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JUST WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

Herald of Truth
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The most striking and characteristic feature of Matthew’s entire gospel,” someone has said, “occurs at chapter five, verses one through twelve. Here the eight beatitudes of Christ are found, those ‘winged words’ that contain ‘their own immortality.’” In last week’s lesson we suggested that the beatitudes reveal something of our proper attitude and conduct toward God, others and oneself. We also suggested that they describe the thoroughly happy man and provide us a complete description of the citizen of God’s kingdom. It is in the beatitudes of Matthew that we gain our picture of the Christian’s character and see the essential qualities of Christ’s followers. The beatitudes challenge every evil current within twentieth-century winds. Here are, in the words of one, “eight different elements of excellence, which may all be combined in one and the same man” (p. 261, A. Plummer, Hastings’ Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. I).

The beatitudes are a part of what is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. God as our Father and our Sovereign brilliantly appears throughout this matchless lesson. As our Heavenly Father He gives us life and is the source of all our strength. When the beatitudes describe those who are “poor in spirit”, “meek”, and “merciful”, they do so with full knowledge that “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). As our sovereign Lord and God He reveals His will to us conveying that revelation through Christ for this age (Hebrews 1:1, 2). When the beatitudes remind us of very real conditions of evil and persecution, they do so within the framework of a sermon that emphasizes God as “our Guide through the perplexities of life.”

With our previous discussion of “the benefits of the beatitudes” as a background for today’s study, I ask you to spend the next few minutes with me finding the answer from God’s Word to this question, “Just what is happiness?”

A young matron, wife of an intelligent and promising writer, came to my office not long ago with this request, “I want to live a happy life.” A popular song and a unique little book both carry the title “Happiness Is.” We are a happiness-crazed people, with no happiness!

First, I want to stress that the beatitudes of Jesus are concerned with happiness — for today and tomorrow, for the present and the future. Happiness arises out of the very nature of the first word in each of the beatitudes, “Blessed.” Recently, I consulted eight well-known English translations of the New Testament, and five of the eight gave “happy” as the most suitable rendering for “Blessed.” One authority has said that to be happy in the sense of the beatitudes is “… something like ‘enjoying God’s favour and destined to enter his eternal kingdom’.” (p. 45, A. W. Argyle, Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible, Matthew). Another well-known student of this term suggests, “The meaning of ‘blessed’ is simply ‘Oh the happiness of …’.” (p. 385, The Twentieth Century Bible Commentary.) With these thoughts on the meaning of the word Jesus uses to express the favored state of those described in the beatitudes, I want us to read the beatitudes from the American Bible Society’s Today’s English Version.

Happy are those who know that they are spiritually poor: the kingdom of heaven belongs to them! Happy are those that mourn: God will comfort them! Happy are the meek: they will receive what God has promised!
Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires: God will satisfy them fully!
Happy are those who show mercy to others: God will show mercy to them!
Happy are the pure in heart: they will see God!

Happy are those who work for peace among men: God will call them his sons!

Happy are those who suffer persecution because they do what God requires: the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!

Happy are you when men insult you and mistreat you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Rejoice and be glad, because a great reward is kept for you in heaven. This is how men mistreated the prophets who lived before you. (Matthew 5:1-12, TEV)

It is here, within these great truths, that the “low” and “carnal” views of human happiness begin to fade. One of the most prevalent modern attempts at happiness, vain pride or self worship, is directly countered. “Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor,” “Happy are those who mourn,” and “Happy are the meek,” do not sound like the movie star’s press agent designed life of publicity. Nor does it sound like most of our cheap, desperate attempts at attention and publicity. The Apostle John says that “vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:16, 17). It may look like the only way now but what about tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?

Modern man is also convinced that happiness is found in the complete satisfaction of one’s lust and greed. You desire to break a competitor, so you break him! You want another man’s wife, so you get her! But there is always another competitor who looms in the broken one’s place and the other wife’s heart. That may neither frighten nor sober some of us, but the next verse then warns, “And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever” (I John 2:16). It may look like the only way now but what about tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?

Jesus was fully aware of the world’s actual condition. This is no visionary fanatic who talks of imagined personalities, evil, misunderstanding and other adverse conditions. The marvel of it all is that the life so described by the beatitudes, when lived, begins to experience even now the very compensations Jesus promised. In the midst of His outrageously unjust trial Jesus said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence” (John 18:36). He lived in a real world of hate, prejudice, misunderstanding, sin, and death but he lived on a far higher plane and overcame it all. That is what the beatitudes promise us as they describe life on the higher level for each of us.

Jesus also suggests in the beatitudes that the very opposite kind of people to those described by most are truly happy. It is this very paradox that represents the core of Jesus’ ministry. To keep your life you must lose it in fulfillment of God’s plan. He taught (Matthew 10:39). Peter on one occasion failed to realize the paradoxical nature of Christianity because he thought like men rather than thinking like Christ (Matthew 16:21-24). To think like Christ requires denial of self and discipline to Christ, Peter and the other disciples were told (Matthew 16:24).

There is still a third observation I want to make about Jesus’ conception of happiness in the beatitudes. Happiness involves more than oneself. It grows out of one’s relationship with others. The “meek,” the “merciful,” and the “peacemakers” are those who think first of others, who involve themselves in the plights of others. We are not surprised at this avenue to happiness. Jesus taught that the summation of God’s revelation to Israel was found in two commandments: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind;” and “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:35-40).

And finally, Jesus shows in the beatitudes that happiness is a condition of heart and life rather than either position or possession. It is not what you have, it is not who you are, it is what you are, that counts. Jesus says in these great truths. So He taught that if we concentrate on “laying up treasures upon the earth” there is only one ultimate conclusion — loss either by theft or by time or death! (Matthew 6:19-21), “The peculiar characteristic of these opening sentences is, the kind of man whom Christ pronounces happy. The Beatitudes open up to us a new world of spiritual character and holy beauty, and consequent joy, such as had not entered into the heart of man to conceive. They express, lies, not in outward circumstances but in inward life,” someone has written (n. 55, 56, W. C. Smith, The Sermon Bible, Matt. I-XXI).

The happiness that we are promised in the beatitudes comes from our God who is Father and Sovereign Lord. “The pure in heart . . . shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). “The poor in spirit” and those “persecuted for righteousness’ sake” are given citizenship in “the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3, 10). “The peacemakers” are “called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9).

The happiness of the beatitudes comes from the Saviour whose blood “frees” us from sin and whose life “teaches” us how to please God. Peter admonishes us to “follow his steps,” this Jesus Christ, “who his own self bare our sins in his body upon the tree, that we, having died unto sins, might live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed” (I Peter 2:21-24).

The happiness of the beatitudes is possible today because they represent an honest confrontation of today’s real world with God’s radically different standards. There is no mistaking the turmoil and the burden of life today. The beatitudes are not fairy tale descriptions of some fantasy land. But once we have seen the world for what it is, we turn to God who reveals His way and gives us through
Christ Jesus the power to live in the kingdom with Him (Colossians 1:13). The Jesus who taught the beatitudes knew suffering (Hebrews 5:8), experienced temptation (Hebrews 4:15, 16), and overcame every form of evil and death (Luke 4:16-21), all for us. What we are told in these magnificent statements is "how to serve God in the midst of suffering and evil."

There is no happiness in sin. God's Word parallels the bitter experience in each of our lives. Sin is death (Romans 6:23). Sin is separation from everything good and meaningful (Isaiah 59:1, 2). Sin is inability to accomplish the great things God has planned for us (Romans 7:18). Sin is despair and leads to spiritual death (Romans 7:24; Philippians 3:18, 19).

So we come to Jesus and through Him to God (John 14:6; Ephesians 2:18). We come in obedient faith that He is God's Son desiring Him to be our Lord (John 3:36; Romans 10:9, 10). We give Him our allegiance before men out of a new condition of heart created by repentance or a complete turning from sin (Acts 2:38). Whereupon we meet Him and are united with Him in baptism, thus receiving the "cleanness" from sin that only His blood can provide and accepting His "life" without which happiness is not possible (Colossians 2:12; 3:1-4).

John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program. He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series. A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth. He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.