

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Give in to win

Presented by Bob Smith

Do you remember what it was like when you were a teenager always trying to present the right image to your peers and what a burden it was to live like that. The sad thing is that many of us have never grown out of it. Some years ago, the psychologist Eric Berne wrote a bestseller about this very thing entitled *Games People Play*. He observed that many of us unconsciously play psychological games with each other in order to present an image of ourselves that we feel will make us more acceptable to others.

Unfortunately these games don't work and make us miserable inwardly because it's a constant strain to try to be what you are not. Eric Berne wanted to make the point that for real psychological wellbeing it is essential, first of all, to learn to admit who we really are. Only then, will we have a foundation to build on. But long before the world had ever heard of Eric Berne, Jesus said a similar thing about the road to spiritual wholeness.

Jesus began his famous Sermon on the Mount with these words: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven & Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be comforted.*" When most of us read those words we wonder why on earth Jesus should say such a thing, because the image presented does not seem to be of someone likely to impress people. The picture we get is of someone who is cowed and lacks self confidence – a real loser. In a world that demands self assurance and a positive spirit, these two statements don't seem to rate the description of '*blessed*'.

The problem, however, is not with what Jesus said, but with the changing nature of the English language and how it translates the original Greek text. The modern Good News Bible has a much better rendition of the meaning of the Greek text when it puts it this way: "*Blessed are those who know they are spiritually poor.*"

Jesus was actually pronouncing a blessing on those who recognise their own spiritual emptiness, and says that it is people like this who truly belong to the Kingdom of Heaven. In effect he was saying that the first step to spiritual blessing is to admit the reality of our spiritual emptiness and turn to God who is the only one who can change that.

Then he goes on to say, '*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*' This verse is another startling paradox. It is almost as if Jesus were saying '*Happy are the unhappy.*' However it is clear from the context that he was not primarily referring to people who mourn the loss of a loved one, but to people who mourn their spiritual emptiness. It is not so much the sorrow of grief, but the sorrow of repentance.

William Barclay illustrates this by comparing it with some of the things the Apostle Paul's said about himself at different stages of his spiritual journey. In Galatians, which is generally considered to be his first letter, he refers to himself as '*Paul an apostle*', and says it's this that gives him the authority to talk to them the way he does.

About seven years later, writing to the Corinthians, he refers to himself as *'the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle'*. Obviously, by that time, he had developed a more modest assessment of his right to be called such.

Another eight years went by and in his letter to the Ephesians he says: *'Unto me who am less than the least of the saints is grace given'*. And just before his death, in writing to Timothy, he says: *'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst'*.

The longer we know Jesus and the closer we get to him, the more we see the standard by which we must judge our own lives; and with an awareness like that there's no place for the games we tend to play.

I used to have a great mate named Eric. Sadly, he died a few years ago, but while I knew him I enjoyed his company immensely, just as I'm sure the saints in Heaven are enjoying it now. Whenever we had a party we'd invite Eric because he was sure to get it sparkling.

Now Eric was an alcoholic, but for the twelve years I knew him he'd been sober. He came from an impoverished background in England and migrated to Australia determined to make good, and he did. He was quite successful in business and his infectious character made him a lot of friends.

Sadly, his first marriage failed and he began to turn to alcohol as a means of escape from emotional pain. But that led him on a downward spiral that included serious car smashes, mounting debts and some disturbing personality changes including a readiness to resort to violence. He later described his alcoholism as *'a disease of denial'* and blamed everybody and everything for what had gone wrong, except himself.

The turning point came after a prolonged period of domestic strife with his second wife. One day he gave her a particularly bad beating and then left home. He couldn't remember what happened after that. He had a complete blackout until he woke up one Sunday morning, dressed only in his underpants, with bindies in his feet, lying in the local Baptist Church's Sunday School bus.

That really frightened him. He thought his brain had finally snapped. But something about it being Sunday morning and finding himself in a Sunday school bus told him he needed help from a power higher than himself. So he went back to his doctor, who had previously given up on him, and told him he needed help.

The doctor referred him to Alcoholics Anonymous, and it was through them that Eric discovered the twelve steps that have made AA the most effective resource we have in combating addictions. Eric accepted that he was powerless over alcohol, that there was a power greater than he who could restore him, and he turned his life and will over to God (about whom he knew little), made a fearless and searching moral inventory of himself, and set out on the journey that was to lead to healing and wholeness.

It was the start of a new life. Eric had been born again. Talking to him years later he summed his experience up in one classic phrase: he said, *"You've got to give in to win,"* meaning that when dealing with the deepest part of ourselves, our spiritual being, we have to accept our spiritual emptiness before we can look to God to grant us spiritual fullness. And that's exactly what Jesus was getting at when he said, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...and blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."*

At the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus contradicted all human judgments, exposing them for what they are, *games that people play*. He said that the kingdom of God is given not the proud and self sufficient, but to those who are honest about their spiritual emptiness. He told the Pharisees, who thought they were so rich in merit and thanked God that they were as they were, that the prostitutes and publicans were closer to God than they were, because they knew they needed God's help.

One of the most powerful examples for us is the way the Jesus described the church at Laodicea in the book of Revelation. He quoted their own description of themselves as an indictment of how far removed they were from true spiritual reality; *'You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.'*

The tragedy of the Laodicean church was that what it actually thought of itself was the exact opposite of what God thought of it. Its attitude reflected all those things we are so familiar with in the church today, wealth, influence, sophistication. But to God they were spiritually poverty stricken and so blind that they could not recognize it.

It reminds me of that story about Thomas Aquinas visiting Pope Innocent III, who showed him the Vatican treasures and referred to the bible story where Peter and John meet a lame man at the gate of the Temple – the one that includes the words, *'silver and gold have I none, but such as I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk'*. – The Pope said; *'You see, Thomas, no longer can the Church say, 'silver and gold have I none''*. To which Thomas replied, *'True, Holy Father. But no longer can she say 'rise up and walk''*.

We have an amazing capacity to play psychological games that keep us from having to look at who and what we really are, including those of us who are religious. It reminds me of the old Jewish story about a pious young man who tried to impress a great rabbi. He droned on about how he always dressed in spotless white, drank nothing stronger than water, mortified his flesh by having exposed nails in his shoes, daily lay naked in the snow and received forty lashes on his bare back to complete his penance.

As he spoke, the rabbi watched a white horse being led to drink at a water trough after which it rolled in the snow, as horses tend to do. *"You see that?" said the rabbi. "That animal, like you, is dressed in white. It also drinks nothing but water, has nails in its shoes and rolls naked in the snow. And you can be sure it gets its daily ration of forty lashes from its master. So, is it acting like a saint, or are you just acting like a horse?"*

Good question. True spirituality is not defined by outward show, but by inwardly admitting we need God's help and then joyfully accepting it. Only then do we find forgiveness and renewal.

'Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them! Happy are those who mourn; God will comfort them.' Jesus said the first step to real inner blessing is to accept the truth about ourselves, to stop playing games and open our lives to the healing and transforming presence of God.

There are so many of us who outwardly seem to have it all together, but inwardly are hanging on by our fingernails. In our innermost thoughts we know, as God knows, that we are empty and alone. Jesus said that it's when we accept that fact that the change can begin. As my friend Eric put it, *'You've got to give in to win.'* And the prize is nothing less than his forgiveness and abiding presence in this life and the next.

Eugene Petersen's well known paraphrase of the Bible puts it this way: *'You're blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you there's more of God. You're blessed when you feel you've lost everything. Only then can you be embraced by the one who is most dear to you.'*