

THE PASTOR'S PEN



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Sorrow in Joyful Times

Next Sunday is Easter, which should be the most celebrated day in every Christian's calendar. Christmas is all well and good, and our own birthdays are important, but on Easter we celebrate something even grander and more wonderful than those days. Easter is a celebration of the resurrection power of Jesus and what that means for all who trust in him— forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Wow! This should be the most celebrated day in every Christian's calendar.

But sometimes it isn't. Speaking personally, Easter is an extremely bittersweet holiday. You see, my mother had a massive heart attack and died unexpectedly, suddenly the day before Easter in 2003. I remember going to church that Easter, the very next day, and seeing everyone smiling and cheerful and wondering why— didn't they know that I just suffered such an overwhelming loss? How could they be so happy when I was in such pain? Since then, every Easter is tinged with a measure of sadness for me.

I know I'm not alone in this. Perhaps it isn't Easter, but there are times when all the world around us seems to be going along merrily and happily, but we are struggling just to survive. Or there are times when we expect celebration, but a turn of events leaves us in mourning. I think of all those mothers-to-be whose joy turned to sorrow with a miscarriage or a stillbirth. I think of all those who have seen a loved-one suffer, or have suffered themselves, from cancer or other illnesses— suffering day-in and day-out while others go about their lives.

If I'm describing you, too, then I'm sure you have a way to get through these kinds of days. But let me share with you what helps me. I draw profound comfort from a small, often overlooked— and even more misunderstood— verse in Matthew 5. In Matthew 5:4 Jesus says, "blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." God promises comfort to the mournful.

That verse is often overlooked. You see, it's at the beginning of Jesus famous Sermon on the Mount. And in that sermon Jesus gives some pretty radical, pretty amazing teachings. He tells us about the true nature of sin and about our need for a real relationship with God (instead of thinking we can work our way into heaven with "good works"). He tells his followers how they are supposed to conduct themselves with others, with each other, and with God. There is some pretty powerful stuff in that sermon. And so those few words in that short verse can be overshadowed, overlooked.

What's more, when we do pay attention to Matthew 5:4, we often misunderstand it. We think that the blessings Jesus mentions here are all about the future— that the comfort that those who mourn will receive is a future comfort but for now they must just sit in their tears and sorrow. I don't think that's what Jesus meant.

Instead, I think that these words are meant to provide encouragement now— right now— for those who mourn. They are the proof that those who mourn aren't alone, but that God takes note of their broken hearts. He is aware of what has hurt them— hurt us— and joins in our sorrow.

You see, we don't worship a God who keeps his distance from our pain. Christian, we worship a God who enters into our sorrows, meets us there, and cries with us.

When I lost my mother, as I have mourned the other pains that life in a fallen world has brought my way, I remember that Jesus suffers with me. He not only knows *that* I hurt, he knows *how* I hurt because he *shares* my hurt. And that is real comfort now, a real blessing now, for those who mourn.

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Help Me Help You!

It's true confession time: over the last four months I've been breaking the rules. And I'm not even sorry about it—zero contrition and remorse. To make matters worse (if they could be!), how I've been breaking the rules is directly related to my ministry at our church, and even involves you.

I was taught over and over and over again by my professors at Trinity to not experiment from the pulpit. Sunday morning isn't a time for trying new things, but for doing what you know works they said. If you want to try new things, try them some other time. But that's not what I've been doing lately. I have been experimenting with new things from our pulpit. The audacity!

In case you didn't notice, ever since we finished Acts back in October I have been preaching a different kind of sermon, what is known as a topical sermon. This is different from what I had been doing, with any regularity, for the previous 4 years of my preaching experience. Topical sermons are those that are organized around a topic (or a series of topics). Topical sermons will draw from a number of different passages of Scripture that all address the topic being discussed. These are different from exegetical sermons, which are sermons organized around a particular passage of Scripture. Exegetical sermons may

A Look Ahead

- Passover Seder – Good Friday (April 3rd) @ 5:30pm at Grace Bible Church
- Easter Breakfast & Program – 4/5 @ 9am
- Men's Breakfast 4/19 @ 8:30am

Are there other important dates to include?
Let me know & they'll be in the next edition!

reference more than one passage from the Bible, but have one primary passage in particular.

Each kind of sermon has its own merits, strengths, and weaknesses. I won't bore you with the details, but generally exegetical sermons are easier to preach whereas topical sermons are generally easier to apply. But because exegetical sermons are easier preaching, they are what most pastors preach when they first get out of seminary. Pastors like me.

However, like most people in their various occupations I want to be better today than I was yesterday, and better tomorrow than I am today. That means I want to grow as a preacher. Part of that growth is learning how to preach topical sermons and stay faithful to Scripture as I do so.

And that's where I broke the rules.

For the last five months, and likely for another five months or so, I have been preaching topical sermons. It is hard. And preparing topical sermons is hard—harder than I thought it would be. But I hope I'm growing in it. And that's where you come in! Will you help me grow as a preacher?

I don't just want you to be "guinea pigs" that receive my experiments with preaching. Instead, would you be my partner? If a particular sermon is hard to follow or didn't make sense, would you tell me so? If you think I misunderstood a particular passage of Scripture, would you say so? If you aren't comfortable telling me these things, then would you share your thoughts on my sermons with Ron or Terry? They are the men that have been entrusted with leading me, and our church, in spiritual matters— including overseeing the preaching of the Word.

Finally, please pray for me as I preach. I need God's wisdom and guidance in order to feed his sheep well; that means each of my sermons must be saturated in prayer. Please help me with this, too!

With your prayers and feedback I know that our church will be better ministered to, will better hear the Word, and will be better equipped to obey the Word. Let's join together to make our Sunday Morning services— preaching and all— a greater blessing, all for the greater glory of our good God.