

Blessed Are the Mournful and the Meek
Romans 7:21-25 and Matthew 5:4-5
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In his book *Everything Belongs*, Franciscan priest Richard Rohr opens the book with a short reflection he calls "Inherent Unmarketability." Here's what he says:

How do you make attractive that which is not?
How do you sell emptiness, vulnerability, and nonsuccess?
How do you talk descent when everything is about ascent?
How can you possibly market letting-go in a capitalist culture?
How do you present Jesus to a Promethean mind?
How do you talk about dying to a church trying to appear perfect?

This is not going to work
(admitting this might be my first step).

Descent is the language of spirituality which is precisely what makes it so contrary to our natural inclinations and so nonsensical to a culture that is founded upon climbing the proverbial ladder. Last week we began our descent with the first Beatitude: Blessed are the poor in spirit. This week we continue our descent, as we come to the second and third Beatitudes: Blessed are those who mourn and blessed are the meek.

Once we have come face to face with our spiritual poverty, as we did a week ago with the first Beatitude, we cannot help but mourn over our pitiful condition. As I confront God and God's holiness, and contemplate the life I am meant to live, I realize my absolute helplessness and hopelessness. I discover the truth about myself and that inevitably leads me to a sacred sorrow. I grieve for what I am that I shouldn't be and I grieve for what I am not that I should be and wish I were, just as Paul described in his letter to the Romans.

It is a spiritual mourning that Jesus speaks of in this Beatitude, not the grief that naturally comes to all of us over the loss of someone we love. It is quite possible for someone to grieve many times over at the loss of family members and friends but to never experience what it is to grieve over one's sin and what that sin costs God.

There are numerous examples in scripture of people who knew the truth about themselves, that is, they were poor in spirit, and as a result they were broken-hearted about their sinfulness. Think of the tax collector of Jesus' parable in Luke 18 who didn't even dare turn his face heavenward, but could only beat his chest and say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (v. 13) Or, the woman of Luke 7 who washed Jesus' feet with her tears—tears that were shed over the enormity and gravity of her sins. These stories beg the question: have you ever shed tears over your sins?

This spiritual mourning springs from a tender conscience, from a broken heart and contrite spirit. It is a godly sorrow over our rebellion against God and our hostility to God's will. It is grounded in the agonizing realization that it was *my* sins that nailed Jesus to Calvary. I am responsible.

The verb tense makes it clear that this is not a mourning that is confined to the initial experience of conviction and contrition. The Beatitude doesn't say, "blessed are those who have mourned" but "those who mourn"—meaning, a present and continuous action. The follower of Jesus has much to mourn over. The sins which he commits—both of omission and commission—are a sense of daily grief if he allows his conscience to remain tender and open. An ever-deepening discovery of the depravity of our nature, the idols of our hearts, the sea of darkness and evil and corruption within deeply affects us. Our consciousness of the well-spring of unbelief, the swelling of pride, the coldness of our love and the paucity of our fruit lead us to cry with Paul, "O wretched man that I am."

The closer we live to God, the more we will mourn over all that dishonors God. Certainly that begins with our own sin, but it is not limited that. With the psalmist we will say, "Horror has taken hold on me because of the wicked that forsake [God's] law," (Ps. 119:53) and with Jeremiah, "My soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and my eyes shall weep sore and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock is carried away captive." (13:17) Perhaps no better image captures the sorrow over the sins of the world than Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, over the city's impending destruction because of the Jews' blindness and hardness of heart. And, of course, included in our mourning on behalf of the world is our sympathetic grieving over others' suffering.

The good news for those who mourn is that when the Holy Spirit produces in our hearts a godly sorrow for sin, God does not leave us there but brings us to look away from the sin and look instead to the Lamb of God who takes away the

sin—and thereby, we are comforted. True, ultimate comfort will not be found in wallowing in our wretchedness or in self-help schemes, but in Christ and Christ alone. As we said in our sermon series on the Ten Commandments, the purpose of the law is to drive us to Christ and it does that by showing us our need of Christ. Likewise, the Beatitudes lead us to recognize our desperate poverty and to mourn over it, which brings us straight to the cross and Christ’s love for us.

The comfort Jesus is offering us here is not a saccharine, sentimental thing. The word translated comfort literally means “strengthened by being with.” Jesus is saying that he’s not just going to wipe away our tears; he himself is going to reinforce our hearts with his presence. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

There is one more rung of descent that we are called to step down, and as we approach it, it must be said that with every step the Beatitudes become more searching and more humbling. There is a significant shift that occurs with the third Beatitude, “Blessed are the meek.” Both of the first two are primarily directed towards the relationship between self and God, but in this beatitude, meekness is a characteristic which involves our stance before God but also our stance with our fellow human beings.

There is a lot of misunderstanding about what it means to be meek, so let’s start with what it doesn’t mean. First, meekness, just like all the other characteristics named in the Beatitudes is not referring to a personality trait. It’s not a natural quality but a spiritual quality that Jesus is holding up as blessed, and all disciples—regardless of their natural dispositions—are meant to be like this. So, clearly meekness does not mean being naturally easy-going. It’s not to be equated with niceness or with avoiding conflict in order to get along. It certainly is not the same thing as weakness, as we’ll soon see. Finally, meekness is not merely a matter of outward manner but, more importantly, of inward spirit.

It might be summed up this way: meekness is a true view of oneself which is then expressed in one’s relationships with others. Now, follow the logical progression here: when we have a true view of ourselves in terms of how spiritually destitute we are, that leads us to mourn for our sinfulness which then leads us to see that we can in no way be prideful. We have nothing of our own merit upon which to stand. We are beggars, and all that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. Therefore, humility is the hallmark of the meek. The meek do not demand anything for themselves, for their position, privileges, possessions or status. They do not assert their rights. They assume a position of lowliness, the

same lowliness that led Christ to leave his place at God's side to take on human flesh. Being meek is a by-product of self-emptying and self-humiliation.

Clearly, meekness is the antithesis to pride, stubbornness, vengefulness, and fierceness. It is the opposite of self-will toward God and ill-will toward our fellow human beings. But, having said all that, we still have not gone far enough. The person who is meek is not even sensitive about himself. He is not always watching out for his own interests. She is not always on the defensive, trying to protect her ego, because she realizes there is nothing worth defending. In the words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "to be meek means that you have finished with yourself altogether, and you come to see you have no rights... at all. You come to realize that nobody can harm you. When a man truly sees himself, he knows nobody can say anything about him that is too bad. You need not worry about what men may say or do; you know you deserve it all and more. The man who is truly meek is the one who is amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do." (p. 57-8, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*)

If there has been **any** thought thus far that Jesus' sermon is something we can implement on our own, surely this erases all such delusions. Jesus is once again going straight for the heart, for the center from which we live our lives. The ego that runs the show is a wounded, fragile, fearful master that has convinced us we must look out for #1, that it is up to us to defend ourselves and our interests. It takes into our own hands what is better let in God's: we are to leave everything—ourselves, our rights, our cause, our whole future—to God and never more so than when we suffer unjustly. How different from the enormous energy we usually expend bemoaning every situation, big and small, that seems "unfair" to us.

The first three Beatitudes strike at the aggressive attitudes of life. They show God's invasion of us, taking away our self-sufficiency and pride and control, so that we can be made ready for the most amazing offensive of love the world has ever seen. God disarms us in order to put entirely new weapons in our hands. Unless these first three Beatitudes become actual, the rest of the Sermon on the Mount becomes impossible. The rub is not at the place of turning the other cheek; the rub is at the place of letting go of the ego-driven self.

As I said last week, this is not for the faint of heart. In fact, it's fair to ask, why would anyone choose to lose themselves in this way? If you want to know true blessedness, true happiness, Jesus says it's the only way. It is the meek who will inherit the earth, according to Jesus, and actually, they already have inherited

the earth because only the meek man or woman is truly, deeply already content. It is the person who has nothing who has everything including life itself.

And so we hear Jesus saying to us (in the words of Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints*, p. 186):

Blessed are those no one else notices. The *Accidental Saints*, kids who sit alone at middle-school

lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night shift street sweepers.

Blessed are the losers and the babies and the part of ourselves that are so small, that they don't want to make eye contact with a world that loves only winners.

Blessed are the forgotten.

Blessed are the closeted.

Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.

Blessed are the meek. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Amen.