

## “HOW TO BE A HAPPY PERSON”

Matthew 5:1-12

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Happiness is...well, how would you define it? Playpen philosopher Marvin says, “Happiness is a diaper fresh from the dryer on a cold morning.” In a Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown comes up to Linus and says, “You know what, yesterday I was almost happy. For one brief shining moment I thought I was winning in the game of life. Then I discovered there was a flag on the play.” Author John Powell says, “Happiness is an inside job.” Abraham Lincoln once said, “People are just about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” Happiness is...well, how would you define it?

The greatest sermon ever preached was delivered by Jesus of Nazareth from a hill in Galilee. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. Speaking from that same mountain last spring, Pope John Paul said, “The Sermon on the Mount is as relevant today as it was nearly two thousand years ago.” Indeed it is. So it should come as no surprise to us that Jesus begins this sermon with a definition of happiness. Here is what he says: Happy are the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. His words had to be as shocking to the first listeners as they are to us. What was he trying to say? May I suggest a couple of things?

In the first place, **happiness is a gift received.** Thomas Jefferson, in writing the Declaration of Independence, made the pursuit of happiness the right of every American. What Jefferson failed to understand was that happiness cannot be found by hot pursuit.

In another Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown is entertaining Snoopy. "Here, have another cookie," insists Chuck. "We've had such a good time today, haven't we? I just want to make you happy. Are you really happy, Snoopy?"

Snoopy replies, "I'd say I'm about one cookie away from being happy." Materialism, which is always transforming our wants into our needs, leaves us all about one cookie away from happiness. It's the American economic way.

A Chinese proverb says if you want to be happy for one hour, get drunk. If you want to be happy for three days, get married. If you want to be happy for eight days, kill your pig and eat it. If you want to be happy for a lifetime, learn to fish. Realizing that fishing is a vocation, not recreation for the Chinese, I wonder if work really can produce a lifetime of happiness. Then I cannot remember a single person on their deathbed ever saying to me, "Howard, I wish I had spent more time at the office." I enjoy my work. I hope you do too. But, you are more than what you do. If you are not more than what you do, you are set up for a life of misery.

Happiness is more than circumstances. If you are waiting for someone to come and make you so very, very happy, then dream on. Two women met at a cocktail party after a separation of many years. As they exchanged greetings and caught up on old times, the first woman noticed her friend was wearing an extraordinary diamond. "That's the most beautiful and enormous diamond I have ever seen," exclaimed the woman to her friend. "It is unusual," replied the friend. "It's the Calahan Diamond. It comes complete with the Calahan Curse." "And what is the Calahan Curse?" inquired the woman. "Mr. Calahan," replied the friend.

Jesus said happiness is not something to be achieved, but

a life to be received. Makarios is the word—"Oh, the blessedness of," or an even better translation—"Oh, the sheer joy." Congratulations, you've got it! It's not pious hope of what shall be but the celebration of what is. It's self-contained joy. The Greeks called Cyprus Le Makaria, the Happy Isle. The place was so lovely, so rich, so fertile, that a person need never go anywhere else to find happiness in life. Could you stand to be that blessed? Oh, the sheer joy of the spiritually bankrupt, who humbly mourn over their sins, all of earth and heaven come to comfort them. "There is happiness," said Jesus.

Somebody gave me this prayer a few years ago. It goes something like this: So far today God I've done alright. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, over indulgent, or told anyone to mind their own business, or to stay out of mine. I'm really glad about that. But in a few minutes, Lord, I'm going to get out of bed, and then I'm going to need a lot of help for the rest of the day.

Why is it so hard to ask for help? Why would we rather do almost anything on earth than lean upon the Lord? Why would we rather try to achieve things on our own than surrender to God? Why do we insist on self-reliance instead of blessed assurance?

For half a century, E. Stanley Jones traveled around the world leading spiritual Ashrams, a time apart for those who were seeking a deeper spiritual life. When Brother Stanley convened an Ashram, the first thing he did was to pass out a sheet of paper to every participant. On that piece of paper Brother Stanley would ask each person to write their greatest need. Inevitably, someone would raise their hand and ask, "But Doctor Jones, what if I don't have a need?" That's when Brother Stanley would say, "That is your greatest need!" God help those who are totally self-

reliant...happiness will forever elude them, then and now.

So if your heart is breaking over some sin committed, congratulations, you are about to find the comfort of the God who fails us not. If you think you are somebody by owning a little dirt, get off your high horse, for only the humble inherit the earth.

Here's what you need to do, said Jesus, "Develop a hunger and a thirst for righteousness and then you will be satisfied." Have you ever said, "I'm starving to death?" We say it again and again, "I'm starving to death." Wrong-not a person in this room has been to the point of starving to death. Of course, there may be an exception or two. When the people of Palestine heard Jesus say, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness," they immediately understood what Jesus was saying. Most of them lived one meal away from starvation. Oh, the sheer joy of those who are starving to death and thirsting to death for spiritual life for they will be satisfied, said Jesus.

A spiritual seeker went to see a Rabbi searching for spiritual direction. The Rabbi invited the seeker to sit down and offered him a cup of coffee. He gave him a cup with a saucer and began to pour the man a cup of coffee. He poured the cup full and when the cup was full, he continued to pour until the saucer was full. When the saucer was full, he continued to pour until it ran into the seeker's lap. The seeker immediately stopped him and asked, "Rabbi, what on earth are you doing?" The Rabbi said, "I'm trying to teach you a lesson. You came to me seeking spiritual nourishment, but your cup is so full of so many things that you have no room for anything I have to give you."

May I ask you a question? Have you developed a taste for spiritual things? Have you developed a thirst for God?

Is God simply an add-on to your life; something you try to tack-on to everything else and every other responsibility that you have? No wonder you feel empty. You are trying to satisfy your own soul. It's a loser's game. Happiness is not something that you achieve. Happiness is a gift of God that we receive. Such are the Beatitudes.

**Happiness is a life we live.** Happy are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and the persecuted. Happy are those that have a life of mercy.

On a Saturday in November of 1994, Reverend Walter Everett performed a wedding for Michael Carlucci up in Bridgeport, Connecticut. What made this wedding unique was that the groom had shot and killed the pastor's son in a drunken brawl a few years before. "At first I was livid," said Reverend Everett. "They ruled it manslaughter and he only got five years in prison for killing my son. The time came when I knew I could not live with such hate. So I started the long process of forgiveness. I began to write him letters and eventually I went to visit him. We developed a relationship and when he asked me to officiate at his wedding, it just seemed the right thing to do." Can you imagine the people gathered in that church when the pastor stood up to read I Corinthians 13? "Love is patient, love is kind, love is not rude, love keeps no record of wrongs." Can you imagine?

Forgiveness is not excusing, forgiveness is not ignoring. Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness fits faulty people. Forgiveness draws a line in the sand and says, "Let's start again please." The merciful are blessed, for in forgiving they open the arteries of grace that flow into their own lives. Happiness is a life we live. It is a life that is full of mercy. It is a life that is full of purity.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. To

be pure is not to be perfect. It is to be genuine, unmixed, real and single minded. It was the philosopher Kierkegaard who said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing."

The great preacher Peter Marshall once said, "Most of us are too "Christian" to really enjoy sinning and too fond of sinning to enjoy Christianity." Most of us know perfectly well what to do; the trouble is that we prefer not to do it.

Happy are the pure in heart for they see God. Happy are the peacemakers for they are called the children of God.

Are you a thermostat or a thermometer? Do you reflect the temperature in the room, or do you determine it? Blessed are the peacemakers.

I once belonged to the country club where Pee Wee Reese was a member. I knew him in the latter days of his life. One of my favorite stories about the legendary baseball player took place more than a generation ago. Jackie Robinson was trying to break into the white world of major league baseball. He was playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers when they came to play the Cincinnati Red's, as we called them, back in those days at Crosley Field. When Robinson took the field the jeers of the crowd grew into a crescendo until it was echoing out of that old ball field. That's when Pee Wee Reese called time out, walked over to Robinson, put his arm around his shoulder and stood there till the crowd grew silent. Are you a thermometer or a thermostat?

Happy are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God. Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. Persecuted for righteousness sake? Do you remember our heritage? The people who heard those words lived through it in their lifetime. Nero wrapped Christians in pitch and set them afire. He sewed them in skins of animals and turned the dogs loose on them. He roasted parts of their body while the people stood and

watched and then poked their eyes out. It is all history. It's just a part of history. But Christians made a choice in that day. They made a radical choice. They chose not to be overcome by evil but to overcome evil with good.

When Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna was martyred for his faith he offered this prayer, "O Lord God Almighty, I thank Thee that thou has graciously thought me worthy of this hour." From the sacrifices of saints like that, you and I have inherited a Church. Friends, we are treading where the saints have trod. When I read those bits and pieces of Church history, I find myself asking deep questions. Have I so much as gone out of my way to be a Christian? In the name of convenience, am I embarrassing my ancestors and betraying our trust?

Happy are the persecuted for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Happiness--it's a gift received. It is a life lived. **Oh, the sheer job of leaning on Jesus and trying to live like Jesus lived. Amen.**