

Jesus On (I):

Happiness (Mt. 5:1-12)

Introduction

Welcome to Meck!

And that means welcome to all of our campuses - at Lake Norman, Rocky River, Mountain Island Lake and those of you joining us on our internet campus.

It's good to be back, but can we give a big round of applause for our summer teaching team? Weren't they amazing?

I read about a listing of the most famous speeches ever given in the United States.

It actually ranked them from the tenth most memorable and influential speech to the first.

You probably won't be surprised to hear that coming in at #1 was the "Gettysburg Address" by Abraham Lincoln.

It was given during the Civil War at the dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

He wasn't even the headliner that day. At least, he wasn't who the people came for.

The person people came to hear was Edward Everett - the most inspirational, popular speaker of his day. He was billed as the headliner at the dedication.

And he delivered.

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He spoke for two hours, from memory, with no notes at all.

Then came Lincoln, who pulled out his few sheets of paper where he had written down what he wanted to say. He put on his reading glasses, and began to read.

Did you know that it barely lasted three minutes?

Ten sentences.

272 words.

The reason we don't have a single picture of him delivering it is because by the time the photographers were ready, he was already done.

Can you remember a single word from Everett's speech? Did you even know that he spoke that day, or have even heard of his name?

But, to this day, we know Lincoln's words.

We know how it began:

"Four score and seven years ago..."

And we know how it ended:

"... government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Those words still stir.

The right words always can.

Like these:

Video Compilation of Famous Speeches (e.g., Churchill, Regan, JFK, etc.)

We know those words!

But there is one speech, one talk, one message that throughout history has been hailed as the greatest of them all.

Given by the Person who lived the greatest life that has ever been lived: The Sermon on the Mount by Jesus.

A single address that changed the world and is still changing it.

And you probably know it's words even more than you realize.

"You are the light of the world."

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

"Turn the other cheek."

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

"You cannot serve both God and money."

"Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?"

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged"

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own?"

"Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened."

"By their fruit you will know them."

Any of that sound familiar?

All from the Sermon on the Mount.

It also had the most famous prayer ever uttered. See if you recognize these words:

"Our Father, in heaven, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

And it has one of the most famous morality stories ever told.

Ever heard the one about the wise man who built his house on the rock, and the foolish man who built his on the sand?

And when the winds and the waves came, the house built on rock stood, but the one built on sand was destroyed?

All of this and more, from the Sermon on the Mount.

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And when He was done, here was the immediate verdict:

"When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law." (Matthew 7:28-29, NIV)

In other words, this wasn't someone pulling off a really good TED talk.

This was someone speaking with the authority that only Jesus could.

The One Christians believe was God Himself in human form, come to planet earth to show us the way.

And this was the heart of what He had to say.

And we're going to walk through every word.

So let's get started, beginning exactly where Jesus began.

Which was with a series of statements known as the beatitudes.¹

Introduction to the Beatitudes

They're called the beatitudes because each sentence begins with the word "blessed" and, during much of the middle ages, the Bible was only translated into Latin, and the Latin word for "blessed" is "beati" (pronounced Be-at-tee).

So these became known as the beatitudes.

Now, to say that someone is "beati" or "blessed," literally means to say that they are happy or people to be congratulated.

So Jesus starts off talking about who it is that is happy. Who are already in the state of happiness.

And what He had to say about happiness was like nothing anyone had ever heard.

I. The Poor in Spirit

Take a look at His first statement:

"Blessed [happy, beati] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3, NIV)

Jesus starts right off by saying something about happiness that no other major spiritual figure had ever said - that the people in the world who are truly happy are people who are poor in spirit.

Hit the pause button: Where in our world do we ever say that anybody who is poor in ANYTHING is to be considered happy? Or has somehow found happiness?

The word poor means you're lacking something, needy, living in some kind or type of poverty. That's not good. That's never good.

But this is where unpacking Jesus starts to reveal why He was such a revolutionary figure.

He brings up something hardly any of us think about. Being poor in spirit is a good thing. So what does it mean to be poor in spirit?

People who are poor in *spirit* are those who admit that they are spiritually empty. That on their own, apart from God, they have nothing.

So Jesus is saying, "People who get in touch with their need for God are people to be congratulated."

Why? "Because theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."

God can only pour into those who are not too full of themselves. There has to be an internal emptying in our lives before there can be a filling.

We have to have a spiritual hunger before we begin to fill ourselves with spiritual food.

If you don't have a spiritual hunger, why would you ever want to eat anything of a spiritual food nature?

People who are poor in spirit have admitted their spiritual need and, as a result, they are able to have their life filled with God.

And that means happiness, because nothing in life can match what God can bring to bear. Nothing else can intersect our deepest needs, our deepest longings, but God.

We were made for relationship with Him, and until that relationship is there, we will never be complete. Never fully alive.

So only if you know you're needy, if you know you're in poverty, can the Kingdom be given to you.

And I'll go public with how true that is.

My relationship with God is the best thing that's ever happened to me. Best thing that has EVER happened to me.

And I've had a lot of good things happen.

I've been married to an incredible woman for nearly 35 years. We have four amazing children who we are so close to. We now have seven grandchildren, with two more on the way, who bring me more joy than I could begin to describe to you.

I've traveled around the world, to nearly 40 countries, and seen things that would be on anyone's bucket list. I have a job and calling that I love. At this stage in my life, I'm in good health.

With all of that, which is what most people aspire to have in life, my relationship with God is *the best thing* that has ever happened to me.

So Jesus begins by saying that happiness begins with knowing that the deepest needs in your life can only be intersected by God and that the people who know that are the ones who chase after God for that interaction.

And as a result, they are the happiest. Why? Because they get God!

II. Those Who Mourn

Here's what He said next:

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

(Matthew 5:4, NIV)

I know that sounds really weird. Happy are the unhappy? The ones in grief? That doesn't make sense, does it?

If you've ever mourned - I mean, really mourned something - you would never say there is anything happy about it at all.

And if someone walked up to you in a time of mourning and said, "You know the Bible says you should be happy because 'Blessed are those who mourn,'" you would want to deck 'em.

But Jesus isn't talking about mourning in general, such as the sorrow we feel when someone we know and love dies.

The Bible records a poignant scene when Jesus lost a dear friend, Lazarus, and He grieved as deeply as anyone. In fact, there's even a Greek word used to describe His grief that refers to the snorting of a horse. In other words, He was grieving so deeply He was heaving, doubling over, almost choking on the grief.

There was no happiness in that moment.

So what did Jesus mean? Once again, He's running deep here. He's talking about the nature of true happiness, not the ups and downs of life in general.

This isn't about circumstances. The kind of mourning He's talking about is the kind that leads to comfort. To relief. To having something that is eating away at you resolved.

When He says, "Congratulate those who mourn," He's talking about the ones who are in sorrow, in sadness, in mourning, over the sin in their life.

Jesus is saying that the key to happiness is having the sin in your life, the disobedience, the rebellion - the things that will drive you to your knees on that day when you will stand before God - have them drive you to your knees NOW.

Don't ignore them, turn a blind-eye to them, rationalize them away or make light of them.

Happiness is letting the things about your life that break the heart of God break YOUR heart.

Now, why is that a key to happiness?

Because Jesus said that only those who mourn about their sin will be comforted, which means through grace and forgiveness.

Sin is serious business. It destroys and mutilates our lives. It divorces us from God and all things related to God.

It infests us with guilt and shame.

If we don't address it as the cancer it is, it will destroy our lives.

But if we will own it, mourn it, bring it to God for confession and forgiveness, that's the kind of mourning that is good because it's met with relief.

In the Bible, there's a guy named David who had more than his fair share of things to mourn about. And he described this in his own life:

"Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be - you get a fresh start, your slate's wiped clean. Count yourself lucky - God holds nothing against you and you're holding nothing back from him. When I kept it all inside, my bones turned to powder, my words became daylong groans. The pressure never let up; all the juices of my life dried up. Then I let it all out; I said, 'I'll make a clean breast of my failures to God.' Suddenly the pressure was gone - my guilt dissolved, my sin disappeared."
(Psalm 32:1-5, Msg)

That's mourning that leads to comfort.

I once read of a psychologist who said something that stuck with me. He said that he could dismiss 90% of his patients tomorrow, if they could only feel forgiven. There was no comfort in their lives from their sins.

Until that happens, there can never be true happiness.

And it's not just mourning over this personally, but mourning it in the world. The sick, sin-stained world that we live in.

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Because only when our heart breaks at such evils as injustice, human trafficking, racism, sexism, will we seek the kind of change needed to end them.

So in whatever way this needs to be applied, blessed are those who mourn. Congratulate them because they're getting it. And it results in comfort.

III. The Meek

But Jesus wasn't done. Here's what He said next:

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

(Matthew 5:5, NIV)

I am not attracted to the word "meek."

I don't know of too many people who are.

I have always thought of a meek person as someone who is easily intimidated, soft, cowardly, passive or weak.

I don't want to run toward that; I want to run away from that. That's not who I want to be.

But when Jesus used the word "meek," that's not what He meant. In His day, the word didn't mean what it means to most people now.

In Jesus' day, it referred to power and strength that is under control. It meant a person who had tamed themselves, who knew how to exercise self-control and self-discipline.

Someone powerful, strong, energized - but who had it under control.

You'll sometimes hear the phrase "meek as a mouse," or "timid as a mouse." But the ancient Greeks would have said, "Meek as a lion."

Meaning someone who had great strength, great power, but did not need to flaunt it. Someone who exercised self-control.

Think of it like a highly trained MMA fighter who has a drunk guy in a bar try and pick a fight.

He could take him - but he doesn't. He walks away. He chooses to be meek.

And why did Jesus say that was a key to happiness?

Because those who are truly meek will inherit the earth. Which means, if you are truly meek, then you are secure. You aren't always trying to strive for more, gain more, assert yourself, prove yourself.

Meekness is the key to satisfaction because when you are meek, life becomes less about conquest, and more about being secure with yourself.

And most of all, it means contentment.

Because let's face it, if we had a crack at writing our own set of beatitudes we'd begin each one with, "If only..."

"If only I had that car..."

"If only I had that job..."

"If only I could find that wife, or that husband..."

"If only I had more money..."

"... then I'd be happy."

But you'll never find "if only" in Jesus' vocabulary.

Because that isn't the key to happiness.

The key is being meek, which is being secure and content, with who you are and what you have.

IV. Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

So is there anything we are to chase after?

Yes. That's the fourth mark of happiness that Jesus offers.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Matthew 5:6, NIV)

Righteousness is one of those lost words that we don't use very much anymore, but it's a shame because it's a great word.

Righteousness simply means "rightness" - and here, a "rightness" with God.

It's the desire to see God's standards, God's values, established in every area of your life. To crave that - and, from that craving, to crave to see the same thing extended throughout all of life and culture.

In the media. In the educational system. In the marketplace. In the judicial system.

Hunger and thirst for that, Jesus says, and you will be happy.

Why? Because you will be filled. Anything else will leave you empty.

Because this is what gives your life purpose.

Think about it: Without a sense of righteousness, what's guiding you? What's leading you?

Without this, there is nothing lifting your vision for your life beyond the most superficial of things.

There is nothing bigger than you calling you to invest your one and only life into something significant.

It's been said there are only three levels of living, and the more I reflect on this the more I think it's true.

The first is survival.

You're just living for the weekend. Making it to the end of a workday. Holding out for the vacation. Waiting for retirement. Waiting to graduate. Get through school. Get a new job.

Just doing what it takes to survive.

A second level of living is for success.

It's all about the corporate climb, the bonus, the stock option, the corner office, the pay raise, the title. You tell yourself you'll live for something different once you get where you're going, but for now, it's all about the going.

But there's a third level of living.

Beyond survival, beyond success - the third level is significance.

Leading a life that matters.

Now you can certainly strive for significance while you're doing what it takes to survive.

You can certainly strive for significance while you're attempting to succeed.

The difference is that those things aren't what's driving you. What's driving you is significance.

Making a difference. Leaving a legacy. For righteousness to break out in your life, and through your life, to break out into the world.

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And as Jesus said, that's the only thing that will satisfy the hunger, quench the thirst, in your life.

There is an emptiness deep inside everyone of us. A loneliness, a void, that cries out to be filled.

It IS a hunger, it IS a thirst, and everyone of us here spends our entire life trying to end it.

Some of us think that the emptiness has to do with things, so we spend our lives going after money.

Some of us think that the hunger and thirst has to do with raw, physical pleasure, so we go after that.

Some of us think that the ache of longing and emptiness inside of us will end if we can just be well-known, or successful, so we spend our entire life trying for that.

But none of that delivers.

You can win the lottery, sleep with everyone you meet, and get the most followers on Twitter and Instagram, and the hole is still there.

Now let's be honest - that stuff delivers for a while.

But when those things are used to fill the hole, time after time, you realize that it's a bottomless pit.

There isn't enough of it in a thousand lifetimes to get at what you're really craving.

Jesus says there's only one thing that will feed the hunger and quench the thirst. Right-relatedness with God, and working for right-relatedness in the world, because the hunger and thirst is for Him and His rightness.

That's the purpose of your life. That's what you're on this planet to chase.

Which is why it's only the people who go to Him and His rightness who get filled. They are the only ones who are ever really happy.

V. The Merciful

So are you tracking with all this? It's a lot to track.

Here's what Jesus has said so far, and it's deep: the person who is truly happy is someone who knows their need for God, has a heart that breaks for the things that break His heart, understands the nature and source of contentment, and pursues right-relatedness with God.

But there's more. Jesus then said:

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."
(Mathew 5:7, NIV)

Mercy is best defined as compassion for people in need. And not just when they're down and out, but showing them grace and forgiveness in the day-in, day-out activities of life.

So what Jesus is saying is, "Happy are those who do not take advantage of the weakness or vulnerability of another."

But that's not the way we do life.

Everything we know, everything we believe, everything we've been taught, is about getting ahead of others at their expense.

We don't want anyone to get promoted over us, we don't want anyone to get ahead of us in the line, we don't want anyone to get our parking space, we don't want anyone to pass us on the road.

I actually had a friend of mine, years ago, tell me that whenever somebody tried to pass him on the road, he found himself speeding up - just because he didn't want them to pass him.

I thought, really? That's crazy.

I said, "Just do what I do. Cut 'em off before they can even try."

But even if we're a little more mature than that, we still can find ourselves enjoying someone else's downfall.

The business leader who is relieved of responsibility. The politician who is disgraced. The priest caught in adultery.

The Germans have a word for it - "schadenfreude" - which means finding joy in the suffering of another.

And we've got that down to an art-form.

Jesus says that real happiness comes from showing mercy to others.

Not just because it's the right thing to do, but because it serves our own lives.

Mercy tends to flow into the life that gives it. Those who give grace tend to receive it.

VI. The Pure in Heart

Now with that in mind, take a look at the sixth beatitude Jesus gave:

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."
(Matthew 5:8, NIV)

To the people of Jesus' day, the heart was the center of their personality, the essence of who they were, the place where decisions were made and the course of their life-direction was set.

So to be pure in your heart meant to be single-minded.

To have the essence of who you were to be focused on one and only one thing.

When you're pure in heart, you aren't letting yourself get pulled in a thousand different directions. The core of your being is not divided in its loyalties or direction.

Instead, the center of your life is centered on one thing: the living God.

Which means your God-focus splashes over into every area of your life.

Again, that's not how we tend to live. Our tendency is to compartmentalize our life.

We have our family life, our vocational life, our recreational life, our social life, and then - over here somewhere - there's our spiritual life.

But Jesus said that's not what will make you happy. You don't have a spiritual life - you just have LIFE. And it's meant to be lived spiritually.

And being pure in heart is being single-minded about looking at all of that life through God-focused eyes.ⁱⁱ

And that brings happiness because, when you do that, your eyes see God - everywhere and in everything.

You're not just a parent. You're to be a God-focused parent.

You're not just an engineer. You're to be a God-focused engineer.

You're not just a teacher. You're to be a God-focused teacher.

You see Him in everything, and in everything you see Him.

Or at least you search for Him.

And when you have that kind of purity of heart, clarity of vision, you find Him.

VII. The Peacemakers

Well, Jesus still wasn't done. He then said:

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." (Matthew 5:9, NIV)

A peacemaker is someone who does just that - makes peace.

Not someone who just avoids conflict - that can be a form of cowardice. In fact, avoiding conflict can often make the conflict worse.

Peacemaking isn't conflict avoidance, it's actively working for peace.

For example, there can be no doubt that we, as a nation, desperately need racial reconciliation. And I've talked about this before.

This summer I was reading author Austin Channing Brown who writes - as a black woman - how "racial reconciliation" has become a buzzword. And that for most white people, particularly in churches, it means:

- Look at us, we have black people in our church.
- We have black people on staff or on stage.
- We have an urban ministry.
- We celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

What we don't do, she writes, is actively pursue peacemaking. She says the hard work of peacemaking is working for racial justice and true multi-racial community.

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Where relationships are deep, transformative and just; where worldviews are altered. Where war is declared on the heinous sin of racism.

And this is just an example.

Jesus was saying that peacemaking, wherever it's called for, is terrifyingly intentional.

But because Jesus says that the person who works to resolve conflict, restore relationships, build bridges, is someone who is living a life that is to be envied.

The person who has a healing word rather than a divisive one; the person who brings calm when there is a storm; the person who soothes rather than enflames.

That's happiness. Because that's when we live up to our Father's name.

Did you make that connection?

Jesus said that peacemakers will be called "sons" (or "daughters") of God.

That's strange language to us, but think about what He's saying. He's saying that our actions reflect our origins. Our beginnings. Our roots. Our heritage.

God is a peacemaker. If you are a peacemaker, you will be marked as someone who is related to God.

People around you will see you as someone who is one of God's true representatives, one of His true ambassadors. Someone who is truly becoming like Him.

They will call you His son or His daughter.

VIII. Those Who Are Persecuted Because of Righteousness

Well, the eighth and final mark of a life that Jesus said was truly one marked by happiness may be the most provocative of all.

It is certainly the one that calls us to go deeper than any of the others.

Let me read it:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."
(Matthew 5:10-12, NIV)

Jesus was under no illusions about the difference between a life of superficial happiness and true happiness, and how they would play out.

He knew that the values He was spelling out were in direct contrast and conflict with the values of the world.

He was not telling the world what it wanted to hear, but what it *needed* to hear.

He was not playing into culture, but giving a radically counter-cultural message. And two wildly different value systems seldom mix.

Jesus lived the fullest, most influential, blessed, enviable life imaginable. Yet He was called a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief and ended up on a cross.

The truly blessed life is not necessarily an easy life. It is not necessarily a life filled with the pleasures we often associate with superficial satisfaction.

I know - a message that says, "Come to God and have the good life" goes over a lot better than, "Come to God and take up your cross."

But Jesus didn't teach the good life - He taught the right life. He never said that coming to God would make life easier. Better, yes; easier, no.

Because happiness is not about the quality of life you experience, but the quality of life you leave behind.

Let me say that again:

According to Jesus, happiness is not about the quality of life you experience, but about the quality of life you leave behind.

I can't say this strongly enough. The Christ life is a radical one. One of high risk, and high reward. It's not for the timid or weak or cowardly or complacent.

It's for those who are willing to say,

"Damn the torpedoes."

"Kill me if you must."

"On this hill I will die."

Conclusion

So there are the beatitudes.

They're not just a list of dos and don'ts. They're not some legalistic checklist. You can't treat them that way. Jesus has cast this vision of a life that you can jump into.

They're an invitation into a way of living and a state of living.

Each one tells us who is happy - and why.

And they can be true of us, if we accept the invitation and enter into what it really means to experience a truly happy life.

Not based on circumstances, but choices.

The beatitudes are just that - the attitudes I can be.

So be those attitudes.

And that's how Jesus started the Sermon on the Mount.

Let's stand for closing prayer.

ⁱ Multiple commentaries used throughout this series, but the most, by far, is John R.W. Stott's *Christian Counter-Culture* (InterVarsity Press).
ⁱⁱ. On this, see John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, p. 17.