

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

Danny Hall

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

If you grew up in America, you probably have heard these words from the Declaration of Independence since you were a young child. They are part and parcel of what it means to be an American. But I believe that the idea that it is our right to pursue happiness is one of the chief stumbling blocks we have to following Jesus in the way we live. This idea of pursuing happiness has become the final arbiter in much of American life, the determining factor in many of our choices. We have separated our choices from any sense of morality, so we are left to make decisions based on what feels good, what makes us happy.

As our culture has evolved, the idea that the pursuit of happiness is our right has spawned all kinds of ancillary ideas. One of these is the idea that the supreme virtue is tolerance, which says that we must let people pursue their own happiness in whatever way they want, because that is their unalienable right. The pursuit of happiness informs the way we think in many arenas of life. Take marriages that are struggling. So many times one partner will say, “I think I want out of this marriage; I’m just not happy anymore.” It is so deeply ingrained in us that we are driven to seek happiness, as elusive as it is.

In the time of Jesus back in the first century, the Jews had been living under foreign oppression for a long time, and they longed for relief from that and restoration to a place of glory and prominence. They longed for a sense of God’s blessing, a sense, you might say, of national happiness. They longed for restoration of their sense of identity, remembering the glory days when they were a political and spiritual power in their region, when they saw themselves as the chosen of God and God was active among them. But now it had been a long time since they had had that sense of God’s presence and blessing.

There were several ways they tried to realize that. On one end of the spectrum there were some political radicals, zealots who were almost like an underground militia group, who sought to mount an insurrection against the occupying forces of Rome to liberate their country and reestablish it as a free nation, thinking that would return to them that sense of God’s blessing.

Others in the religious community, particularly among the leaders, sought to define ever more what Jewishness was about. In their lack of self-worth or blessing they had developed an “us vs. them” mentality: they were the pure, great Jews as opposed to the awful Gentiles, particularly the oppressive Romans. They also continued to delineate the markers of what it meant to be a real Jew, which over time multiplied, so that by the time of Jesus there was a mountain of minute applications of the Law that the Jews were supposed to follow as a way of gaining a sense of identity and blessing.

But in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus challenges the assumptions that the Jews have had about the kingdom of God and how it is to be achieved, and about what it means to be the people of God. In so doing, he seeks to undermine the very things they have been holding on to as a means of gaining blessing, happiness, and fulfillment. In the opening of this sermon Jesus begins with a description of

God's blessing and of kingdom people that we call the Beatitudes.

This is important for you and me, because we have been absorbed in our society's headlong, self-indulgent pursuit of happiness, and I fear that it has crept into our experience as the people of God as well. We have started to miss the point rather dramatically about where true happiness lies, what truly being the people of God is and how we are to live that out. And because we have been compromised in this way, we have lost much--the wonderful blessing of intimacy with God, his enduring presence in our lives no matter what context or circumstance we may find ourselves in.

In this message we're going to take a detailed look at this description of blessings, which forms the foundation of Jesus' whole teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Let's ask God to show us where true happiness lies. We're going to study Matthew 5:3-10. (We'll also read verses 11-12, transitional verses that we will note for now and look at more fully in the next message.)

Where true happiness lies

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 gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

There are some general observations we can make about these blessings. First of all, the language here is rich with allusions to the Old-Testament hope of Messiah. It mirrors some of the greatest of these passages. Let's look at one of them. Isaiah 61:1-3:

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
Because the LORD has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And freedom to prisoners;
To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn,

To grant those who mourn *in Zion*,
 Giving them a garland instead of ashes,
 The oil of gladness instead of mourning,
 The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting.
 So they will be called oaks of righteousness,
 The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.”

There are many other passages in the Old Testament filled with these ideas of hope. Jesus employs some of the same language, saying, “Here is the fulfillment of these Old Testament promises of hope. I direct you toward them because you are looking in all the wrong places.”

A second observation is that the first and the last of the Beatitudes frame the rest of them with the promise of receiving the kingdom of heaven. Nothing was more important to the Jews than the understanding that they were the kingdom of God. They longed to be restored to that. Their hope had been centered on the resurrection of their nation to prominence, echoing their past history and glory. But Jesus says there is a different way to receive the kingdom, and by bracketing all the blessings between these two promises of the kingdom of heaven, I think he means that the totality of them is where the kingdom of heaven lies. He tells them the kind of people who are kingdom people, the way to receive kingdom blessing, and what the true kingdom of God is--a spiritual kingdom. He redefines it for them into categories that blow them away, and that will eventually cause such great opposition that it will cost Jesus his life.

The promise of the first and last blessings is in the present tense; the six blessings in between are in the future tense. This is important, because Jesus is saying to them, as he preaches in other places, that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, embodied in Jesus himself, accessible to all who will come to him. But at the same time there is an unfolding of the promises of God that will go on into the future, to the consummation of the age when Jesus will come again.

Jesus presents all eight statements of blessing in the third person. After he has finished those eight, in verses 11-12 he changes to the second person: “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you....” He states these blessings as general principles of the kingdom of God, then turns to his listeners and says, “This is about you folks right here.” This speaks once again of the accessibility of the kingdom of God to those who will come to God on his terms. A door has been wonderfully thrown open.

Finally, much of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is simply an elucidation of these eight principles in practical application. He says the peacemakers are blessed, and then he tells his listeners not to be angry (5:21-22), to resolve their differences before they come to worship (5:23-24), and when the Romans come to conscript them, not to resist them, not to join the insurrection. (This is most likely what is behind the phrase “Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two” [5:41].) He says the pure in heart are blessed, and then he takes his listeners beyond surface issues of sexuality and goes all the way to the heart of purity--not even having lust in their hearts (5:27-28).

With that in mind, let’s look now at each of these eight pronouncements of blessing. Each one of them is worthy of a sermon in and of itself, but we are going to have to move through them quickly, so that we can take in the totality of this picture that Jesus has drawn for us about what kind of people kingdom people are.

Poor, sorrowful, gentle, righteous, merciful

He starts off with “blessed” and repeats that word eight times. That word has sometimes been translated

“happy.” We are a little reticent nowadays to translate it “happy” because of the way happiness has been interpreted in our society. The idea here is a sense of settled contentment, knowing one is in God’s favor—even happiness—for those who have entered into the kind of relationship with God that Jesus describes.

“Blessed [content, happy] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The word translated “poor” here is the word that is used for complete bankruptcy or absolute, total destitution. In the parallel teaching in Luke, Jesus doesn’t use the words “in spirit.” Luke records him as saying simply, “Blessed are you who are poor....” (Luke 6:20.) There has been much debate about how to reconcile these two. Probably Jesus says one and then the other in two different settings, but what he is saying in essence encompasses both ideas. We have to come to the place where we understand we have nothing to offer God. It is the person who understands his total, complete vulnerability, his lack of anything at all with which to earn God’s merit or entry into his kingdom, the person who has a deep sense of his complete need of God’s mercy and grace--that is who will enter into the kingdom of heaven. It is a foundational principle of all that Jesus is going to teach us that we must approach him with that sense of absolute need.

One of the core principles of our recovery ministry is that you start out by acknowledging that you are at rock bottom. Until a person gets to rock bottom and is willing to say, “I can’t help myself--I admit that I am totally controlled by this addiction and I must throw myself on the mercy of a Power higher than myself, on the strength of God,” there is no way to help them out of it. This echoes this core spiritual principle that Jesus begins with: Blessed are the poverty-stricken, the destitute in spirit, the ones who recognize their total bankruptcy before God. For it is when we get to the point where we have nothing to offer, and we can only cry out for God’s mercy, that we can enter the kingdom of God.

How contrary that is to the thinking of the nation of Israel at the time, which was proudly holding on to its heritage and culture and tradition, trying to offer them up as its justification, employing all kinds of strategies and behaviors designed to reclaim a sense of prominence and national honor.

With that foundation laid, Jesus moves on to the second of the eight blessings: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” What I think Jesus is saying here is that when we come to the point of spiritual bankruptcy, it ought to remind us of the devastation of sinfulness. We live in a world that is characterized by suffering. We have all kinds of pain and suffering in our own lives, a huge portion of which is of our own making. The question that Jesus drives home to these people is, “When is the last time that your heart has been broken for the sinfulness of our society?” When is the last time we wept over the ravages of sin in our own experience, in our relationships, in our church, in our community, in our world? In Luke 19:41-44 Jesus saw the city of Jerusalem and wept over it, foreseeing the destruction that was coming because of their sin. It is when we are broken over our own sin and the ravages of sin all around us that Jesus promises we will be comforted. It is the God of mercy to whom we are calling out. He wants to restore the brokenhearted, to reach into the pain of life and bring healing. Jesus says this is where we will find the comfort we are looking for.

Third, Jesus says, “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.” The NIV translates this, “Blessed are the meek....” The word “meek” is sometimes misunderstood as reticence or shyness, but it is not that at all. Jesus himself is described as meek. It has to do with the kind of inner strength that frees us from demanding our own agenda and thus allows us to treat others with the kind of care and gentleness that they need. It is diametrically opposed both to the philosophy of the world and to the way the Jews of Jesus’ day thought about bringing a return of greatness to the kingdom.

In all kinds of arenas we have our own agendas. I call a certain game that couples play “My Day Was Worse than Your Day.” We come home at the end of the day, and we want our spouse to take care of us,

so we play this game projecting our own sense of need onto the relationship. But Jesus says kingdom people are willing to set aside their agenda and their rights and discover how they can serve others, treating them with gentleness, becoming the kind of person who meets others' needs.

The fourth blessing he gives is "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." This phrase "hunger and thirst" speaks of a passion that drives them. Righteousness is their true motivation. This idea of righteousness can be understood in a couple of ways. It can mean a desire of the heart to personally live righteously. But the word can also be translated "justice" and might have a larger meaning of hungering and thirsting for a right and just society. I think it is probably the more global idea that Jesus had in mind. It comes across practically like this: I passionately hunger to live rightly and influence my society to be a just and right society. Kingdom people want to do the right thing, and they want their church, their community, and their country to be about doing the right thing.

Now, passionately longing to be just and right in our hearts and in our actions and to call our nation and our community to rightness and justice goes against the grain in a society that is to a large degree built on manipulation, subtlety, often deceit, and competition. In Jesus' day, the Jews wanted righteousness and justice, but they wanted to define it their way. They wanted to measure it out to everyone else but not so much to themselves.

But Jesus says people who have a passion for righteousness and justice will be satisfied. Many people are dissatisfied day in and day out in all that they do, because their passions are directed toward things that can never satisfy. The way to find satisfaction of soul is to long for the right thing, and the right thing is righteousness or rightness before God, as a people and as individuals.

Flowing out of that, then, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful." Kingdom people are people of compassion and forgiveness. Farther on in the sermon there are practical applications of this. "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." (6:14-15.) Jesus means that kingdom people who rightly understand the nature of God's forgiveness must be forgiving people. Living compassionately and mercifully toward others has to play out in all arenas of our lives. So often our reaction to the things that go on around us is anger or judgmentalism or criticism. When we hear of something horrifying, it is so easy to react first in a sort of righteous indignation. A lot of times when people disagree with my point of view on something, I get angry about it, and I want to say it's because I'm standing up for God and for righteousness, but it's really because I can't believe they don't agree with me! Yet as kingdom people we must understand that we live in a sinful world. Without condoning the sinfulness, our hearts must be full of compassion. We must recognize the ravages of sin in other people's lives and long to see them rightly restored, so we come with compassion and mercy. The ones who extend mercy are the ones who receive mercy.

Pure, peacemaking, persecuted

Jesus moves on. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." This speaks of a heart that desires to be pure not merely on the surface, but at the core. This idea of purity also has the connotation of singleness of heart. I think here Jesus means that we are singly devoted to God, directed passionately toward God himself. Nothing else is important. We are willing to remove all barriers, all sins in our life, that we might find God. The promise is that those who are like this will see God. Many of us know that deep in our hearts what we really want is to have a personal walk with the living God. And this single-hearted devotion that is willing to purge out sinfulness has the wonderful blessing of intimate fellowship with our loving Father.

Next he says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Who are the real sons of God? They are the ones who are reconcilers, the ones who seek peace. We do that on several levels. First of all, we try to bring people to peace with God by introducing them to the wonderful story of forgiveness in Christ. But we are also reconcilers with one another. Christians ought to be leading the way in efforts to bring peace and reconciliation among groups. Back in the late sixties and early seventies, early in my Christian life, two different churches that I was attending and serving in, one in Atlanta and one in Memphis, went through the trauma of integrating for the first time. I remember the pain of confronting the segregationist past of those churches and opening the doors to African Americans for the first time. Years later, looking back on those experiences and hopefully having grown up in the Lord a little bit more, I wonder why it has been so hard for the Christians of our world to be peacemakers. Why is it that we have not been at the forefront of reconciliation on so many different levels?

That’s what Jesus calls us to. The society that he was speaking to was becoming ever more closed and exclusive. He calls them to break out of that mold and to be reconcilers, peacemakers, for these are the ones who are the sons of God. One of the key players in the ending of apartheid in the early reconciliation movements in South Africa was a believing Christian who was motivated by this very idea.

Finally, the last of the blessings (which might not seem a blessing at all): “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” Once again it is these to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. What Jesus is basically saying is “If you live as I am teaching you to live, if you are willing to stand up for what is right and live to the glory of God, this is going to run against the grain of human society. There is going to be opposition and hostility. You are going to be persecuted. But you are blessed when that happens because you are in the right place, and the kingdom of heaven is yours.”

Now having looked at these eight great blessings that are foundational to our spiritual lives, we have to ask ourselves what difference it makes.

This life is about Jesus

First, this description of what a kingdom person is like points us to Jesus. This is not a life that we can achieve on our own by just trying a little harder. This is a life that drives us to our knees and casts us upon the grace of Jesus. It is a life that can be found only in him as he graciously enters our lives and transforms us through the presence of his Spirit, calls us more and more to himself, and builds us up in him.

Second, this teaching reminds us that even as people who claim the name of Jesus and regularly come together to worship God, we can easily miss the point. I’ve tried to think of some of the ways that I miss the point of Jesus’ calling on my life. There are two broad categories that I’ll suggest to you. One is my contentment with where I am spiritually. I’ve been doing this awhile. I know the right things to do in a lot of places. I know how to look good spiritually when I need to. My spiritual life can descend into routines. That can happen to all of us. But Jesus is calling us out of that into a passionate relationship with him based on his mercy and grace.

Feeling content with where I am spiritually also means that it is easy for me to rationalize my sin. It’s so easy for us to think that we’re just not that bad; the things we do don’t really matter. There are always people we can compare ourselves to who are much worse--somebody who has shot his kids, or some guy who is cheating on his wife. But the danger with being content where we are is that it leads us to rationalize our sinfulness rather than seeing just how bankrupt we are without God’s grace and how

much we must rely upon that.

The second way I miss the point is in my desire to preserve my comfort zone in life. I want my life to be as smooth as possible. That influences the way I think about my society. I wonder how many times I've made decisions--even in whom I voted for--based on what I thought would preserve my status quo as a comfortable, middle-class, white American rather than on what was right and just. It is not an easy question, and I offer it only as something to think about. Do I desire the maintenance of my lifestyle, or do I desire justice and righteousness, the kingdom of God and his glory? How easy it is to wrap up a desire to maintain the status quo in Christian language, particularly in our country. We want to be comfortable and we want the government to protect that. But we must not allow ourselves to think like that. We have to stand with Jesus before our society.

Ultimately it comes down to this question: If our comforts, our freedom, or whatever are taken away, is Jesus enough? That is where happiness is--not in some American dream, or in some accumulation of importance or power, or even in the best relationship on earth. It is in Jesus as we let him form us into the kind of kingdom people he describes.

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Danny Hall
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