
"Jesus' Take on Happiness, Part 1"

(Matthew 5:3-5)

Pastor Peter Yi

July 13th, 2008

Introduction:

Everyone has an opinion about everything. Isn't that true? Everyone's got a 'take' on various subjects. Politics. Global warming. The death penalty. Health care. Music and media. Taxes. Raising children. Dating. Homosexuality. Faith. Spirituality. I mean, you name the subject and we can all come up with our personal take on it.

And we do this with our faith too. I bet if we took a survey on various topics related to faith and morality, we'd get quite the variety of answers even within this congregation. For example if I threw out a general question like, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" I think there'd be a variety of answers like, it means to be a good person or it's all about being nice to people or following the words of the bible or living your life after Jesus or having a personal relationship with Christ.

The Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapters 5-7, is Jesus' take on the life of a person who is a part of his Kingdom. It's Jesus' take on what it really means to be a Christian. What should distinguish that person? How should that person act and behave. How should a Christian be thinking about certain subjects. What should a Christians perspective or take be on things such as money, life's problems, relationships, marriage, the poor, prayer, and eternity, just to name a few.

So the first thing we'll be looking at is Jesus' take on Happiness. And we know these nine statements as the beatitudes. The attitudes we are to have. These are the inward qualities we're to possess.

And then when we look at the structure of these statements we observe a common pattern. Each of them state a quality or a condition or a situation that a Christian will / should experience. And if and when we experience that quality then we can expect a certain result. And the result is a reward or gift that comes from God, so it's a supernatural blessing. And because they get this thing from God, Jesus says they are blessed.

So there's a quality or situation we will experience as Christ's followers, as citizens of his Kingdom, and when we do, the King himself will give us a certain gift or reward and because of that we are considered blessed.

What does it mean to be blessed or as some translate say, to be happy?

We throw this term around quite often and sometimes we use it without knowing what it means. We say it in our prayers and when people sneeze. It's a loose word used very freely that it has lost its meaning. What does Jesus mean when he uses 'blessed' in these verses.

To be blessed means to be approved, or to find approval. When we bless God, we are approving him. We are saying that God is good, it's a form of praise. And when God blesses us, we are being approved by God. And when we are approved by God, that is when we are truly happy or blessed. Does that make sense?

All of us seek approval. We want to be recognized by our peers, our parents, our teachers and instructors. Even by society we want to be approved. It's not necessarily a bad thing to seek that approval. But in the midst of all that approval seeking, we have to discern what it is that gains us God's approval. What do we need to be doing to gain God's favor, blessing, or happiness. But the greatest blessing, approval can come only from the greatest being and that is God. But often times we are more concerned with superficial approval instead of the ultimate approval—the approval that only God can give.

So Jesus, in giving these beatitudes, is essentially saying, “there are a ton of messages out there about finding happiness, about getting approval or blessing. Let me cut filter out all the other messages and make it clear to you. Here's how to get happiness and approval from God.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (3).

Luke, in his record of the beatitudes just writes, “blessed are the poor.” Luke's gospel had an intentional focus on the downcast and underprivileged people in society. That's why he just says “blessed are the poor.” But if we were to synthesize these two versions, I think it's pretty obvious, that in most cases it is the poor that are at the same time poor in spirit. Most of the mission work done in the world is done about the billions of poor. They are accessible. They are receptive. They are abundant.

But for whatever reason, in Matthew's account it's “poor in spirit.” So what does that mean? The word poor is an extreme word. It doesn't mean lacking, it doesn't mean you make 30,000 instead of 60,000. It's an extreme word. It means that you possess very little, or almost nothing. But the phrase ‘poor in spirit’ here does not mean financially poor and it doesn't mean materially poor. If it meant those things, it wouldn't apply to 90% of the people in the North America. Europeans who were once so strong in their faith, have now essentially become totally secular. And North America is not far behind. The vast majority of Canadians are not materially poor, but we are spiritually poor.

To be ‘poor in spirit’ means you personally acknowledge your spiritual bankruptcy.

As a high school student, there were four things in my life that I had that made me think I had it all. And it was these four things that God systematically dismantled in the course of a few months to show me my spiritual bankruptcy. If he had not removed these things from my life, I don't think I would have ever turned to God. And that's why it's hurting people and struggling people and people down on their luck that are often times the most receptive to God. Because God is working on them, humbling them, to show them their sins, and rescue them from their sins and its consequences.

So for me the four things that I had thought were so important were 1) academics 2) girlfriend 3) sports 4) friends. One by one these crutches were removed and then I cried uncle and confessed that I wouldn't make it without God. That was the beginning of my acknowledgement that I was poor in spirit.

So to be poor in spirit is to say to God that I've got nothing. It is the confession of not being worthy before God. It is the deepest form of repentance. So to be poor in spirit is not just saying, “I'm nothing,” but it is recognizing one's complete sinfulness before God. It's saying that I am

unworthy before God, because of sin and rebellion. It's saying to God that you cannot save yourself, you cannot forgive yourself, you cannot have meaning apart from your Creator. It is a desperate plea for God to have mercy on you.

This is an attitude and a prayer for anyone who is not a Christian yet, but would like Jesus to forgive their sins. And you can do that today, right now, by asking confessing, believing and committing.

And...this is also the attitude of all of Christ's followers. The whole Sermon on the Mount was directed toward believers. It is the description of the person who considers themselves a follower or a disciple of Jesus Christ.

What would be the opposite of being 'poor in spirit'? PRIDE. Spiritual Pride.

Pride says I don't need God at all or all the time. Poverty says I can't make it without him.

Pride says I'm not that bad. Poverty says, I'm rotten to the core.

Pride says, I can't let my guard down and let people see what's on the inside. Poverty says, God knows the heart and he knows what I'm like already.

What do you have? Pride or poverty.

So if you have this quality called 'poverty of spirit' you will be blessed by God. God can't be fooled. He knows the hearts of all men and women. This is the form the blessing takes. "Theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." You have the greatest reward possible. Is there a better blessing? I had a difficult time thinking of one. You are guaranteed a spot in God's kingdom. You are promised to be a worker for the Kingdom.

King David in the Old Testament, after his adultery with Bathsheba wrote these incredible words of spiritual poverty.

16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

This is the heart, the attitude that gains favor with God. God looks at those who are poor in spirit, who are broken, who are bankrupt, who express their need for him and he promises them the Kingdom of God. Isn't that amazing that the citizens of the Kingdom of the Creator of the universe, the people of the most high God are all contrite and wounded and weary. Those are the people God welcomes and to whom he gives his Kingdom.

The next beatitude is found in verse 4. It goes like this. **Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.**

Mournfulness is sort of like the emotional side of being poor in spirit. Why would Christ want mournfulness as a Christian virtue? Is he not the one who brings joy and joy to the fullest? Why mourning? I mean its so depressing. Aren't there enough depressing things in the world today? War, famine, disease, crime and on the personal side, sickness, tragedy, failure, sour relationships. Why do we need to be mournful people and mournful about what? I hope that you'll see it is essential.

At the personal level, mourning is a personal grief over personal sin.

There's a mourning that comes because one has done something wrong and is caught—I would say like a former U.S. President.

But there is a mourning, and this is what Jesus is talking about, that comes when a person comes to that place where he or she realizes how totally dark and sinful they are. You know outwardly, we're pretty good and I would say that the majority of us are outwardly very good. You grew up in the church, you never strayed very far, and you never got involved in heinous sins. But in reality it's this type of people that can begin to think that they are not really all that bad. Some of us maybe haven't ever shed tears over the sins we've been guilty of.

But there is a place that a person comes to when he or she realizes what they really are. You look at your behavior, you look at your thoughts, you look at your attitudes, your motives, your rationalizing, you look at your self-centeredness, your pride, your neglect of God, your lack of love for your fellow man, and then it hits you. And you can only confess, "I am a wicked person." And the place where that happens is before the presence of our Holy God. Isaiah was the perfect example in ch. 6. He was in the presence of God and the angels are flying around shouting "holy, holy, holy" and the Lord's presence filled the room and it was then that Isaiah realized he was a sinner—a man of unclean lips. Have you come to that place? Have you sat in the presence of God?

There used to be these goofy shows which were quite entertaining called, "World's Craziest Police Chases." And one that I saw had this criminal who stole a car and was trying to outrun the police and there are around 6 cars following him and then they get air support and the helicopter and the police cars all have their lights shined at this car. And what happens next is that the guy crashes his car and he begins his chase on foot and it's ridiculous for this guy to think that he can escape these lights. There's nowhere to hide.

And I think that's the place we need to be...in the presence of God and the blazing light of his holiness. And there we discover how sinful we are.

I remember the story of the tax collector who knelt in a corner and couldn't raise his face to heaven and just cried out, "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner." That's the type of attitude Christ wants us to have.

And when we mourn over sin, the blessing we receive is comfort. Comfort by the hand of God. Comfort in forgiveness. Comfort in finding a renewed desire not to sin and to be holy. What an amazing thing to be comforted by the God of all comfort, by the one who knew us before time, who created and knit together our beings. What an amazing thing to be comforted by the man of sorrow, by the one who was tempted in every way, yet did not sin. By the one who bore the penalty and actually became sin for us. That's the promise to those who mourn. And when that happens, you and I are blessed.

Conclusion:

Friends, God promises to bless those who are poor in spirit and those who mourn. I hope the Lord will grant each of us this happiness as we live out these virtues.