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SERMON

Happiness - God's or Yours?

Matthew 5:1-12

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

“The *biggest* obstacle to happiness is frivolous emotions. Seems obvious, right? But we are the ones that make our happiness contingent upon if x, y or z happens, then we’ll be happy. Sometimes it does and we’re happy...temporarily. Then we find another stipulation to fixate on; and another; and another. The best thing we can do is practice healthy emotional detachment. Your own mind is the disease *and* the cure. Master your mind, master your emotions, and master your life.”

“Happiness is not a life devoid of troubles; it is a chosen state in spite of them.”

And finally, “some people bring happiness wherever they go; others bring it whenever they go.”

As is so often true of many things, our ideas of happiness are often fleeting and never really bring us to that state of rest, wholeness, and contentment that we so desperately desire. We strive after money, fame of some kind or another, all sorts of things just to be happy but in the end we find that no matter what it is that we have been pursuing the happiness always seems to elude us and is never achieved.

In our scripture today Jesus talks about that state of happiness. But, when we look closely, we see that true happiness, the kind of happiness that God offers to us, comes in quite a different way than we might think.

I want to give a little background to this story in Matthew. The first thing we notice is that this section is entitled “the Sermon on the Mount.” For Matthew and his audience this is significant. Matthew is writing to a predominantly Jewish group of believers and so they would immediately see the significance. In particular they would remember the other time when someone spoke from a mountain to the people to bring God’s word to them. The Hebrews had left Egypt and were led into the wilderness of Sinai to a place where they were to meet with God. There Moses and the priests ascended the mountain, and then Moses continued to the top, alone, and met with God. Moses returned to the people and because they could not bear to hear the voice of God, he read to them the 10 Commandments and all of the Law. This was codified and became the rule of this community of believers. If you do this, or don’t do that, then you are one of us, and therefore one of God’s people.

Matthew repeats this image with Jesus, up on a mountain, speaking to the people but instead of reading out a list of do’s and don’ts for them to follow, Jesus proclaims the things that make us “happy” or “blessed.” Unlike the Law given by Moses, the people here are listening to that “Voice” which the Hebrews didn’t want to hear.

Speaking of the Law, it’s interesting to note that when Jesus talks about the Law, He states that He is not abolishing it. Rather, when you read Jesus’ comments about the Law and the 10 Commandments, He presents them in a context that shows how these 10 rules were really meant to be a way of life. For example, when He talks about “Thou shall not kill,” He goes right to the heart of the matter by saying that even if you are angry with your brother or sister, you have already committed murder. He shows us that it’s not a matter of following a set of rules but it’s letting all of those rules set the tone of our life. It’s allowing those rules to be the conduit through which love flows and out of love, we don’t kill, or rob, or lie, etc.

Now we have Jesus up on a mountain, seated among a large group of people and proclaiming to them the “rules” for being happy but these rules sound very different than the ones that Moses proclaimed; that’s because these are not laws to be obeyed but rather, as their name implies, attitudes that must come from the heart.

Let’s look at the word that starts each one of these – blessed. Another way to translate this word from the Greek is with the word “happy” but for me that gives a very superficial meaning. The Greek word is *Makarios*. It means “supremely blessed; fortunate; well off.” In these sayings Jesus is not only stating that the different characters are blessed, but also the *nature* of that which is the highest good. Therefore in the first statement not only are you blessed by being poor in spirit, but the attitude of BEING poor in spirit is a blessing.

Now let’s look at each of these to get a glimpse of what Jesus was saying to the people on the hillside and keep in mind that these were very radical ideas to His listeners. Even today these cut across the grain of everyday life because they are so different from the norm of our society and culture.

- **Blessed are the Poor in Spirit:** This first beatitude is said to be the summation of all of the rest; and it’s from this first one that all the rest come forth. In Luke it simply says “blessed are the poor.” Matthew adds, “In spirit.” Being poor is not necessarily a blessing so Matthew’s addition, “in spirit” takes in the whole breadth of being poor: it is those who come to God as children, knowing their lack of knowledge and wisdom; it is those who are satisfied with simplicity and forsake the wild extravagances of life, and who like Thoreau can say, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately; to have only the necessities of life...” It is those who are the peasants, the ones whom the upper class despises and turns away from them. These are the ones who have discovered the entry gate into the Kingdom.
- **Blessed are Those Who Mourn:** We all have experienced times of grief and sorrow, some greater than others, and the pain that we feel is real because of that loss. There is comfort for that, but this mourning and the resulting comfort goes even further. It also extends to that feeling of hurt when we see others being abused, oppressed, injured; those with seemingly no one to stand alongside them when they are suffering under cruel injustice; or when we simply look at the sad state of our cities, our country, the world, and just like the saints who have died in Christ cry out, as the book of Revelation says, “Lord how long?” There is comfort. Comfort in the hope of Christ, in the faith that says, “Hang in there! God hears; God cares; God will avenge.”
- **Blessed are the Meek:** This is not a weak state of being; to be meek is not the negative connotation that our modern usage has placed on this word. It is the opposite of self-assertion and self-interest. As I heard a teacher say one time, “meekness is simply a right view of one’s self.” I like the definition that Strong’s Greek Dictionary uses to define the Greek word: “Meekness is that attitude of spirit in which we accept God’s dealings with us as good and therefore without disputing or resisting. The meek person truly acknowledges him/her-self as a sinner, and this teaches us to endure the provocations of others; it is wholly relying on God to defend them against injustice.”
- **Blessed are Those Who Hunger and Thirst After Righteousness:** These words are very strong. The word translated “hunger” means literally “intense desire.” The word for “thirst” is even stronger. Having lived in that part of the world for a period of time you learn very quickly the importance of water and when you don’t have it, you crave it with a desire that you never knew existed; and then when your hunger and thirst are finally satisfied, it is a joy like you’ve never known before.

- **Blessed are the Merciful:** this statement runs contrary to so much of our life and culture today just as it did in Jesus' day. The Romans were a proud people and despised pity. The Stoics might offer some aid but never real compassion. The Pharisees were harsh in their judgments, and the common reason for suffering was because of sin. This statement of Jesus flew in the face of conventional wisdom. To be one who showed mercy, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, was almost unheard of in Jesus' day.
- **Blessed are the Pure in Heart:** Of all of the beatitudes this one is the brightest star and probably seems to be the least attainable. Which part is more beyond our ability to achieve: a pure heart or seeing God? "Heart" means the whole person including motives. "Pure" is used to describe white linen or gold or glass. It refers to rightness of mind and singleness of motives. I liken this to what a pastor told me once, "Having found a decision to be wrong, I'd rather face God being able to say, 'I was trying to follow You,' rather than having done nothing because I wasn't sure."
- **Blessed are the Peacemakers:** "Peace" is something for which we all hope, and for which we all pray but "peace" in the Bible is much more than a cessation of hostilities. In Hebrew *shalom* refers to health, welfare, prosperity, friendliness, completeness, and even perfection. Jesus was the ultimate peacemaker. At one point, He said "I did not come to bring peace but a sword..." and then in His last words to His disciples He said, "Peace I leave with you...not as the world gives do I give to you." Peace is not something that just appears; rather it takes work to achieve it and to maintain it.

And the last 3 we'll take together:

- **Blessed are They Which are Persecuted** – *theirs is the Kingdom; blessed when you are reviled, persecuted and slandered for righteousness; rejoice – for so were the prophets persecuted:* This is not out of place in our day but I do think it might need some work. Christianity is at risk of being condemned when it is tepid and can be ignored. Our faith should be dynamic as it cuts across the grain of society and this is exactly what Kingdom living is all about. We do not join in with the status quo rather we are to stand out, separate, but, we have to do this for the right reason. Persecution should only happen because we stand for righteousness; we should experience being reviled because we claim the name of Jesus. Then, we should "rejoice," literally "leap for joy." We should not seek it out but when it comes, count yourself among the supremely blessed, because you are in the same company as the prophets and saints who literally gave their lives before you. "Behold what a great cloud of witnesses surrounds us."

After this section Jesus goes on to explain the 10 Commandments, the Law, as motivations that should cause us to live out the life that God has given us. A life that shows forth His love, and grace and mercy as exemplified in the Tabernacle service, and later the Temple. Thus living in His Love, we worship God, we honor our father and mother, we do not rob, or kill or desire that which belongs to another but rather rejoice in their prosperity.

So, too, the beatitudes from this sermon we cannot cherry pick to decide of which group we are a part, rather these are all attitudes, in total, that should inhabit every follower of Jesus. These are the attitudes by which, as the apostle said, shows how we love one another. Our love is not just those within the community of faith, but these are the attitudes which propel us to go into "the highways and byways," and to be among the people, to sit alongside them as equally poor, to mourn with them, being meek among them, to help ease their hunger and thirst, to be merciful to their plight, to do this in pureness of motive, that we might bring peace to them. Then, if they reject us, mock us, or are cruel to us, we have the assurance that we have done the right thing. We have presented Christ and the love of God and His mercy to the world. Amen.