to be happy means having a lot of money, having plenty to eat, having someone to take care of us, or being well-liked by everyone. That isn't what Jesus said.

One day Jesus went up onto the side of a mountain. He sat down, gathered his disciples around him, and began to teach them about happiness. Even though these are not the exact words Jesus used, I think they will help us to understand what he taught.

He said things like:

Be happy when you are poor in spirit, because then you will find that your riches are in the kingdom of heaven.

Be happy when you feel you have lost what is most dear to you, because it is then that you will feel the love of the One who is the most dear to you.

Be happy with what you have, because then you will find that your heavenly Father provides everything that you need.

Gladness in the mourning!

Rev. Dr. William M. Lyons

Be happy when you are hungry for the things of God, because then you will find that only He can satisfy.

Be happy when you are caring for others, because it is in caring for others that you will find that you have a heavenly Father who cares for you.

Be happy when your heart is right with God, because it is then that you will see that God is at work in the world around you.

Be happy when you help others to get along peacefully with one another, because it is then that you will know the peace that comes from being a part of the family of God.

Be happy when others treat you badly because you follow me, because your reward will be great in heaven.

You see, happiness is not a feeling that is brought about by the things that happen to us. It is an attitude that we have because of what we have in our heart. We need to be like the bee, buzzing happily through life because of what God has done for us.

Dear Father, help us to have the happiness that you want for us. Happiness that comes, not from what happens to us, but from what happens inside of us. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.