

“Blessed Are Those Who Mourn”
Part Three in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5:4

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
Delivered at Oakland Christian Church, September 17, 2017

Paradox—a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense, and yet is true. Coming across a paradox not only produces surprising insight into the truth of things; sometimes a paradox produces, well, laughter. The comedian George Carlin made a riddle of the following paradox: “If you try to fail, and succeed—which have you done?” Another comedian, Steven White, said he had a dog named Go. When Go tried to run away one day, White yelled “Stop Go!”

Sometimes we see unintended paradoxes on road signs, like the sign reading, “No signs allowed.” Other times we find them in buildings, like the sign reading, “Anyone caught exiting this door will be asked to leave.” Church signs are particularly good when it comes to unintended paradoxes, like the sign reading: “The Prophecy Class has been cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances.”

But the type paradoxes that concern us this morning are those that convey profound wisdom. For example, the great philosopher Socrates said: “I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing.” A paradox worth pondering, don’t you think?

Like the other seven Beatitudes, the second Beatitude—“Ah! the happiness of those who mourn”—is a startling paradox. We think of happiness and mourning as polar opposites. We pursue happiness with every fiber of our beings, while doing everything we can to avoid situations that cause mourning. But in the second Beatitude, Jesus linked the two: happiness and mourning. Could there be a greater paradox?

Scholars who have spent their lives studying the teachings of Jesus are quick to point out that Jesus’ most distinctive sayings are marked by paradox and hyperbole. Because of this, the sayings of Jesus are “sayings that jolt.” Jesus typically couched his teachings in provocative parables and short, pithy sayings deliberately designed to jolt his hearers out of ordinary patterns of thought and action, forcing them to wrestle with new ideas. Time and time again—especially in the Sermon on the Mount—we encounter sayings of Jesus so characterized by hyperbole or paradox that they completely jolt us out of our normal ways of thinking about life; they shatter our neat and orderly worldview. As my colleague, Russell Pregeant, put it: Jesus’ sayings that jolt confound the “normal attempt to make rational sense of existence and plan for the future.”¹

Why is this so? Why did Jesus deliberately utter sayings that jolt? He did so because he knew that there is great spiritual danger when we become too set in our ways, too sure about the nature of reality; when we have everything all neatly categorized, all neatly organized inside

“intellectual cubbyholes” and “religious boxes” of our own making. For you see, when we arrogantly espouse absolutes and certainties, we can be sure that we have omitted some things that truly matter. We are finite beings; our perspectives are always partial. Consequently, we inevitably overlook things that won’t fit into our preconceived and finite categories. And because we are trusting in categories and cubby-holes and boxes of our own making, we can count on our gracious God to come along and shatter our finite worldview in order to open us to the greater realities we are ignoring. God will graciously but persistently nudge us to enlarge our worldview, resulting in us once again placing our faith, our trust, in God rather than in ourselves or other finite humans. For you see, at its core, spirituality is about continually expanding our souls—about being “Fat Souls,” to use a term my wife, Patricia, coined in her books and essays.² Fat Souls are constantly growing, constantly expanding beyond their current bounds.

We see Jesus deliberately engaging in the gracious, soul-expanding work of God throughout the Sermon on the Mount—shattering people’s narrow worldviews, their limited way of thinking about life, their false certainties—freeing them from shackles of their own making so that they can grow spiritually. So, let’s get “up close and personal” as we examine this startling paradox: blessed are those who mourn.

Although mourning resulting from the loss of a loved one is included in this Beatitude, in the Bible mourning is a much broader concept. For the biblical writers, mourning is caused by an awareness of sin, suffering, and evil in the world. Let’s explore this spiritual concept by looking at some specific examples.

In Psalm 51:3, King David mourned his own sins when he wrote the poignant sentence: “My sin is ever before me.” Jesus would have responded to him: “Blessed are those who mourn for their own sins.” Sadly, many people are content to live an unexamined life; they are either unaware of their own sins, or they consider their sins to be trivial matters. They are content to remain Thin Souls. But the mourners depicted in the second Beatitude are those who perceive God grieving in holy love over their sins, and in response, they grieve alongside God. They are Fat Souls becoming fatter.

Another way we can express the meaning of this Beatitude is: “Blessed are those who voluntarily share their neighbors’ pain.” Sadly, many people ignore the sorrow and suffering of others, pretending it does not exist. They turn a blind eye to the suffering of those who lack adequate food and shelter, health care and education. They discount those who are unemployed or underemployed, those who suffer racial or ethnic discrimination.

What a different attitude Jesus highlighted in this Beatitude! “Blessed are those who mourn the consequences of sin in the world.” The disciples of Jesus are those who “expose themselves to the world’s misery,” and mourn because of it.³ Richard Rohr described Jesus’ disciples as “those who can enter into solidarity with the pain of the world and not try to extract themselves from it.” He also suggested that this is one of the reasons Jesus remarked, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom.” The rich tend to spend their lives “trying to

make tears unnecessary.”⁴ This is the way of Thin Souls. In sharp contrast, disciples of Jesus perceive God grieving in holy love over the consequences of sin in the world, and in response, they grieve alongside God. They are Fat Souls becoming fatter.

But there is more to this Beatitude than mourning, more than grieving alongside God because of the sin, suffering, and evil in the world. Each of the eight Beatitudes ends with a glorious promise. The promise in the first and the eighth Beatitudes is: “for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven,” that is, they experience the redemptive activity of God in their lives. The second through seventh Beatitudes offer specific examples of what it means to experience God’s redemptive activity in one’s life. The promise of the second Beatitude is: “for they will be comforted.”

The Greek word used here in Matthew for “to comfort,” *parakaleō*, literally means “to call to the side of.” What this means is that our mourning summons God’s Spirit to our side to render aid because our mourning is in harmony with God’s own nature. Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as The Comforter, the One who would be called to the disciples’ side after Jesus was no longer with them.

Our English word “comfort” is derived from Latin roots—*con* and *fortis*—which literally mean “with strength.” Thus, the divine comfort of which this Beatitude speaks depicts both soothing tenderness and reinforcement or strengthening. We need both when we mourn.

Mourning for our sins and for the sins and suffering of the world is one of the distinctive marks of a disciple. But the mourning of discipleship is counter-balanced by an amazing truth: One aspect of God’s redemptive activity in our lives is the divine work of comforting all those who mourn. Thus, as disciples of Jesus, we are indeed most blessed.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ Russell Pregeant, *Encounter with the New Testament: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 69.

² See especially Patricia Adams Farmer, *Fat Soul: A Philosophy of S-I-Z-E* (Shiprock Press, 2016).

³ “Matthew” in *The Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 7* (Abingdon Press, 1959) 281.

⁴ Richard Rohr with John Feister, *Jesus’ Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount* (Cincinnati, Franciscan Media, 1996) 133.