

“Character that Counts: Vulnerability” (2014)

Matthew 5:4; Luke 19:37-44 ¹

Μακαριοι οι πενθουντες, οτι αυτοι παρακληθησονται.

“*God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted*” (Matthew 5:4).

I’m not sure, but I think it was the spring of 1969. I had become infatuated with a lovely young coed at Georgetown College who played in the orchestra with me. Nancy played the oboe, and I was head-over-heels in love. It was a quixotic relationship, though; I’m not sure we ever actually went on a date. I remember inviting her, but I don’t remember her ever accepting my invitation.

In my frustration, I did go out with her roommate a couple of times—and, for the record, let me report that this was not a smart idea if I wanted to get anywhere with Nancy! At some point during the spring semester, it finally sank in that, while Nancy was willing to be a friendly acquaintance, that was all there would ever be between us.

When my heart realized this, I went into a period of mourning that completely obliterated the beauty of springtime in Kentucky. I have vivid memories of spending several weeks being almost literally sick over the loss of a relationship that never really had any substance about it at all. Now I know that this mourning was a very small thing in the panorama of human experience, but it was devastating at the time. Has your heart ever been broken?

The second Beatitude tells us that “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*” So what is “mourning”? Well, mourning is behavior that expresses grief, and grief is sorrow over personal loss. The word Jesus used here was the strongest possible word to express the idea of mourning. It’s the word used for mourning the dead (πενθεω).

Now one way to understand this teaching is to take the words quite literally. When sorrow comes into our lives—especially great sorrow—we’re often driven to our knees, sometimes literally as well as spiritually. If we are in Christ, and if we persevere in our searching after God in the darkness that has overtaken us, this journey—and it’s sometimes a very long one—brings us at last to a comfort that is deeper than our sorrow—to the settled conviction that “*nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:39).

While this conviction is absolutely true, and while it is a necessary and certain anchor for our Hope, both in time and in eternity (Hebrews 6:19), I don’t really think that this was Jesus’ main point in the second Beatitude. As we noted last week, the main thrust of the Sermon on the Mount has to do with the contrast between the Code of Conduct of the world and the Code of Conduct of the Kingdom of God, so the meaning of this teaching is likely to be found in that direction.

The world encourages us in a hundred ways every day to “Be yourself! Do what comes naturally. This is the way to happiness.” But in the second Beatitude, Jesus told us that, Madison Avenue notwithstanding, progress toward abundant Life actually starts with our beginning to understand all the *harm* we’ve done precisely by “being ourselves.”

Violence, corruption, and lust seem to be the main themes of much of our culture these days, and as awful as those are, the truth is that they do describe what we humans frequently create by “being ourselves.” That has been sadly true from the first chapter of Genesis to this very morning; and, although you’d never know it from most media accounts, Sin is not a trivial matter.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on July 13, 2014.

While sane and sensible gun control has its place, guns are not really our problem. Although our jails and prisons overflow with drug offenders, drugs aren't really our problem, either. Sin is our problem.

The ugliness, the horror, and the agony of the Cross are the measure of the price of Sin; the unending pain of hell is its result. And so it was that Jesus burst upon the human scene with the words, "Repent! Be sorry for what you've done and for what you've caused. Turn around! Unless you allow me to remove your Sin, you will die! Unless you mourn for what your sins have done, you can never be free from their source, and you will never know the Joy I want to give you" (Mark 1:15; John 10:10; Ezekiel 18:31).

What I think Jesus really meant by the second Beatitude was something like this: **"Oh, how joyful you'll be when your heart is broken for the world's wickedness and for your own sin, for in that despair you'll discover the healing power and the eternal faithfulness of God."** I think Jesus told us that the unlikely path to the joy of forgiveness and the way of abundant Life is through the desperate sorrow of a broken heart.

We know from our own experience that mourning often involves tears. The New Testament records only two occasions when Jesus wept. Jesus didn't weep in the Garden of Gethsemane. He agonized in spiritual battle there, and His robes became ringing wet with sweat tinged with blood, but He did not weep. When did Jesus weep? Jesus wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus (John 11:35), and He wept as he entered Jerusalem for the last time (Luke 19:41-44).

Jesus' tears for Lazarus had to do with ordinary and normal human grief, because Lazarus was a dear friend; but those tears also had to do with grief over the destruction that death brings into human life through its ancient root in our Sin. The Bible tells us that death first entered the world through and because of human Sin (Genesis 3:19; Romans 5:12).

Jesus' tears over Jerusalem were for this same reason: "As [Jesus] *approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you'*" (Luke 19:41-44).

Jesus' heart was broken—both figuratively and literally—over our sin.² You and I have experienced heartbreak for many reasons, but I wonder whether one of those reasons has ever been sorrow for our own sin or for the sin of our nation or of our world? I must confess to you that, while I am no stranger to the tears of grief, I can remember precious few times when I have actually wept over sin.³

George Buttrick, a famous preacher of the last century, wrote about this Beatitude that "Joy is not the opposite of pain, or in respite of pain, or despite pain: it is *because* of pain and

² John 19:34

³ The Bible offers much precedent for such weeping: the *Psalmist* wrote, "Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed" (Psalm 119:136); *Ezra* mourned and fasted because of the unfaithfulness of the exiles who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon (Ezra 10:6); *Jeremiah* wrote, "My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed" (Lamentations 2:11); *Paul* wrote, "For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ" (Philippians 3:18); God told *Ezekiel* to "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it" (Ezekiel 9:4).

through pain.”⁴ “Blessed are they,” Dr. Buttrick wrote, “that voluntarily share their neighbors’ pain. They could sidestep it: ‘It is not my business; I have enough troubles of my own.’”⁵

This a hard teaching. There’s no doubt about that. But this is how God relates to the evil in the world: by wading into it and turning right side up what evil has turned upside down. In the powerful theological novel, *The Shack*, God, speaking as The Trinity, tells Mackenzie, the suffering protagonist, “We’re not *justifying* all the evil in the world. We are *redeeming* it. . . . Judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right.”⁶

When Jesus told His “home synagogue” in Nazareth what He was setting out to do, He quoted the words of the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:18-19).

Isaiah went on to say that the Messiah would *comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair* (Isaiah 61:2-3).

It was in this sense that Jesus told us that “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*”⁷ The word “comfort” means “to add strength.” One of my favorite verses is 2 Corinthians 1:4, where Paul wrote, “*God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*” We pass it on.

It was Friday morning, February 4, 1898. Captain J.C. Arnold, Chief of Police for the City of Dallas, called his best friend, Dr. George W. Truett, who was Pastor of the First Baptist Church, to ask him to go hunting with him on a farm near Cleburne, a little south of Ft. Worth.⁸ Dr. Truett was not a hunter, knew little about guns, and didn’t want to go. Captain Arnold and Mrs. Truett prevailed upon him, though, and he agreed to the invitation at last. It was a fateful decision.

That afternoon, Dr. Truett accidentally discharged his shotgun, hitting Captain Arnold “on the right leg midway between the knee and ankle, tearing away a large piece of flesh and about four inches of the smaller bone.”⁹ Although they improvised a tourniquet, Captain Arnold’s loss of blood was very great, and he died the next evening.

Dr. Truett was enormously grieved over this accident. He knew that the wound had been accidental, but he couldn’t escape the terrible thought that his hands would be stained forever by the blood of his best friend. He told more than one person that he would not only stop preaching, but that he would leave the ministry altogether.

Truett didn’t sleep for the better part of a week. Finally, on the next Saturday night, Truett fell asleep quoting Psalm 31:15: “*My times are in your hands.*” As you may know, George Truett did

⁴ George Buttrick, “Exposition on Matthew,” *The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), vol. 7, p. 282.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁶ William Paul Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007), pp. 127, 169.

⁷ The phrase “will be comforted” is one word in Greek, and its root is “Paraclete,” a word that the New Testament uses for God’s Spirit (παρακλητος; John 14:16; 1 John 2:1).

⁸ We used to live near there, and our family has been camping in Cleburne.

⁹ *Dallas Daily Times Herald*, February 6, 1898, pp. 1-2.

eventually return to the pulpit, after which “Crowds flocked to hear him preach and multitudes yielded to the Christ whom he proclaimed with an intensity and vividness such as they had never heard.”¹⁰ Truett’s mourning was transformed into great power that brought many persons to Christ.

Ruth Bell Graham’s father was Dr. L. Nelson Bell, who was for twenty-five years the chief surgeon at the Tsingkiangpu General Hospital in China. Dr. Bell once told this story:

The operating room was gleaming with the multiplied perfections of modern equipment. Two surgeons, along with residents under training, stood in their pale green sterilized gowns and caps, their faces partially covered by germ-inhibiting masks.

Both the chief surgeon and his first assistant were men whose years of arduous training and experience had earned for them certification in their surgical specialty. The elder of the two had only recently been honored by his associates by being made chief-of-staff of the hospital, and just prior to that he had been the president of a society of distinguished surgeons.

Adjacent to the operating table there was a shining array of instruments, each designed for a specific purpose—clamps, clips, retractors, spreaders, scissors, sutures of various kinds—everything needed to facilitate the operation.

The patient, draped with sterile sheets and towels, was breathing deeply as the anesthetic began to take effect. Then the anesthetist looked up and nodded his head. The patient was ready.

The surgeon took up an instrument, but then laid it down. Then he took up another, but laid it down, too. He went from one to another, handling each of the various instruments. It was a strange pantomime. The surroundings were perfect, the patient desperately needed surgery, but the entire procedure consisted of meaningless motions. The surgeon made no incision. *He did not use the knife.*

After an hour, the patient was rolled from the operating suite to the recovery room. There he was cared for until fully recovered from the anesthetic. Then he was taken to his room where relatives waited anxiously to see him. But before long it was obvious that the patient was no better.

Hospital authorities were asked to investigate. The surgical staff met and discussed the case and also a number of similar ones that had occurred in the same hospital. Every step in the patients’ history was gone over again and again in the attempt to uncover the cause of repeated failures to cure these patients.

One night during a general staff meeting the mystery was again under discussion. The interns and residents were encouraged to join in the discussion. One young man ventured to speak up:

“Sir,” he said, “I have scrubbed in on a number of these unsuccessful operations and there is one thing I have repeatedly noticed; the surgeon does not use the knife. There is no incision,

¹⁰ Powhatan James, *George W. Truett: A Biography*, 1919. On September 25, 1926, George Truett preached the dedication sermon for the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia, where I once served as Pastor.

no bleeding, no going down to the source of the illness, nothing is removed; when the patient leaves the operating room, he is in exactly the same condition as when he went in.”¹¹

As many of us know, submitting to surgery is one of life’s most vulnerable experiences. Surgery creates pain, but it also brings healing. The scenario Dr. Bell described is silly, if not criminal, with respect to treatment of physical disease; but **do we not often do this very thing in our treatment of spiritual disease?** We build beautiful houses of worship; we prepare beautiful music; we offer engaging programs; but often we, too, leave this “operating room” in the same condition in which we came in.

The second Beatitude is really about surgery—spiritual surgery. The message of the second Beatitude is that you and I need to become so vulnerable to the pain of the world that our hearts are broken by it and our lives are invested in its relief; but a prior vulnerability is required. If you and I are to mourn as Jesus intends for us to mourn, we must begin with the vulnerability of the confession of our own sin and mourning over its continuing effects in the lives of others.

Our nature is to be eager to confess everyone else’s sin, but seldom our own. It’s generally pretty easy to imagine how the persons sitting in front and behind us, and those to either side, need this message, but the spiritual surgery of which Jesus speaks involves dealing with **our own sin.**¹²

In his famous Pentecost Sermon, Peter said, “Each of you must turn **from** your sins and turn to God . . .” (Acts 2:38, NLT). “*Blessed are those who mourn,*” Jesus said, “*for they will be comforted.*” May God give us hearts that are truly ready for such comfort.

¹¹ L. Nelson Bell, *Convictions to Live By* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 127-129.

¹² One of my favorite examples of this principle is found in a vignette I call “The Undragoning of Eustace Scrubb,” which I will attach with the online version of this sermon (C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Book 3 in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (NY: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 87-91).

The Undragoning of Eustace Scrubb¹

They went to the rocks and sat down looking out across the bay while the sky got paler and paler and the stars disappeared except for one very bright one low down and near the horizon.

“I won’t tell you how I became a—a dragon till I can tell the others and get it all over,” said Eustace. “By the way, I didn’t even know it *was* a dragon till I heard you all using the word when I turned up here the other morning. I want to tell you how I stopped being one.”

“Fire ahead,” said Edmund.

“Well, last night I was more miserable than ever. And that beastly arm-ring was hurting like anything—.”

“Is that all right now?”

Eustace laughed—a different laugh from any Edmund had heard him give before—and slipped the bracelet easily off his arm. “There it is,” he said, “and anyone who likes can have it as far as I’m concerned. Well, as I say, I was lying awake and wondering what on earth would become of me. And then—but, mind you, it may have been all a dream. I don’t know.”

“Go on,” said Edmund, with considerable patience.

“Well, anyway, I looked up and saw the very last thing I expected: a huge lion coming slowly towards me. And one queer thing was that there was no moon last night, but there was moonlight where the lion was. So it came nearer and nearer. I was terribly afraid of it. You may think that, being a dragon, I could have knocked any lion out easily enough. But it wasn’t that kind of fear. I wasn’t afraid of it eating me, I was just afraid of *it*—if you can understand. Well, it came closer up to me and looked straight into my eyes. And I shut my eyes tight. But that wasn’t any good because it told me to follow it.”

“You mean it spoke?”

“I don’t know. Now that you mention it, I don’t think it did. But it told me all the same. And I knew I’d have to do what it told me, so I got up and followed it. And it led me a long way into the mountains. And there was always this moonlight over and round the lion wherever we went. So at last we came to the top of a mountain I’d never seen before and on the top of this mountain there was a garden—trees and fruit and everything. In the middle of it there was a well.

“I knew it was a well because you could see the water bubbling up from the bottom of it: but it was a lot bigger than most wells—like a very big, round bath with marble steps going down into it. The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first. Mind you, I don’t know if he said any words out loud or not.

“I was just going to say that I couldn’t undress because I hadn’t any clothes on when I suddenly thought that dragons are snaky sorts of things and snakes can cast their skins. Oh, of course, thought I, that’s what the lion means. So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, like it does after an illness, or as if I was a banana. In a minute or two I just stepped out of it. I could see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling. So I started to go down into the well for my bathe.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Book 3 in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (NY: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 87-91.

“But just as I was going to put my foot into the water I looked down and saw that it was all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as it had been before. Oh, that’s all right, said I, it only means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I’ll have to get out of it too. So I scratched and tore again and this under skin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bathe.

“Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? For I was longing to bathe my leg. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good.

“Then the lion said—but I don’t know if it spoke—‘You will have to let me undress you.’ I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

“The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know—if you’ve ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it *is* such fun to see it coming away.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Edmund.

“Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me—I didn’t like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I’d no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I’d turned into a boy again. You’d think me simply phony if I told you how I felt about my own arms. I know they’ve no muscle and are pretty moldy compared with Caspian’s, but I was so glad to see them.

“After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me—.”

“Dressed you. With his paws?”

“Well, I don’t exactly remember that bit. But he did somehow or other: in new clothes—the same I’ve got on now, as a matter of fact. And then suddenly I was back here. Which is what makes me think it must have been a dream.”

“No. It wasn’t a dream,” said Edmund.

“Why not?”

“Well, there are the clothes, for one thing. And you have been—well, un-dragoned, for another.”

“What do you think it was, then?” asked Eustace.

“I think you’ve seen Aslan,” said Edmund.