

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

INTRODUCTION

A. Christ's Concern

Many Christians wonder if they are experiencing true happiness. The happiness of believers is one of Christ's main concerns. That is evident because Jesus' first recorded sermon (the Sermon on the Mount) begins with the theme of happiness. In Matthew 5:1-12 the Greek word translated "blessed" is used nine times and simply means "happy." Those two words can be freely interchanged when reading that portion of Scripture.

LESSON I - THE CONTEXT

The first twelve verses of the Sermon on the Mount explain the purpose of Jesus' sermon: that believers know true happiness. The rest of the sermon deals with how happiness is possible and the life-style that produces true happiness.

A. The Biblical Context

1. New Testament verses Old Testament

a) A new perspective

Matthew 5-7 initiates a dramatic change in the flow of divine revelation. The last message from God in the Old Testament is Malachi 4:6, where God said, "And he [the Elijah; Luke 1:17] shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." The Old Testament spoke of the law, Mount Sinai, judgment, and ended threatening a curse. The New Testament shows the way to grace and peace, and begins with promises of blessing.

b) A new character

(1) The blessed are content

The Greek word translated "blessed" (makarios) is an adjective meaning "happy" or "blissful." Makarios comes from the Greek word makar, which speaks of being happy in a way not dependant on circumstances. Both Homer and Hesiod spoke of the Greek gods as blessed in themselves (F. Hauck, "Makarios," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. 4, edited by G. Kittel [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967], p. 362). Their happiness was thought to be unaffected by the poverty, problems, and death faced by men, so it described a state of

contentment and bliss unaffected by circumstances. That is similar to the idea expressed in the New Testament by the word "blessed." Jesus' pronouncements in Matthew 5:1-12 are referred to as the Beatitudes--that which express a state of blessedness.

(2) The blessed are like God

"Blessed" is a word used to describe the character of God.

- (a) Psalm 68:35--"Blessed be God."
- (b) Psalm 72:18--"Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel."
- (c) Psalm 119:12--"Blessed art thou, O Lord."
- (d) 1 Timothy 1:11--Paul called the Almighty "the blessed God."

(3) The blessed are like Christ

The New Testament also uses "blessed" to describe Christ: He is "the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15).

(4) The blessed are God's people

The only people who will ever experience blessedness are those who belong to God and Christ. Second Peter 1:4 says that believers are "partakers of the divine nature." That means we can know the same happiness and contentment known by God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

That also means the promises of blessing in the Sermon on the Mount do not apply to those who have not placed their faith in Jesus Christ. The happiness that belongs to God and Christ can be experienced only by those who know and love them. That is because the contentment Matthew 5 speaks of is not based on circumstances but on the indwelling character of God.

c) A new reality

The Old Testament is a record of the first Adam. He was the first king of the earth, but because he fell his legacy ends with a curse. The New Testament is the record of the second Adam, Christ, who is the new King of the earth. Matthew is an appropriate beginning to the New Testament because it presents Christ as king. The first king fell and left a curse but the second King was obedient and reigns, leaving a blessing (Rom. 5:12-21).

With Jesus, a new reality dawned upon human history. He reversed the curse of the first Ad am. The Sermon on the Mount is the great statement of the King as He gives blessing instead of cursing to those who desire it.

2. Worldly expectations verses the Lord's emphasis

a) The world's expectations

(1) The paradox

The Beatitudes can seem paradoxical because our Lord presented a kingdom that doesn't reflect the world's ideas of what happiness is. Jesus said that those who are poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peaceable, persecuted, and reviled are happy. Most people would say, "Wait a minute! I'm not sure I want that kind of happiness! That sounds more like misery with another name!"

The paradox of the Beatitudes is that what is often thought of as misery is actually the key to happiness. One writer said it's as though Jesus crept into life's large display window and changed all the price tags. Worldly people think that happiness is getting your own way--grabbing all the gusto you can get. Christ's message about happiness doesn't fit that idea.

Seneca, the first-century Roman philosopher who tutored the emperor Nero, said, "Nothing can be more preposterous than to place the good of a reasonable creature in unreasonable things" (Of a Happy Life, chap. 10, emphasis added). He knew that a man's empty soul can't be filled by external things. Yet that's what the worldly try to do.

(2) The illustrations

(a) Solomon's dissatisfaction

Solomon was the most magnificent king who ever lived. He was born in the royal line of David, through which the Messiah would eventually come. His palace was a place of opulent splendor located in Jerusalem, a city favored by God. His wealth was so great that during his reign silver was as common as stones (2 Chron. 9:27). He ate fabulous food and had huge stables in Megiddo with thousands of the finest horses. He had buildings, servants, vineyards, fishponds, gardens, and hundreds of women. He was the most intelligent man who ever lived. By the world's standards, Solomon should have been a very happy man. Yet his response to all he had was, "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (Eccles. 1:2). Similarly, our Lord said, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15).

(b) The inadequacy of possessions

The happiness that can fill the void in every soul can't be manufactured by the world. Physical things don't meet spiritual needs. There are those who say, "If you're having trouble in your marriage, go out and buy a new car. If you've had a bad argument with someone, go out and buy a new suit. You'll feel better."

Try to satisfy spiritual needs with physical remedies is just as foolish as trying to do the opposite. When you are hungry you don't want a lecture on grace. You want food! A person dying of thirst in the desert doesn't need a lecture about the wonderful mercy of God--he needs water.

(c) The poverty of great wealth

In Daniel 5 we read that King Belshazzar of Babylon gave a wild party during which he and his guests drank wine from the golden vessels that had been taken from the Temple at Jerusalem. After they drank the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote on a wall, "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin" (v. 25). God was telling King Belshazzar that he had been weighed in the balances and found wanting (vv. 26-28). The king was terrified and his wealth was no longer any comfort to him (cf. v. 6).

The Puritan Thomas Watson said, "The things of the world will no more keep out trouble of spirit, than a paper [screen] will keep out a bullet.... Worldly delights are winged. They may be compared to a flock of birds in the garden, that stay a little while, but when you come near to them they take their flight and are gone. So 'riches make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven' (Proverbs 23:5). They are like a meteor that blazes, but spends and annihilates. They are like a castle made of snow, lying under the torrid beams of the sun" (The Beatitudes [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971], p. 27). External things do more to distress the soul than to bless it. Ecclesiastes 5:13 says that "wealth [is] hoarded to the harm of its owner" (NIV). There is no satisfaction for the soul in what the world has to offer.

b) The Lord's emphasis

Jesus didn't offer worldly remedies. But many who claim to be Christians do just that. They promise a financial prosperity and success that the Sermon on the Mount knows nothing about. Jesus knew that the things of the world are the fuel of pride and lust. He said, "The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful" (Mark 4:19; NIV). The world's riches are thorns that will tear at a soul in the same way thorns will tear a shirt or dress.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus emphasized that people will never find happiness through what this world values. That would be like seeking the living among the dead. If you're looking for real blessedness you have to ascend to a different level. Paul said, "If ye, then, be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above.... Set your affection on things above, not on things on

the earth" (Col. 3:1-2). First John 2:15 says, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." The Sermon on the Mount presents a standard of life opposite that found on television, billboards, and in magazines.

B. The Political Context

The Jewish people of Christ's time were looking for a Messiah who would be a political ruler. But the Lord didn't come to be that kind of king, and never offered that kind of kingdom. Jesus made no reference in His sermon to the political and social goals that the Jewish people hoped to see instituted by the Messiah. He was concerned not so much with what men do as with what men are because what men are determines what they do.

The teaching given in the Sermon on the Mount is contrary to human ideas about governments and kingdoms. The most exalted people in Christ's kingdom will be those the world values as least important. Jesus said that greatest man who had ever lived up to His time was John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11). But as far as the world was concerned he was a raving maniac who ran around in a modified Tarzan suit eating bugs! He wasn't even a part of the Jewish religious system. Yet our Lord said, "He that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John the Baptist]" (Matt. 11:11).

Those in the kingdom of heaven are poor in spirit, mournful over sin, meek, hungry and thirsting for righteousness, full of mercy, pure in heart, peaceable, and persecuted. By the world's standards that sounds like the biggest group of losers ever assembled. The worldly say, "exert yourself, demand your rights, be a big shot, push yourself up, and hold on to your pride." But Christ presented a kingdom in which persecution was to be endured without retaliation--a devastating blow to those who wanted a political Messiah.

C. The Religious Context

In Matthew 5-7 Jesus was confronting a whole society of professional religionists. They were divided into four main groups within Judaism.

1. The Pharisees

The Pharisees believed that happiness was found by observing tradition and minute points of the law. They sought blessing by obeying the extensive body of oral and written tradition that developed over the centuries.

2. The Sadducees

The Sadducees thought that happiness was found in modernism and liberalism. They advocated putting aside the past in favor of an updated religion.

3. The Essenes

The Essene movement advocated happiness through separation from the world. But that separation was primarily geographical separation. They just moved out of town.

4. The Zealots

The Zealots believed that happiness would be found once Rome was politically overthrown.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees was that religion is not a matter of external observance. To the Sadducees He said that religion shouldn't invent philosophies to accommodate changing times. To the Essenes He said that religion is not a matter of geographical location. And to the Zealots His message was that social activism is not the answer.

Jesus' message was that His kingdom is internal. That is the underlying foundation of the Sermon on the Mount. Christ's kingdom did not embrace external ritualism, philosophy, geographical location, or social activism as a basis for operation. The Sermon on the Mount opens the door to the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31:33, where God says, "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts." To the religionists of His day our Lord said, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). He meant that unless they had more going for them than the external things they were focused on they would not be a part of His Kingdom.

Christ's Message Still was the seat of thinking. If people spent as much time caring for their spiritual hearts as they do their physical hearts they would be in far better shape spiritually. The Williams translation of the Bible expresses well what Jesus said in Luke 11:39-41: "Now you Pharisees have the habit of cleaning the outside of your cups and dishes, but inside you yourselves are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the One who made the outside make the inside too? But dedicate once for all your inner self, and at once you will have everything clean"

Why Study the Sermon on the Mount?

There are five important reasons for studying the Sermon on the Mount.

A. It Shows the Necessity of the New Birth

The Sermon on the Mount shows that we can never please God on our own. Only those who are "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4) can know the happiness Jesus spoke of. Jesus' message demonstrates that the law of Moses could never save anyone. The Mosaic law showed people what not to do but it couldn't be completely obeyed apart from a new nature. That requires the new birth that comes from salvation in Jesus Christ.

B. It Reflects the Mind of Christ

The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps Scripture's clearest reflection of the mind of our Lord. Anyone who desires to know how Christ thinks needs to study the Sermon on the Mount.

C. It Teaches the Only Way to Happiness

If you want to be happy and filled with the Spirit, don't attempt to seek those things through a mystical experience. Study the teachings of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount and put them into practice.

D. It Provides the Surest Means of Evangelism

If all Christians fully lived out the principles taught in the Sermon on the Mount we would knock the world over for Christ! There is power in a transformed life.

E. It Shows Us how to Please God

Christians are a privileged people. Only they can please God because only they know His Son. Studying the Sermon on the Mount and applying its message enables believers to be pleasing to God.

LESSON II - THE OCCASION

Jesus had compassion for the multitudes (Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32). The multitude mentioned at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount is described in Matthew 4:23-25: "Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. And his fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with diverse diseases and torments, and those who were possessed with demons, and those who were epileptics, and those who had the palsy; and he healed them. And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judaea,

and from beyond the Jordan." When Christ saw those who came to Him, His heart was always moved to meet their needs.

All kinds of people were attracted to Christ: the sick, the demon-possessed, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, harlots, publicans, scholars, illiterates, rich men, and beggars. The apostle Paul explained that the attraction of Christ is that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). When Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount He wasn't directly addressing the crowd--His primary audience was the disciples. Nevertheless He wanted the masses to hear His words. Even though they were a secondary audience they were what prompted our Lord's message.

LESSON III - THE PREACHER

A. His Authority

Jesus is the greatest preacher who ever lived. John 7:46 says, "Never man spoke like this man." Mark 1:22 says that people "were astonished at his doctrine; for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes." Christ didn't quote the old rabbis as authorities--His authority was Himself. A woman in Samaria recognized that He was a prophet: after she met Christ she went and told the people of her town, "Come, see a man, who told me all things that ever I did" (John 4:29).

B. His Sermon

Our Lord's sermon is a great example of the art of preaching. It has three points: 1, The citizens of the kingdom; 2, The righteousness of the kingdom; and 3, An exhortation to enter the kingdom. The latter part of Matthew 7 shows the effect our Lord's preaching had on people. The flow of thought is beautiful, logical, and powerful.

C. His Divine Commission

God said to the prophet Ezekiel, "I will make thy tongue cling to the roof of thy mouth, that thou shalt be dumb [speechless], and shalt not be to them a reprover" (3:26). Later Ezekiel recorded, "Now the hand of the Lord was upon me in the evening ... and my mouth was opened, and I was no more dumb. Then the word of the Lord came unto me" (33:22-23). God divinely commissions whomever He chooses to speak through. The Lord Jesus Christ, possessing the power and intellect of God, restricted His mouth until God's sovereign will and timing opened it. His speech not only had power and structure, but also was made by divine commission.

LESSON IV - THE SETTING

The Greek text of Matthew literally says that Jesus when up to "the mountain." The mountain isn't identified by name. It's a slope that runs down to the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. As you look up the slope you see the hills of Galilee on the right and the Golan Heights on the left. Apparently the reason the Greek text says the mountain is that it was a special mountain known among the Christian community as the place of the Lord's sermon. In a sense the mountain had been sanctified as a special place by what happened there.

LESSON V - THE STYLE**A. It Signified Official Teaching**

It was traditional for a rabbi to sit down when he taught. When a rabbi stood whatever he said was considered unofficial. But when he sat down all he said was considered his official teaching. Similarly, in our own day when a professor is given an assignment at a university it is said that he is given a "chair." Roman Catholics understand that their Pope may speak ex cathedra--from his chair. Those terms signify the official character of what is said.

B. It Was Dignified in Manner

When the Lord taught the Sermon on the Mount He wasn't throwing out random thoughts on the spur of the moment. The phrase "he opened his mouth" in verse 2 is a colloquialism in Greek used of solemn, dignified, and weighty statements. In extrabiblical references it was used of speaking intimately from the heart.

LESSON VI - THE RECIPIENTS

The recipients of the Lord's teaching were His disciples. They were the primary audience because only they could know the blessedness of which Christ spoke. They would come to live out the Sermon on the Mount because they would be partakers of God's power through His Spirit.

CONCLUSION

The only way a person can apply the Sermon on the Mount is by becoming a Christian--a partaker of the divine nature. Several years ago Archbishop Magee said that it was impossible to conduct the affairs of England on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount because the nation was not loyal to the King--Christ (cited by G. Cambell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew* [N.Y.: Fleming H. Revell, 1929], p. 39). He was right--you have to know the King. Many have tried to make the Sermon on the Mount into merely a social gospel of doing the right thing and taking care of others, but the reality of two World Wars has diminished that effort. You must know the King to reflect the King's ethics.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is Christ's concern? How is that made evident?
2. What was the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount? After first twelve verses, what does the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount talk about?
3. What kind of change takes place in the Bible when we come to Matthew 5-7?
4. What is the New Testament meaning of the term "blessed" (see p. 2)?
5. What is the only way a person can experience true blessedness (see p. 3)?
6. The contentment Matthew 5 speaks of is not based on _____ but on the indwelling _____ of God.
7. Why do the Beatitudes seem paradoxical according to the world's standard of what happiness is?
8. What did Solomon think about the things the world tells us to pursue to find happiness? How did our Lord confirm that assessment?
9. Why won't physical remedies meet spiritual needs? Explain.
10. What kind of kingdom and Messiah were the Jewish people looking for? What was Christ concerned about?
11. Identify the religious groups Christ confronted and their beliefs regarding the source of happiness.
12. What is the underlying foundation of the Sermon on the Mount? What did God say He would do when the New Covenant was established (Jer. 31:33)?
13. Give five reasons for studying the Sermon on the Mount.
14. What feeling did Christ have toward the multitudes that followed Him? Support your answer with Scripture.
15. What kinds of people were attracted to Christ?
16. How do we know that Christ was a unique preacher (Mark 1:22; John 7:46)?
17. What is significant about the fact that Christ sat when He spoke?
18. To whom was the Lord primarily speaking in Matthew 5-7? Why?