

What In The World Is Happiness?, Luke 6:17-26

A family had sold everything possible to pay bills and to put food on the table. Nevertheless, a burglar broke in one night when the family was gone. The family returned and found the door knocked off its hinges. "What did the burglar get?" the police officer asked. The head of the house just shook his head.

"Practice," he said. **It's not easy being poor. What did Jesus mean, "Blessed are the poor?"**

Jesus was a master at keeping his listeners off-balance. He always said the unexpected. He praised people others despised. He lifted up those others put down. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." And two thousand years after his death and resurrection theologians still wrestle with his exact meaning. No better example can be found than the Beatitudes found in differing forms in both Matthew and Luke. Many modern translators contend that the word "happy" is closer to Jesus' original meaning than "blessed."

That doesn't help. That means that, among other things, Jesus said you are happy if you are poor, happy if you are hungry, happy if you are down-hearted, happy if you are hated and happy if you are persecuted. To which most of us would say, **"Thanks, but no thanks."** We don't want to be poor. We want to be like Michael Jordan. I read recently that Jordan makes more money each year from pitching Nike shoes than all of the Nike factory workers in Malaysia combined. Michael's our role model, not some homeless fellow shuffling along the street looking for his next meal. We don't want to weep or mourn or be persecuted. It's bad enough that sometimes we feel the world is against us.

Comedy writer Robert Orben has a great line. He says, **"Sometimes I get the feeling the whole world is against me, but deep down I know that's not true. Some of the smaller countries are neutral."** We all feel that way at times, but that's not how we want to feel. We are more comfortable with J.B. Phillips parody of Jesus' beloved words:

- Happy are the "pushers": for they get on in the world.
- Happy are the hard-boiled: for they never let life hurt them.
- Happy are they who complain: for they get their own way in the end.
- Happy are the slave drivers: for they get results.
- Happy are the knowledgeable people . . . for they know their way around.
- Happy are the troublemakers: for they make people take notice of them.

SO, WHAT IS IT THAT JESUS IS SAYING TO US ABOUT 'HAPPINESS'? We need to know. For you and I are not poor, we're not hungry, we're not down-hearted, we're not hated and we're not persecuted. And many of us are not happy, either. In fact, according to some studies, people in our affluent, safe, comfortable society are more depressed than they have ever been! Where have we missed it, Lord? Where is happiness to be found?

First of all, . . . let's dispel the notion that Jesus was a dewy-eyed dreamer--out of touch with the real world.

Do you know Thornton Wilder's *Heaven's My Destination*? It's a comical little play about a poor soul who attempts to put the Sermon on the Mount into practice. The results are disastrous. In one scene he refuses to take interest on his savings account because he does not believe in usury. Other customers, overhearing his argument with the teller, suspect that something is amiss at the bank and begin demanding their money. And the bank nearly collapses. The implication is that literal adherence to Jesus' teachings results either in comedy or tragedy, depending on your sense of irony.

When author Philip Yancey was teaching a class on the Beatitudes, he decided to incorporate into the lesson a video clip of Cecil B. DeMille's movie *King of Kings*. As Yancey fast-forwarded through much of the movie, he watched another television nearby on CNN. This happened to be at the end of the Gulf War, and CNN was featuring a speech by Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf. The general pulled out maps and diagrams, explaining in detail how America's superior weaponry and training easily overcame Iraq.

Philip Yancey switched his attention back and forth between the Jesus movie and the news conference. Yancey found the place he was looking for in the movie, the scene where Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount. **And as the character of Jesus spoke of blessings upon the poor in spirit and the suffering, Philip Yancey caught the irony.**

Gen. Schwarzkopf was extolling the virtues of bigness, strength, power, conquering through force. **Jesus was preaching on humility, lowliness, gratitude.** His words must have been shocking to a DEFEATED PEOPLE caught in a warring nation. Why didn't he lead them in a bloody rebellion? Why didn't he establish a new kingdom? Could it be that he had a different kingdom in mind for them?

Jesus did have a different kingdom in mind--a kingdom of the Spirit. He was no dewy-eyed dreamer. He knew his followers would be persecuted. He knew that many of them would be rejected by family and friends. He knew that many of them would live their lives on the edge of abject poverty because of their commitment to him. That's still true today in many parts of the world.

Have you ever read about the tragedy of children caught in the slavery that took place in Sudan? Those are Christian children who were being kidnaped from their homes and sold, for the most part.

Jesus knew the hardships that his followers would endure, but he wanted them to know that happiness isn't dependent on outward circumstance. Happiness comes from within. **But let's begin by admitting that Jesus was not in denial.**

Secondly, let's acknowledge that when people look for happiness elsewhere, they are less happy. Joseph R. Sizoo tells of visiting a luxurious estate--one of the most luxurious in America. Within the house were Italian fireplaces, Belgian tapestries, Oriental rugs, and rare paintings. Sizoo said to a friend, *"How happy the people must have been who lived here!"*

"But they weren't," his friend replied. *"Although they were millionaires, the husband and wife never spoke to each other. This place was a hotbed of hatred! They had no love for God or for one another."*

WHERE ARE 'YOU' GOING TO TURN FOR HAPPINESS? Your work? There is certainly much satisfaction to be found in a job well done. But today's fast-changing world is turning many talented, intelligent people into Willy Lomans--hanging on to jobs for which their skills are no longer needed. If work is your chief source of happiness, beware. It's a cruel world out there, as many people are discovering all too well.

Of course, you have your family. The Roper Organization asked Americans what they believed constituted "the good life." The ranking was instructive. First was material aspirations; second was a happy marriage; and third was children. A Mass Mutual study of family values showed that eight out of ten Americans reported that their families were the greatest source of pleasure in their lives--more than friends, religion, recreation, or work. In a survey of ten thousand Better Homes and Gardens readers (a majority of which were baby boomers), more than half said their relationship to their spouse was the single most important factor in their personal happiness--well ahead of children, spiritual or religious belief, health, or even financial security.

We prize our families, but even family circumstances change. A spouse can bring great joy into your life--and then break your heart. So can children. And sooner or later all whom we love leave home--whether for college, for a family of their own, or for the grave. **If you have invested all you have and all you are in your family, WHAT THEN?**

In 1954, Billie Sicard's twelve-year-old son, George, died of cancer. George was the center of Billie's life. She was a wealthy woman, and she lavished all the best toys and things on her son. After his death, Billie Sicard became a recluse. She refused to change anything in George's room. All his clothes and toys stayed just where he had left them. Billie cut off most of her social contacts. For the next twenty-five years, Billie spent all her time at home grieving for George. She may have died in 1979, but her life actually ended in 1954.

On WHAT OR WHO do you depend for YOUR HAPPINESS? Jesus was no dreamer. And experience has taught us that when people look elsewhere for the totality of their happiness, they end up less happy rather than happier.

BUT, JESUS POINTS OUT IN TODAY'S READING... THAT IF...we live according to HIS PLAN for our lives, we would have a zest for living that would know no bounds.

Suppose we lived our lives having as our greatest PLAN... "LOVE FOR GOD AND LOVE FOR OTHERS!!" Suppose instead of burning ourselves out seeking wealth or status, we lived all our lives seeking to expand our divine

potential so that we were continually improving our minds, improving our bodies, improving our Spirits--not out of fear, not out of insecurity, not out of greed or lust, but simply out of living fully and completely as children of God?

Can you see how much more productive, how much more effective, how much more alive we would be?

THIS IS WHAT 'SAINTLY LIVING' is all about. It is not about SECLUDING ourselves away from the world--though many saints have found much joy in developing that kind of intense relationship with God.

For most of us...SAINTLY LIVING is about turning the world of human values on its head. It is about moving from values which are survival-based to values that are faith-based. It is about moving from a life that is self-centered to a life that is God-centered and other-centered. It is about moving from a life in which we are conscious of what we lack to a profound gratitude for all we have.

It is here that we find... true happiness. And in turn, true blessedness.

In 1989, columnist Nick Clooney decided that he, like a modern-day Huck Finn, wanted someone else to do his work for a little while. So he invited a variety of local celebrities from the Kentucky-Ohio area to send in their ideas on a column about epitaphs. What would these famous men and women want to have written on their tombstones? He was surprised by the wit and sincerity of the various responses.

Ira Joe Fisher, a weather man, wrote this epitaph for himself:

"He wanted the mind of Plato, the heart and soul of Socrates. But his life was more of a tribute to Ol' Mediocrities." Paul Knue, the editor of the Cincinnati Post, couldn't make up his mind about what to write until after he and his family went away for a weekend trip. When he returned, Paul knew that he wanted an epitaph that reflected the importance of his family in his life. He chose as his epitaph two simple words: "HE CARED."

But the most sweetly whimsical message must surely be from Charlie Mechem, former head of Taft Broadcasting.

His epitaph read:

"Dear God, Thanks for letting me visit. I had a wonderful time."

Jesus was no dewy-eyed dreamer. Just the opposite. Jesus knew that TRUE HAPPINESS is not found in wealth or a full stomach or the gift of our friends or even family relationships--though all of these can satisfy us for a while.

All of these are important. But the THE TRUE SOURCE for true and complete happiness IS—GOD!

BLESSED ARE YOU WHO ARE FILLED IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM!

Amen.