

“#Blessed: The Happiness of Poverty”

Matthew 5:1-12 • Ezekiel 36:22-36

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • January 13, 2019

Let me ask you something. What makes you happy? I bet if you thought about it for a moment you could write down at least one thing that makes you happy on the front of your bulletin. Maybe it's your home or your shiny new car. Maybe it's your career, the work that you do, or a hobby you enjoy. Or opening your retirement account statement and seeing how well your investments have done or your accomplishments. Henry Ford said "There is no happiness except in the realization that we have accomplished something." Many of us find happiness in our family. George Burns said happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family...in another city."

Albert Schweitzer said that happiness is nothing more than health and a poor memory. In the last 10 years or so happiness has become big business. People have been researching and writing a lot about happiness and especially about the link between happiness and health. In fact, Amazon lists over 50,000 books about happiness with more published every month. There's *The Happiness Advantage: How a Positive Brain Fuels Success in Work and Life*. There are books called *The Happiness Advantage*, *The Happiness Project*, and *The Happiness Trap*. There are books that promise happiness in 7 days or 30 days or 101 days. And you can apparently become happy through 7 strategies or 8 steps, 20 life lessons or 52 small changes. What most of these books DON'T discuss, though, is what God says will make you happy.

This morning we're starting a new series looking at the Beatitudes, a series of short statements that Jesus makes at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. They're called beatitudes from the Latin word for *happiness* or *blessed*. Each line of Jesus' first sermon begins with the words, "Blessed are..." and a description of the people who are blessed or happy and then the reason they are happy.

Leading up to this point Matthew has been carefully and intentionally revealing Jesus' identity to us. We've been told by Old Testament prophecy, by angels, by the wise men, by John the Baptist, by God, and by Satan that Jesus is the Messiah, the King, the Son of David, the Son of God. We have seen that he is the one who fulfills all of the prophecies and that he has proved his identity by healing people with all kinds of diseases and afflictions.

It's important for us to notice that Jesus heals *before* he teaches. As Dale Allison puts it, "Before the crowds hear the Messiah's word they are the object of his compassion and healing. The first act of the Messiah is not the imposition of his commandments but the giving of himself." The same principal holds true today. Before you and I are even the least bit interested in what the Bible tells us to do, we have to experience the grace and forgiveness of Jesus. Likewise, before we can tell other people about Jesus we have to earn the right to be heard. Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.

So now with his identity firmly established and proven Jesus begins to teach. He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted." Some Bibles translate the word as "blessed," as the ESV does. Others translate it as "happy," which is also an acceptable translation. But neither one really conveys the idea. Fortunate is probably a better translation these days. The idea is really complete satisfaction and joy.

The thing that should stand out to you about this list is that it is exactly the opposite of the way we normally think. He says that the ones who are truly happy are the ones who are poor in spirit, who mourn, the meek, the merciful, and most surprising those who are

persecuted. Those don't sound like the kind of happiness we read about in a Hallmark card. But that's the nature of the kingdom of heaven. It's not what you think. It's radically different from the kingdom of this world. A person who is blessed is someone who is favored by God and is therefore happy or fortunate.

This morning we want to look at the first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. When he says *poor in spirit* he's not necessarily talking about economic poverty, although the word he uses does mean to be destitute or begging. But I think there's more going on here. I think what Jesus is saying is "Those who are spiritually bankrupt are most fortunate." Now you might be thinking what an odd thing to say. Why would Jesus say it's good to be *spiritually* poor? Well, to be poor in spirit refers to being separated from God because of sin. The truth is that everyone falls into that category. Every one of us is marred by sin and we're unable to fix it. As Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

But I'm pretty sure that Jesus wasn't saying that sin is what makes us blessed. In fact, it's just the opposite. Paul says in Ephesians 2, "you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." That doesn't sound like being blessed. So what IS Jesus saying here? To help us understand, let's look at the second chapter of Mark's gospel. Jesus was having dinner at the home of Levi the tax collector. Mark says Jesus was eating with a number of well-known sinners and other tax collectors, something prohibited by Jewish law. When the Pharisees complained about Jesus eating with them, Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." He's saying that he came for those

who are spiritually destitute, those who have no hope.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he's not saying that the blessing comes from spiritual poverty. Instead, he means that the blessing comes when we realize our spiritual neediness because of our sinful nature, seeing ourselves as we truly are. If you don't realize you're sick you aren't going to go to the doctor. In the same way, if you don't realize that you are spiritually sick you aren't going to go to the Great Physician. Of course this goes against our sense of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. We want to feel like we're in control But Jesus reminds us that when you realize your poverty, that you have nothing of value to offer to God, that you are broke without any way to get out of this kind of poverty, only then will you realize how fortunate you are because of what Jesus has done for you. When you finally get to that point your life will never be the same again. You will have joy that words can't describe. Jesus says that when you reach that point you discover that you are part of the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is not like an earthly kingdom that has a particular geographic place. Rather, the kingdom of heaven refers to the reign or rule of God. It's what guides and controls your thinking and actions. Wherever people are willing to submit their lives to God's will, the kingdom of heaven has come. With the coming of Jesus the kingdom arrived on earth. But all we have to do is turn on the evening news to know that things on earth are not the way they should be. So while the kingdom of heaven has begun here, we still look forward to the time when Jesus returns and makes everything right. And that's the point of the Beatitudes. Rather than being primarily a set of instructions on how to get to heaven, the Beatitudes are a message of hope. Each one is a declaration of how things are and how things will be.

So what does this mean for us today? I think it means that each of us needs to examine

ourselves and see our true condition. We are bankrupt and helpless before God. But once you admit your condition you discover that Jesus calls you “blessed.” I think John Piper puts it best when he says, “Blessed are the people who feel keenly their inadequacies and their guilt and their failures and their helplessness and their unworthiness and their emptiness—who don’t try to hide these things under a cloak of self-sufficiency, but who are honest about

them and grieved and driven to the grace of God.” When you and I can be honest with ourselves and honest with God we can then be honest with each other. Rather than trying to get our lives “together” before coming to church, we can be real with one another and help each other along the way. We can begin living in the kingdom of heaven today.

Amen.