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Truths to Live By: Good Grief

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TEXT: Matthew 5:4 (ESV)

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Today is Father's Day, a time to honor and thank dads who have loved us, protected us, and provided for us in so many ways. And one of the things a good father typically provides his children is with some wisdom, truths that can make our lives work a bit better. My dad taught me things like hard work never hurt anyone. "Steve, you won't get anywhere without it." Or, "Always be honest because integrity matters." "Don't buy what you can't afford. Live within your means" was a favorite. But the best was, "Believe in Jesus." And those truths have all served me well. I imagine your father passed along truths like that to you.

Today we have a truth from our Heavenly Father revealed to us through His son, Jesus Christ. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." This truth sounds a bit odd to our ears, doesn't it? "Happy are those who are sad." That doesn't make sense. There are a number of things over which people in our world naturally mourn. They mourn over loss, the loss of loved ones, marriages, friendships, loss of material things, or loss of a job. People mourn over unfulfilled dreams, things they wish they'd done. People mourn over things that they're lacking, like money or good health, or mourn over failures or the loss of a sense of purpose. So is Jesus saying that everybody experiencing this kind of thing is blessed by God and will be comforted? No.

You see, it's important that we remember that each of these beatitudes are truths meant for citizens of the Kingdom of God—those who have tasted God's grace through faith in

Christ. But it is true, if you believe in Jesus, you will find comfort in His presence as you call upon him. During those times, he will come. So, is Jesus saying Kingdom citizens are to take on a more melancholic, sorrowful, sourpuss disposition in this world? No, I don't think so. After all, Jesus did say he came to give us his joy to the full. Is Jesus simply teaching here that the Christian life is not all joy and laughter and bliss? That's true. Jesus never promised his followers exemption from hardships that cause mourning in our lives. In fact, he himself is known to have wept and suffered all kinds of hostility and hurt and rejection and disappointment and loss, which can bring about mourning and grief. So, it is true that grieving and mourning are a part of living in this broken world for everyone. I'm sure Jesus wants us to know that, but that's not the main truth in this statement he gives.

Remember, the Beatitudes are spiritual in nature. They all have reference to a spiritual condition and to a spiritual attitude, being commended to those who are citizens of God's kingdom through faith in Christ. And that being blessed describes a state of well-being in relationship to God, standing approved by Him, enjoying the fullness of life that flows from an ongoing relationship with him because there's no greater joy and blessedness than this. So when Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," he's talking in spiritual terms, like the first Beatitude, when he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," those who recognize and admit their dependence on God's grace in life.

Today's Beatitude is about mourning, then over sin. And what is sin? Sin is rebellion against God, breaking the boundaries he has set for us, insisting on our own way. It's also described as falling short of the mark of God's purposes for my life. It's also an inner condition of being turned in on myself with me at the center, always looking out for number one, it wrecks my relationship with God and other people and myself. It's a very serious thing, a deadly thing. And Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn over this."

Blessed are those who mourn over, first of all, the sin and evil around us in our world. They grieve over the sins of others and the consequences it brings. They know this conduct is against God's original intentions. And what breaks God's heart breaks their hearts and makes them long all the more for His will to be done. We see that in Jesus, who was described by the Prophet Isaiah as a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. Grief over what? Grief over sinfulness. He wept over the sins of others and the bitter

consequences of the impenitent who would not receive Him. "Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he mourned, "how I have longed to gather your children to myself like a hen gathers her brood. But you would not come." And Jesus wept at the grave of His friend Lazarus, as He witnessed the consequences of sin, which is death.

So we too, as God's people in Christ, should walk in those footsteps, perhaps grieve over the sin and evil in this world and its consequences, refusing to become indifferent and callous towards it. Like the psalmist who said to God, "My eyes shed streams of tears because men don't keep your law." Or the Apostle Paul, who shed tears, wrote over the false teachers who were troubling the churches of his day, living as enemies of the cross, leading members away from the truth of the gospel to their destruction. He grieved over sin in the church. Well, Kingdom citizens grieve over sin. They also pray for God's will to be done, and they speak against it and work against sin. And they grieve over those who reject and refuse God. And they also love and serve others who are suffering the consequences of their own sin or the consequences of living in a sinful, broken world that has caused pain and injustice in their lives.

Jesus said, "Those who mourn over the sins of the world shall be comforted." How is that? Well, they will be comforted in the here and now with the presence and love of the Holy Spirit of God working in them. He is called the Comforter by Jesus in the Gospel of John. He strengthens, enlightens, and empowers believers and comforts them each day and keeps them going for Jesus Christ as we call upon Him."

And there is also a coming future comfort that gives us comfort now, a comfort that awaits Kingdom people that I'm going to talk about at the end of this message. But let's go on. Christian mourning is not only over the sins of others and the world in general, but it's also grieving over one's own sins. You see, in Jesus Christ, believers are both saints and sinners saved by Christ, but still constantly sinning. The old Adam is still there, wanting to have his selfish way. And as I stand before God in His holiness and contemplate the life I am to live according to His Word and the life I'm actually living, it makes me mourn. Recognizing it and mourning over it moves one to repent and confess it to God with a penitent heart. For as Paul states, "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret." Being sincerely penitent for my sinful thoughts, words, and actions, I turn to Him, humbly asking for His forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal so that I might be restored and walk in His ways to the glory of His name.

I'm reminded of Ezra in the Old Testament who wept and cast himself down before the Temple of God, confessing his sins and the sins of Israel, pleading for mercy. Or the apostle Paul, who sorrowfully asked this question after describing his tendency to not do the things he wanted to do for God and always doing the things he didn't want himself to do: "Who will save me, wretched man that I am?" That sounds penitent. He's penitent for his sinfulness. We know he also chastised the Christian congregation in the city of Corinth who were tolerating some very sinful behavior in their church. And he said, "And you are arrogant about this. Ought you not rather to mourn?" That's his counsel.

All this in mind leads me to ask myself and you as well, a personal question: Do I mourn my sin? And when was the last time you mourned over your sinfulness? Christian pastor and author John Stott wrote a while back something that captured my attention. He said, "I fear that we evangelical Christians, by making much of grace, thereby make light of sin. There's not enough sorrow for sin among us." What do you think? Is Stott right in his assessment? Have we come to the place where we ignore Paul's words of caution to the Christians in Rome after describing the grace of God? "What then shall we say? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!" Have we, you and I, become presumptuous before our holy and pure God, so desensitized to sin and its serious nature that it no longer troubles us within? Have we lost sight of God's holiness and our lack thereof, and forgotten His expectations of Kingdom people to live holy lives before Him and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness? As Luther teaches us, because if that's become true of us, watch out. We're treading on dangerous, deadly ground. And it's time to turn around to God with deep contrition, kneeling before Him, asking for His grace and mercy and the renewal of our spirits so that we may follow Him more faithfully to the glory of His holy name.

Someone might wonder, "It's so easy to get off track on this. How can I avoid that kind of thing happening in my life?" Like John Stott describes. The great experts in the life of the Spirit have always recommended daily self-examination. They say it's a good thing for every person to pause at the end of the day and meditate upon himself or herself, to run quickly over his or her life, asking the Holy Spirit to show them the moments of this day when they blew it and broke God's heart. Or to ask, "What have I done, said, or thought that or behaved with respect to others that broke God's heart?" It's humbling, and it brings you to some grieving about yourself. Why? Why am I so irritable or

frustrated? Why am I so bad-tempered or unkind or jealous and envious? There, I did it again. Why am I unable to control this? I don't want to be like that. And I know God doesn't want me to be like that. It's like there's this battle in me. I sin again. And I need forgiveness, a fresh start.

Then you humbly confess and ask God to forgive you and renew a right spirit within you so that you can walk in His ways. Then what? You listen now to our Savior's promise, for you shall be comforted. If you're troubled over your sins, your spiritual failures, your lack of faith and love, about the way you've blown it, and you're dismayed at your tendencies to give in to old sinful habits, try as you may, you turn to God. And you shall be comforted, comforted with His forgiveness, which came at great cost to Him. The Spirit points you to Christ's atoning sacrifice of Himself at the cross and how He took your sins upon Himself and suffered the punishment that you and I deserved. That cross is our comfort as Christians, for at the cross, we're reminded of God's gracious love for us and His forgiveness. And we're told, "You're forgiven. God still loves you." And that is comforting. As H.G. Spafford testified in his great hymn: "My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part, but the whole, Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!" And it is well with my soul. The greatest comfort, relief, and joy of all for believers to experience is to go to God and receive His grace and forgiveness, to open His Word and read again and again the good news that God loves you so much that He gave His Son to die for you. Your sins are forgiven. He still loves you. And as you move forward with your life to serve Him, you are never alone or on your own. For you have the Holy Spirit in you to comfort and help you, to keep you on God's path, striving to walk in His ways to His glory. It can change a person's life, that kind of comfort.

Dr. Haddon Robinson, in his book "What Jesus Said About Successful Living," tells a beautiful little story that illustrates this truth about comfort. Paderewski, the great Polish pianist and composer, had a young woman in training with him. She was playing in a recital, and in the middle of her piece, she forgot the music. It sounded as if she was playing bedsprings as she hit one wrong note after another. She stumbled through it, but at the end, she just sat at that piano and wept. Paderewski went over and kissed her on the cheek. He hugged and comforted her. It wasn't that Paderewski no longer cared about her playing correctly. He knew that comforting this young girl in her failure would motivate her to try again. But her frustration was a sign that shed light on

her need for more study. And because of his comfort, she wanted more than ever now to please him and become a brilliant concert pianist.

This promise of comfort, by the way, for those who mourn over sin, has a beautiful future aspect to it that comforts us now and gives us hope. Because while we mourn over the present sufferings and sin around us and within us, we're comforted with the assurance that they are not forever. They do not compare with the glory that shall be revealed at the end of time when Christ returns. For when He returns, sin shall be banished from the earth. There will be a new Heaven and a new Earth where only God's righteousness dwells among us. And God shall wipe away every tear, and death shall be no more. And neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. For the former things will have passed away, and all will be well. Perfectly well, as we sing together, "It is well with my soul. It is well, it is well with my soul."

So that's Christ's word of truth, hope, and comfort for those of us trusting in Jesus as Savior and Lord but still stumbling along life's way, who mourn the reality of sin like a weight on the neck of the world and longingly pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven." Here's the truth to build your life on: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Let's pray. We thank You, Lord, for Your holy truth. And we know that as we walk in that truth, it has the ability to comfort us and set us free. May we be mourners turning to You constantly for forgiveness and rejoicing in all that Christ Jesus has done for us. Amen.