

Facing Death with Certainty

Matthew 5:3-6

There's an old church in Rome called the Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini. That church was commissioned in 1626. And beneath that church is a crypt where a Capuchin friars came to pray down in the crypt. It became accustomed to bury the friars when they died underneath the church. And now that crypt, over the centuries, has become really an ossuary, a, a, bone box containing the exposed bones of more than 4000 of those monks. Their bones and skulls were arranged like some kind of macabre piece of artwork. But intentionally so, to help the living contemplate death.

There's a plaque displayed prominently in one of the chapels there written in three languages. It's known as a momentomoria, a note from the dead. It's a warning to the living that they should always be mindful about the inevitability of death. And that plaque reads, "What you are now we once were. What we are now you shall be." Reminders like that sound rather

uncouth to modern ears. But here in our country it used to be that cemeteries were in church yards. Something very heathy about that.

People both young and old coming to church, going from church every Sunday. They had to pass by those gravestones. They had to see the names of dead relatives. Older people that had passed, friends, people they knew and loved now having departed this earth and their bodies lying buried there in the ground. Today, we live in an age that tries to ignore death as much as possible. All our messaging about health and public health and safety and promises of science to cure all of our diseases and vaccinate us from every scrouge and plague. All the noise drowns out the sober contemplation of death as we pursue our fun.

But for all of our focus on health and healthy living and eating right and exercising daily and advances in medicine, and all the hopes of science, we can never escape the stubborn fact that death is the end of all the living. The human death rate remains fixed at 100 percent. Save one. Which is why Solomon

said 3000 years ago, "Death is the end of all humanity and the living should take it to heart."

Death is a certainty. The Bible says in Hebrews 9:27, "It's appointed for us to die once and after this comes judgment." So if we will consider our eternal future now, it'll give us wisdom about how to live now and how to face death when it comes.

It is truly healthy to ask yourself now, "What's gonna happen to me when I die? What will I say to God when I stand before him and face his judgment? When he calls upon me to give an account for this life that he's given me to steward? What judgment will God make about me? What's the honest truth about me? Saint or sinner? Heaven or hell? What do I know about myself and what does God know even more fully than I know?"

As we think about that day when we will all stand before our Creator and law giver and judge, facing the inevitability of death, do we face it in denial and ignoring it, which is fear of death. Or do we face it with hope and great anticipation knowing that God will receive us into his presence? So the way to face

the inevitability of death in an attitude and a posture of confident hope is to enter through the narrow way that Jesus spoke of at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.

He said this, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life and those who find it are few." So many people today, whether they are religious or irreligious, they have entered through the wide gate of life. It's so wide they haven't even noticed that they passed through.

They are walking down the wide road to destruction like cattle heading to a slaughterhouse. And like the unreasoning beasts, they're blissfully unaware of what awaits them on the other side of the curtain. It was C.S. Lewis who said, "Indeed the safest road, road to hell is the gradual one. The gentle slope soft under foot without sudden turnings, without milestones without signposts." He's right. The wide gate and the broad road are so comfortable, so easy, no real demands. Nothing to change. Nothing required.

But at the end of that broad road, they wind up at the throne of judgment where the sentence is passed of eternal death for sins. And there are some who, by the grace of God, are awakened from their slumber. They become aware of the grave danger that they're in and they come to that narrow gate, they pass through it. They squeeze through it. They walk that hard narrow way.

But that doesn't matter to them. They are undeterred. They've been awakened to the danger and so they hurry to that narrow gate. And they squeeze themselves through it and they strive to walk to that hard road. Why is that? Why would they live life that way? Because they know it leads to life.

The gate stands at the entrance to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The section that we call the Beatitudes right there at the beginning of the sermon. And the first few verses of that sermon, Matthew 5:3 to 6, Jesus said this, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the

meeK, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

In other words, happy are the poor, happy are those who are mourning. Happy are the meek, hungry, the thirsty. You go on in the Beatitudes, there are a number of paradoxical sounding statement just like that. Jesus tells us plainly it will cost everything to embrace the life that he offers. But in the end, for those who do embrace that, they are the ones who are happy. You can walk through that narrow gate that Jesus has opened for you, and you can walk on that narrow hard road that leads to eternal life.

And I’m going to give you the first four steps through that gate. Number one, step number one is to confess your spiritual bankruptcy. Jesus said there in Matthew 5:3, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Supreme happiness comes to those who recognize that they are poor in spirit. That word for poor refers to absolute destitution, total bankruptcy. It’s a recognition that you have absolutely nothing in the spiritual realm, nothing spiritually that you can offer

to God. Nothing in you that makes you acceptable before God. And so in that sense, we've got to admit we're spiritual beggars. We don't have two spiritual pennies to rub together to offer God so we can get in through the gate.

Many people I talk to are quite confident they'll go to heaven when they die. It doesn't seem to bother them at all that there's no evidence in their life that they love God, that they love or obey his word. They have no interest in being with God's people and serving others over themselves. Still, they believe, in spite of all evidence, that they're fine when they die.

Because I'm a good person. Others have hurt me, but I've lived a good life. I've done right by others. I've been religious. I go to church. I give money. I serve on boards, committees. I'm really involved in the community. An increasing number of people I talk to these days seem to be completely uninterested in questions about heaven, questions about life after death. They don't care whether they're righteous or unrighteous or anything.

For them, life is good enough. They're entertained enough. They're enjoying their own version of heaven on earth. They're choosing their own reality. They choose to ignore questions about the future, about what will happen when they die. Because all that's going to come to a crashing halt when that heart attack comes, when that stroke comes.

So many, though, have accepted the materialistic, empiricist lie that all that exists is atoms. Everything that exists is atoms. So there's nothing beyond the grave. People are only interested in creating their own heaven on earth, rummaging around this earth to satisfy physical pleasures, passions, satisfy curiosities, pursue interests. People like that refuse to think deeply. They refuse to recognize that material reality is insufficient to explain immaterial realities.

Atoms can't explain our sense of justice. Atoms can't explain our sense of right and wrong, good and evil, which we use every day. Atoms, material things are an insufficient reason or cause of invisible immaterial realities. Things like logic. The reality of numbers. Mathematical relationship between numbers that govern the physical universe. Atoms can't explain



things like that. They can't explain intangible virtues like duty, responsibility, courage, truth, aesthetics, beauty, goodness.

For those who, on the other hand, admit spiritual realities, but in pride they refuse to admit their own poverty of spirit. These are the religious people. They go to church, but they refuse to confess their sins. The Bible is clear. "There is no one who is good. There is no one who seeks after God. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23.

If we think that my good deeds outweigh my bad deeds, well, the Bible's got us there in Isaiah 64:6, "All our righteous deeds," even the best that we have to offer, "are like a filthy garment." It's like taking a smelly old gym shirt and offering that to God and saying, be pleased with this. Jesus said, No. The first step to entering the narrow gate is confessing your spiritual bankruptcy, to acknowledge that you have nothing, that you are nothing.

And when you do that, it turns out you gain everything. They're the ones who will possess the kingdom of heaven. Confessing your spiritual poverty leads to a second step: to mourn over your spiritual condition. Jesus said in Matthew 5:4, "Blesses are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." And the mourning he's talking about there, or the sorrow, is mourning over personal sin. It's sorrow over the fact of sin. I mourn over the consequences of sin and the final consequences of an eternal judgment in hell.

Jesus said if you're gonna enter the narrow gate, you enter mourning over your sin. Why is that? Why is that necessary? Because your sin has separated you from a holy God and that's got to bother you. Because God is at the end of that road. He's the one we pursue. We're to "be holy as God is holy," 1 Peter 1:16. We're to "be perfect as God is perfect," Matthew 5:48.

Our sins have separated us from God and left us in a helpless condition. We're condemned before him. So no amount of works, good works can bridge that gap. Nothing we do can erase the guilt of our sin. None of our works can undo the offense of violating God's holiness, of breaking his law.

The only way you can enter through that narrow gate is by dropping all the sin. By dropping all your own ambition and pride and self-centeredness and self-seeking. You must repent. The gate is so narrow, so compressed, so confined that if you're trying to carry all your sin through that gate, you're not gonna get in. The way's too narrow. When you recognize your spiritual bankruptcy, it leads to sorrow and sadness because you realize that the one you want, God, will not accept you in your sin.

And that sense of utter spiritual destitution, it grips your conscience. It causes you even psychological pain. James 4:9 portrays it vividly as weeping, even howling over our guilt. Those who mourn over their sins against a holy God, those are the people who give true evidence of the work of God in them. It's only by the work of God that you can mourn over it and have true remorse seeing what God you've offended. That's called the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

And it's what produces the confession. It's what produces the sorrow over sin. And that inward spiritual change, it

doesn't just happen on the inside, it actually shows up on the outside where everyone can see it in our attitude. This is a third step. So step number one, you've got to confess your spiritual bankruptcy. Step number two, you gotta mourn over that condition. And step number three is to now walk in meekness.

Jesus said, Matthew 5:5, "Blessed are the meek, for the meek shall inherit the earth." It's the proud of this world, the selfishly ambitious, the strong, the rich, the powerful, they are the ones who are trying to gain the world on their own terms, in their own strength, in their own power. They want to take over the earth.

But by a reversal of fortune, God turns the tables on the proud and the arrogant. He turns their ambition on their own heads. He withholds the earth from them because the earth is his and everything in it. And he saves the earth for the meek. He gives it to them as an inheritance. Spiritual beggars, humble mourners, they're not proud self-seeking people. They're meek before God and they're meek before man.

They're meek because they realize their spiritual condition puts them at the mercy of God. They have no claim upon him or his grace or mercy. And so they make no demands. They set no conditions on what they will or will not do. They submit themselves to God wholly and completely. They're willing to come to him on his terms, no theirs.

They're also meek before other people. They're not demanding of other people. They see themselves as recipients of mercy from God. When people sin against them, they realize how much they've sinned against others. They see themselves as deserving of nothing. They're forgiving, forbearing, kind. They refuse to play the victim card. They refuse to make lists of demands on other people. They refuse to require others accommodation and deference to them. They're meek.

What will people say about you when you die? After you've departed from this life, will you be remembered that way? Or will people have to overlook the fact that you were self-centered and arrogant and proud? Will they have to overlook quite a bit in your life to say nice things about you, to

eulogize you? But everybody knows the truth. Most importantly, God knows.

If you follow Jesus Christ, if you're putting your faith in the very Son of God, the Son of Man, he himself who epitomized meekness, who said, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For," here's what characterizes me, "I'm gentle and lowly in heart."

Same word for gentle could be translated meek. If the one that we claim as Lord and Savior is meek, shouldn't that show up in us, too? True Christians are transformed from proud to humble, from arrogant to meek because they seek one and only one thing from God and it's righteousness. It's something only he can give. And that's the fourth step through the narrow gate, a final piece of evidence that God has really changed you from the inside out.

Step number four, you hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus said in Matthew 5:6, "Blessed are those who hunger and

thirst for righteousness.” Why are they blessed? Why are they happy? Because “they will be satisfied.” Those who recognize their spiritual poverty, they’re well aware of what it is they lack. They’ve got clarity about what they want most in life. They have a profound hunger and an insatiable thirst for righteousness.

And it’s not a righteousness that they can find on this earth. They long for the righteousness of God. A righteousness that only he possesses. Righteousness, it’s a long word, but it just means living a life according to the standard of God’s righteous character, living a life that he prescribes. When righteousness is your singular aim, nothing stands in the way of pursuing it.

Jesus said, Matthew 6:31 to 33, “Don’t be anxious about anything saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ The Gentiles,” he’s speaking of them as a category of unbelievers. Unbelievers “seek after all these things, your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

That's why nothing stands in the way of pursuing his kingdom and his righteousness because if we pursue that and that alone, nothing else matters. Nothing else hinders us. We don't have any excuses saying, Well I would pursue righteousness, but I didn't have enough money. I would pursue righteousness, but the job market, you know. I would pursue righteousness, but I had a poor housing situation, difficult family situation.

Jesus said pursue his kingdom and his righteousness. Everything else will be added to you. Just trust him. That's why true Christians are not preoccupied with the stuff of this world: food, drink, clothing. They don't chase after the stuff of biological life. They seek something higher of a spiritual nature. They long for an eternal life that only God can give and that is the very energy of the kingdom of God.

The currency of that kingdom is righteousness. It's the very righteousness of God, which is characterized by all kingdom citizens. In other words, true Christians want righteousness. They want God to rule and to reign in their hearts, in their



minds directing all their thoughts, their will, and their behavior. True Christians want God's standards of right and wrong to govern the entire earth, in fact. Starting, though, with their own hearts, spreading out to others as well.

Christians seek first and foremost God's kingdom, God's righteousness and they trust God to supply everything else. As I've described this, I think you can see from a worldly point of view, it's just not easy to enter through that narrow door. To take these four steps starting out on the path of life, it's a hard way. It's a confined way, a narrow gate. That's why Jesus said in Luke 13:24, "Strive to enter through the narrow door."

The word strive is the word *agonizomai*. We get our word agonize from that word. You need to agonize to enter through the narrow door. Why? Because "many, I tell you, will seek to enter and won't be able." Contrary to many of the false gospels floating around out there, it's not easy to be saved. It's very hard to repent and believe. It costs everything.

Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." And that, friends, is utterly impossible for any of us apart from the grace of God. That's why trying harder in your own strength is not the solution to the sin problem. It's believe and obey the Gospel. By the grace of God, that is the only way to salvation.

Jesus said, Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but it's the one who does the will of my Father who's in heaven." What is his will? It's to believe in Jesus Christ, to drop all sin, to repent of it, and to follow Jesus Christ in a life of obedient faith. Jesus said, John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

It's the exclusivity of Jesus' demands of the Gospel. There are not many roads to God. We're not all feeling different parts of the elephant, but it's the same path. There's only one way to heaven. And Jesus says it's through him and him alone. When we're poor in spirit, spiritual beggars, he is infinitely rich. His wealth becomes our wealth when we trust in him. When we mourn over our sin, when we look to his perfect sacrifice

that took that sin away, paying the full penalty when he died on the cross. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in him."

In other words, God punished Christ for the sins that we committed, so that every individual who believes in Christ will be forgiven. And so now when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, he fills us because he fulfilled all righteousness and grants it to us as a gift. We're not righteous on our own. But in him, we have the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. After God punished Christ for our sins on that cross, God raised him from the dead, showing that he accepted that sacrifice, showing that death had been conquered, sin had been punished and paid for. And the barrier separating God and man had been destroyed. The door to heaven had been flung wide open for everyone who will repent of their sins.

Turn away from sins and receive Christ by faith taking these four steps. God gave the punishment that you deserve to Christ when he crucified his own son on the cross. And he did that so he could take the righteousness of his son and cover you

# PILLAR OF —TRUTH—



with it. Through the righteousness of Christ, that you can be made fit for heaven.

And you know when God works in your life because you see this message with clarity. You understand it. You're eager to take the four steps through that narrow gate and on that narrow road. Poor in spirit, mourning over sin, becoming meek, and hungering and thirsting for righteousness as you serve your Savior and Lord faithfully throughout life on earth.