

The Pursuit of Happiness

Matthew 5:1-3

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Stephen Davey

William Marston once asked three thousand individuals this question, “What have you to live for?” The answers surprised him. He found that 94% were not really living in the moment at all. They were enduring the present while waiting for something to happen in the future.

For instance, they were waiting for their children to grow up and leave home; waiting for next year when things would be better, or different; waiting for the chance to take that trip they’d been planning; waiting for tomorrow . . . waiting . . . waiting.



How would you answer Marston’s question: “What have you to live for?”

I can’t help but think about what’s happening today. We’re all, in a sense waiting to get back to life like it used to be before COVID-19.

In the meantime, a lack of meaning and contentment in the very fabric of our culture has begun to show up.

Domestic violence has increased tremendously; the sale of alcoholic beverages has skyrocketed; suicides have increased.

Why? Well for one major reason – people have been forced to live with themselves – without the possibilities of distraction or relief. They can’t go to a movie; they can’t go to the bar; theaters are closed, restaurants are closed; bars are closed, entertainment venues are closed; you can’t go to a ball game and sports on television are reruns. I mean, who wants to watch a game when you already know the final score?

It has caused our culture to come to terms with a shallow definition of happiness – if not the very meaning of their lives.

William Barclay wrote, “That is human happiness; it is something that is dependent on the chances and changes of life – something life might give but that life might also [take away].¹



What thoughts do you have regarding Barclay’s quote? Is he right? Is your happiness dependent on your circumstances?

That’s true, isn’t it? For most people, happiness depends on what happens. We are happy if certain things happen to us and if certain things don’t happen to us, then our happiness vanishes.

We in America know all about the pursuit of happiness. Benjamin Franklin made this insightful comment about our own Constitution that guarantees everyone, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He wrote, “Please note that the Constitution only gives a people the right to pursue happiness; you have to catch it yourself.”²

¹ John MacArthur, Kingdom Living Here and Now (Moody Press, 1980, p. 26

² Robert J. Morgan, Thomas Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 406

The trouble is, sometimes you think you got it and it turns out rather differently. Or it doesn’t measure up.

In New York City, I read that there are at least 8 million cats, and counting. New York is basically concrete and steel, so when your cat dies, you can’t go out in the back yard and bury it. In fact, many people don’t have a backyard. The pet cemetery costs around \$1,500 dollars. The city charges a fee of \$50.00 to come and take it away.

One enterprising lady thought, “I can render a service to people in the city and save them money.” So she placed an ad in the newspaper that said, “When your pet cat dies, I’ll take care of it for you for only \$25.00.” Half the price. This lady would go to the local thrift store, and buy an old suitcase for 2 or 3 dollars. Then, when someone would call about their pet, she’d go get it and then place the cat in the suitcase. She would then take a ride on the subway in the early evening hours – the perfect time for pick-pockets and thieves. She’d set the suitcase down then act like she wasn’t watching.

Without fail, some thief would come by when the doors opened, steal her suitcase and run out. She’d holler, “Stop . . . thief.” Rather quietly.³

When you think about it, the world is running after suitcases they think hold

³ Provided by Scott Wenig, Preaching Today #182

something that will bring them happiness – but it never quite delivers.

I find it fascinating that Jesus Christ's first sermon recorded in scripture, called the *Sermon on the Mount*, identifies this true, abiding happiness and how to discover it.

It's found in *Matthew chapter 5*.

Nine times in nine verses, Jesus Christ will use the word, "happiness". It's a Greek word that means fortunate, blessed or happy.

Jesus took the world's view of happiness and turned it upside down. The truth Jesus revealed was stunning. He claimed to know how to find that elusive element of life that mankind has been chasing throughout all of human history – true, lasting, genuine happiness.

The Pursuit of Happiness

And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them. (Matthew 5:1-2)

The traditional posture of a Rabbi while teaching was actually sitting down; whenever he sat and taught it was official business.

Even to this day, we refer to a professor occupying "the chair" of a department. We call the spokesman of a board or

committee a chairman – he occupies the chair.

The phrase here that says, Jesus opened his mouth, is a Greek expression used to describe the delivery of serious, weighty statements.

This section of Scripture is called *the beatitudes* in most Bible outlines. The word simply means "supreme happiness."

What I have discovered is that the beatitudes are really the key to overcoming the me-attitudes which stand in the way of supreme, genuine happiness.

True happiness has nothing to do with external situations – it has everything to do with an internal spirit.



Would you agree or disagree that your personal happiness is rooted in an inner spirit as opposed to external situations? How dependent are you on external things to feel happy?

Christ's first statement stunned their minds and rocked their world.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:3)

These people had been hearing for years, “blessed are the perfect in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

No, Christ said, in effect, “Blessed are those who recognize they are not perfect in spirit.”

Just what does “poor in spirit” mean?

The word translated “poor” refers to utter bankruptcy.

There were two kinds of poor people described in Jesus’ day – the poor who were day laborers and barely made enough to buy food for one day at a time and not a nickel more.

Then there were the poor – *ptochos* is the Greek word used here – which describes people who were bankrupt – they didn’t have a nickel to begin with.

It was poverty so deep that the person must get help in order to survive.

People this poor were entirely dependent on someone else for everything.⁴

Poverty of spirit is an awareness that in ourselves there dwells no good thing (Romans 7:18) and we are utterly and entirely dependent upon Christ for everything.

Only the spiritually bankrupt inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Thomas Watson, the wonderful puritan pastor of old wrote on this text,

This signifies those who are brought to the sense of their sins, and seeing no goodness in themselves, despair in themselves and appeal wholly to the mercy of God in Christ. Until we are poor in spirit we cannot receive grace for we are swollen with self-excellency and self-sufficiency.

If the hand be full of pebbles it cannot receive gold. Until we are poor in spirit, Christ is never precious. We only see our wants and never see Christ’s worth.

-Thomas Watson

The world would say, “Happy is the man who is always right; blessed are those who have it together.”

No, Christ effectively says, “That’s what you might think!” But I say unto you, “blessed are the poor in spirit.”

Happy are those who find nothing in themselves and everything in Christ.

What is poverty “in spirit?”

The spirit here refers to the inner person, not the body. The inner person – the spirit is that immaterial part of you that is dead prior to salvation and now that it’s alive longs for and begs for the

⁴ Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, The Sermon on the Mount (Crossway, 2001), p.19

strength of Christ to carry you through the day.

- The inner man is humble and contrite of spirit and who trembles at my word (*Isaiah 66:2*);
- The Lord saves those who are crushed in spirit (*Psalm 34:18*);
- The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise (*Psalm 51:7*).

This is fundamentally the difference between the hypocrite and the child of God.

The hypocrite can tell you what he has; a child of God mourns what he lacks. A hypocrite is glad he's so good.

That was the Pharisee in Luke 18.

The redeemed cry out to God, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." And the tax collector who prayed that prayer, the Lord said in Luke 18:13 went home redeemed.



When you think about your spiritual life, do you think more about what good you have to offer Christ, or do you think more about what you still lack?

The world would say, "Don't talk about yourself like that . . . that isn't the path to happiness" . . . Jesus is turning the wisdom of the world upside down

Again, listen to this from the pen of Puritan Pastor, Thomas Watson who wrote in the 1600's;

Christian do you grieve that you are so bad? Do you go from moment to moment needing God's supply? Do you complain to God that you lack grace? Do you complain that you need a broken heart, a thankful heart?

These are good signs that you are poor in spirit and the kingdom of heaven belongs to you.

-Thomas Watson

Imagine that promise – the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs in the kingdom of heaven.

It's theirs! That pronoun is emphatic, which can be translated, "It's theirs alone." Who does the kingdom belong to? The poor in spirit. And it's a present tense verb. "The kingdom of heaven is theirs, right now.

Not just in that future Millennial Kingdom when Christ rules on planet earth – but right now, we are His

subjects and He is our King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

And even after you are saved through faith in Christ alone – having recognized your bankrupt spirit and sinful heart – you come to Christ for eternal forgiveness – and you know what? You never outgrow this kind of spirit that recognizes how utterly bankrupt we are – which keep us in the grip of true humility. We're just grateful to be the subjects of Christ's grace and mercy.

Warren Wiersbe put it this way when he wrote, "The Beatitudes are attitudes that ought to be in the believer's life." And we will rarely read of them, or be encouraged to act like them.⁵

Let me show you three other passages where this word happiness shows up.

Two surprising appearances of happiness.

Happiness is commitment when the will of God is confusing.

The angel came to Mary, a confused teenage girl. Mary is no super saint, but rather, someone who submitted to the confusing will of God.

But in her declaration of faith, she says:

From this time forth, all generations will count me blessed. (Luke 1:48)

Supremely happy . . . really?

You might say that she was happy that she had been chosen to bear the Messiah.

But happy in life? Well, study her life.

Mary and Joseph will have to run for their lives into Egypt soon after Christ's birth until Herod dies.

During Mary's life she never lives down the suspicion that she had gotten pregnant out of wedlock. The Pharisees will throw that in Jesus' face later in His ministry. In fact, this same rumor persists to this day that she had a liaison with a Roman soldier.

She doesn't really understand the issue of His death and resurrection until after He rises from the dead (Acts 1:14)

If you're under the impression that happiness only occurs in the lives of those who clearly understand what God is doing with their lives – think again.



When has God's plan for your life seems confusing, and how did that affect your happiness?

⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Live Like a King* (Moody 1976), p. 22

But she doesn't regret writing that testimony earlier in Luke chapter 1 – because happiness is indeed commitment to God even when His will is confusing.

Happiness is persistence when the will of God is painful.

Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast.
(James 5:11)

The context of this passage is suffering.

John Calvin's sermon on this text reminded his listeners that the world would say a happy person is one who is free of pain. But Christ says a happy person is one who persists in following God in spite of pain.

A large part of the reason is because these are the people who develop total and utter dependency on Christ and every time we are driven in total desperation to Christ – when we're out of options – and Christ becomes our only option – there we find true satisfaction.

Joni Eareckson Tada, the quadriplegic who has impacted the lives of so many people with her testimony, wrote in a magazine article how she was the speaker at a Christian women's conference. One woman said, "Joni, you always look so together, so happy in your wheelchair. I wish that I had your joy!"

Joni responded, "I don't do it. In fact, let me tell you how I woke up this morning. This is my average day. After my husband, Ken, leaves for work at 6:00 am, I am alone until I hear the front door open at 7:00 am. That's when a friend arrives to get me up. While I listen to her make coffee, I pray, "Lord, my friend will soon give me a bath, get me dressed, sit me up in my chair, brush my hair and teeth, and send me out the door. I don't have the strength to face this routine one more time. I have no resources. I don't have a smile to take into this day. But you do. May I have yours? So . . . whatever joy you see today was hard won this morning. [And in reality, it is only what I begged from God today.]⁶

That, ladies and gentlemen, is why beggars are the truly happy ones. They have abandoned themselves to the all-sufficient resources of God's grace.

⁶ Adapted from Joni Eareckson Tada, "Joy Hard Won," Decision (March 2000), p. 12

Your Turn

Living It Out



Blessed are the poor in spirit!

Blessed are those who understand that they are bankrupt apart from the grace of God!

Don't forget that as you struggle with your failures and your foibles, even right now, you happen to be – as a child of God – an heir to the kingdom of heaven.

Remember:

- Happiness is commitment to God even when His will is confusing.
 - Happiness is persistence even when His will is painful.
 - Happiness is obedience when the will of God is obvious.
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