

# OUR SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

## Matthew 5:1-12

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I've never met anyone who doesn't want to be happy. Happiness is even called an "unalienable right" in the United States Declaration of Independence. Parents want their children to be happy. And, in fact, our own happiness is dependent on the happiness of those closest to us. You may have heard the saying, "You're only as happy as your most unhappy child" or you may have seen the t-shirt which says, "If Mama ain't happy, then nobody's happy." But what do we mean by happiness? Is it a virtuous goal? What does the Bible have to say about it?

The Sermon on the Mount is a collection of Jesus' teachings, the go-to place in the Bible where you can find the essence of Jesus' message. These little sermons were delivered to Jews living in what is now the northern part of Israel, in the region of Galilee. They were living under Roman occupation. Largely poor, they earned their living off the land or the sea. They relied heavily upon the educated rabbis to teach them how to apply their Scriptures to their everyday lives.

They knew their history as Jews. A history of exile and deportation, of being governed by nations other than their own. They paid enormous taxes to support a society from which they derived few benefits. The benefits went to Roman citizens, to the wealthy. The people to whom Jesus spoke had a shorter life expectancy, a higher infant mortality rate, compared to Romans. Their living conditions were noisier, more crowded, more dangerous, less sanitary. Their children received an inferior education, entered the workforce at a younger age, and nurtured few dreams of social advancement. They were a downtrodden people.

Some of them were desperate for hope, for good news, for change. To these people, Jesus speaks. His message is not entirely original; he knows the wisdom of the Hebrew

scripture. He knows the prophets, the psalmist, the rabbis who preceded him. But his voice is entirely his own, designated for this group of people at this particular time. He says to them, "God is with you." "You haven't been abandoned, God hasn't forgotten what was promised. You are still the people who bear that promise and this is still the promised land." And here, Jesus says, is where you will find God: in the goodness of life well-lived. Don't look for military victories, don't clamor for political power, don't expect material wealth. All of those avenues are roads leading to nowhere. If you want to find God, be about God's work, take on God's agenda as your own. Wherever there are people doing their best to redeem an imperfect world, there we will find God. Call it happiness if you will, or blessing. It is not something we wait for but something we create.

We've talked before about Jesus' method of motivating people. He wasn't one to issue edicts, orders, threats. He didn't tell people what to do. His was the language of imagery, metaphor, story. He painted pictures and invited people in to the new world he was imagining for them. His world, God's world, God's realm. "Look," he said, "at what blessedness is like." Look at what happiness really is. It's knowing, first of all, and this is the one Jesus begins with, that material possessions do not make us happy. When I visited the Senior High Mission Trip last week and talked to them on Thursday night worship, I said to them, "I hope that you remember how good it feels to be of service to other people. You know it this week. You are experiencing the joy of service. But when you get home, you'll be tempted to forget. Because the messages we receive all tell us that happiness is to be found in things we buy - food, drink, clothing, entertainment, cars, whatever. But that happiness is so fleeting. Buying things leads to wanting to buy more things. It doesn't lead to a feeling of satisfaction, of contentment. It doesn't lead to that fulfilling word "enough."

If material possessions were the key to happiness, then it wouldn't be the case that we, the richest country at the richest time in history, are a people of such anxiety. If having things led to happiness, we wouldn't be so depressed. Why is it that people in Manhattan are desperately

seeking one sort of pleasure after another? Why is it that people in Beverly Hills are so addicted? When are we going to admit that having more expensive things doesn't lead to happier lives?

In the Beatitudes, the words "blessed" and "happy" are interchangeable. It is the same concept. Happiness comes when we are surrounded by people who will comfort us when we are broken hearted. When we know that we can't live this life all alone, that difficulties are inevitable, but that we can survive them by relying on one another. Happiness is found in patience and perseverance, in giving and receiving, in striving for peace and justice.

Jesus would paint the picture today of hospice volunteers who sit with the dying, nurses who care for babies born addicted, police and firefighters who race into collapsing buildings, Habitat for Humanity volunteers who give of their time to create a dignified home for someone they do not know. Jesus would show us a political prisoner whose life has been shaped by strong conviction, and a person who visits in the prison. Teachers and social workers, especially those in our inner cities. Counselors who listen to the teenager whose arms are striped by repeated cutting. Foster parents, and any parent who embraces the child who is difficult to love.

Happiness is found in the life that has had to dig more deeply, to leave the shallow waters to find the source of extraordinary strength.

Did you know that there is a new kind of science, called the science of happiness? Happiness is now a field of research study. You may take an online course - here's a little blurb for it: "A free eight-week Science of Happiness course that will offer practical, research-backed tips on living a happy and meaningful life." Yes, it's free, but if you want to pay \$49 for the same content, you can receive an official certificate of completion.

Academics are now studying the habits of people who describe themselves as happy. They conclude that it is possible for anyone to become happier through focus and attention. Each book about the science of happiness contains a list of the things that happy people do. Their lists are remarkably similar to the life Jesus describes in the Beatitudes. When people engage in

activities that draw them closer to God, they feel happier, they feel blessed. The practice of gratitude is essential. It makes every single list. People who concentrate on their reasons for gratitude say that every aspect of their lives improves. Another ingredient to a happy life is service to others. Whether it's making a meal for the new parent next door, or going on a mission trip, or making a financial donation, extending yourself to improve someone else's life will always make you feel better, too.

One of the happiest persons I know is Anil Henry, a medical missionary in India commissioned from this congregation. If you haven't met him yet, you'll have the opportunity to in September. It isn't his surroundings that make him happy – he lives in a dusty town with almost no amenities. No nice restaurants, no movie theater, no sports teams. It would be very hard for me to be happy there. But Anil's happiness doesn't come from anything external. He finds joy in serving, in providing medical care for people who otherwise would have no access to it, and his happiness fuels incredible productivity. Every year he dreams of another project, and every year one comes to fruition. A nursing school. A cancer treatment clinic. A van to take medical care into the rural areas. A new wing for the elementary school next door. A dorm where families can stay while their loved one is hospitalized. And on and on it goes. A contagious joy emanates from him. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

Another familiar verse in the Bible reminds us that there are seasons in life, a time for every purpose under heaven. It is not always the right season for direct active service. If you are a parent raising young children, that sacred work IS your mission and purpose. Bringing up children who will have a heart for service is a gift to the future of the world. When children see their parents donating time, talent and treasure, they learn those practices for themselves. I'm still learning from my parents. When my dad retired from full-time ministry, he became trained to

be a visitor in the federal prison near Atlanta. He visited two prisoners once a month. One of the prisoners was not visited by any other person. The one hour a month with my dad was something he very much looked forward to; it made a real difference in his life. When my parents moved to Ohio, my dad began volunteering for the local community service agency. He'll be 86 this summer, but every Wednesday night he picks up the day-old bread from Panera and delivers it the next morning so it can be distributed by the local food pantry. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

This was a happy week in Cleveland. Many people commented on it. Whether you were at the parade, or standing in line to buy a t-shirt, or just in traffic, it seemed that people were in a better mood than usual. What would it take to harness that good will and use it to make a lasting difference? How could a basketball championship turn into better public schools? How could the lifting of a curse turn into the lifting up of children out of poverty? How can we prove that we love every child in the city as much as we adore our professional athletes? That would be a real blessing.

There's no secret to happiness. It's right under our noses. God has created us for happiness. God has given us life as a gift, and God wants us to enjoy this life. God wants us to love ourselves, not in an indulgent way, but so that we can love others. God wants us to serve, not resentfully, but knowing that service draws us closer to the source, that one whose being is love itself. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Resource used for this sermon: [What Jesus Meant](#), by Erik Kolbell