

“Blessed or Happy?”

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Matthew 5:1-12.

What does it mean to be blessed? We sometimes think of a person leading a “Blessed” life. Everything goes their way, all the doors open before them. But if we are blessed, who are we blessed by? Often when we say a person has had a blessed life, we don’t mean that they have been blessed by God. Most of the time, we mean that they have had a life that has gone well, without difficulty. That could be the result of good luck, or merely being born in the right place and the right time, in the right culture, even in the right body. A white man starting out in 1950 would have a much easier time getting ahead than a Black woman, or someone of colour. The blessed life we lead may have much to do with who our society thinks should get ahead, and who should be held back.

When Jesus pronounced that the poor and those who mourn were blessed, he was speaking to people who did not feel terribly blessed. The people Jesus hung out with were poor fishermen, farmers and peasants. Any surplus wealth produced by the region was shipped off to Rome. Few people were wealthy. Most people knew what it was like to be poor, and most of them knew they would probably live and die in the same few towns in Judea and Galilee. It was not a time when people felt blessed.

So, it must have been quite a surprise when Jesus started his talk on that mountain with the words “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” At face value that just sounds ridiculous. The poor are not wealthy in anything, much less citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

But we should remember that Jesus did not say these words to the crowd on that day. They were below, by the seashore, waiting for Jesus to work some miracles. He would talk to them later. For now, he has drawn his disciples up the mountain to have a private talk with them. These are the men he wants to be the foundation of the Jesus movement, for years to come.

These men will be expected to make many sacrifices to spread the good news about Jesus. We know that they will be shunned, jailed, beaten, mocked, and most of them will get killed for it. It

is unclear whether Jesus can see this, but he could certainly guess that lots of trouble lay ahead for these young men. In his pep talk on the mountain, he mentions people being persecuted for righteousness' sake, and being ridiculed. So, Jesus has a sense of what is coming. It is many things, but it will not be easy.

So, Jesus says that they will be blessed. When they live in poverty, when they mourn the life they have abandoned, when they make peace, when they are persecuted. They will be blessed by God, even when they are flat out miserable. They will know that God approves of what they are doing, and at the end of it all, they will be welcomed into God's arms, blessed for all their hard labour.

That's what today's text says, but it isn't actually what Jesus said. In the original Greek of the New Testament, Jesus does not say "blessed are the poor in spirit." In fact, he doesn't mention blessings at all in this whole speech.

Makarios = "happy"

Instead, he uses the word "Makarios," which means "happy." So, a more accurate translation would be:

"Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

On Me

Sounds different doesn't it? Instead of giving the assurance that up in heaven God is blessing the disciples, Jesus switches the focus back down onto the Earth. Happiness is something we feel spontaneously, right here, right now. It's local and internal. And when you put it that way, this passage seems very strange indeed.

Jesus loves saying things that turn normal meanings upside down. Everyone back then knew that if you want to find happy people, go find rich people - those who have enough money to

enjoy themselves. Indeed, that was the meaning of makarios, it was associated with the wellbeing that comes from worldly wealth. But Jesus is saying something different. He lists a whole bunch of people who are at the bottom of life - the poor, those who mourn, the meek - and he says that they are happy. Which is clearly not true, or not true most of the time. Who is happy when they mourn? That's the opposite of happiness. When we mourn it feels like we may never be happy again. So what is Jesus talking about?

Jesus is talking to his disciples, trying to wake them up that there is more than one kind of happiness in life. There's the kind that comes from what we call the good life - nice car, good home, enough money to go to restaurants when you want to - that kind of happiness comes from material things. But we all know that you can have all of that and not be happy. Trouble comes to the comfortable, too. Lovers break up, children reject you, people get depression, a loved one dies. Externals are no guarantee of happiness. In fact, in English, the word

Happiness

“Hap” = chance

happiness derives from the word “hap” which means chance.

“Hap” = chance

“Perhaps”

“Happenstance”

“Happening”

This gives us words like “happenstance”, “happen” or “perhaps”. The word “hap” suggests that worldly happiness comes and goes, it is not stable or reliable.

So Jesus takes this state, which everyone wants and associates with the material good life, and he turns it upside down. It's the meek and the poor and those who mourn, and those who are

persecuted who are happy. This is not the worldly kind of happiness, obviously. So what kind of happiness does he mean?

He is speaking to his disciples, men who have left behind their fishing and farming to follow him. They have taken a voluntary vow of poverty, although they may not realize it yet. Jesus could have said “blessed are the poor in spirit,” but that implies that whatever terrible things happen to the disciples, at least God approves of what they are doing, so they’ll be rewarded after they die. But he doesn’t say that. Instead, he says that they will be happy. In this life, even though they have chosen poverty, and a life that may lead to persecution.

Jesus is widening the definition of happiness. He’s saying there is a kind of happiness that begins when you give things up. When you stop clinging to worldly things and assuming they will bring you happiness. This is a spiritual happiness that monks and hermits cultivate by taking vows of poverty. They want to clear away the clutter of a busy life so they can open their souls to God and each other. This is an example of what Buddhists call non-attachment. The spiritual space that opens up inside you when you let go of things you used to cling to.

None of us here are hermits, but many of us will learn that often what we cling to is not what brings happiness. The opinions and approval of others can seem empty when they prove fickle or unreliable. People who seek likes on social media depend on the approval of strangers who are easily distracted, and may not even be human beings. We may buy clothes or other things to make us happy, but they wear out, and fashions change. They, too, are fickle. Often material things are very exciting when we first buy them. They can bring us temporary happiness. But human beings get used to things too quickly. Yesterday’s marvel becomes tomorrow’s normal. It can take a long time to realize that much of what we count on to make us happy is not reliable. As the Book of Ecclesiastes says, everything is like vapour, it just evaporates.

Jesus offers an invitation to a different kind of happiness. One that starts where attachment to the world ends. He offers it to a small group of men who will give up their wealth and their families. They will give up their attachment to their old life, which will initially induce a feeling of mourning. Then, they will become meek. In this reduced, liberated, state, where the world only expects misery, these men who are open to God will find happiness. Not just God’s approval, God’s blessing, but happiness. It is the happiness we sense in spiritual leaders, like the Dalai Lama and the late Pope Francis. The ability to laugh and smile even when life is very hard. That kind of happiness comes from feeling deeply connected to God. So connected that it can carry people through even when times get hard. We hear this kind of happiness in the words of the Apostle Paul when he is in jail, facing possible execution, and yet he speaks of rejoicing because he feels Christ within him:

17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. 18 Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. (Phillipians 2:17-18)

What about for us? Few of us will sell all our goods and become nuns or monks, or impoverished saints. It is like the Olympics. Every year we watch people do things with their bodies that seem impossible for us. 4 minute miles, 2 hour marathons, gymnastic routines that seem to require a body made of rubber bands. But those athletes are human like us, they show us what our bodies can do with enough training and skill. Our souls are also just as capable of connecting to God as the disciples were. We can all choose to detach from some things in our life so we can have more room for the Spirit. Being wealthy, and expecting wealth to make us happy are two different things. One can have wealth and not expect it to give us meaning. Christ offers us a different kind of happiness, that starts when we let go of the world, even just some of it. Afterall, Christ provides nine possibilities, not just one.

You may be wondering, if this scripture is really about happiness, why does it get translated as "blessings?" Back when the Bible was translated into English, the words for blessing and happiness were interchangeable. 500 years ago, Christians assumed that happy people were close to God. So, they used the word "blessed" because it had a holy feel, but they also meant happiness. As late as the 19th century, dictionaries defined blessings in terms of a happiness derived from God.

But then society shifted. We became more secular. The idea that being close to God could result in happiness faded, so the word blessing got stranded. It still meant God's approval, up there, but it lost its sense of happiness down here for those who followed God. That was a loss. But together we can revive it. By leaning more on God than the shifting sands of the world, we can find a happiness that lasts. One that can be with us until our life is reduced to just a bed, a lamp and a bedside table. Happy are those who can be open to God. They will be blessed - and happy. Amen.