

## Core 52 – Week 18

### Blessedness

A few years ago, Forbes Magazine did a survey which asked people what is the one thing you want in life, but can't seem to attain. Since it was Forbes, you might expect the top answer to be money. It wasn't. It was happiness.<sup>1</sup> It is something enshrined into our Declaration of Independence- the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But this pursuit is not distinctly American. It is a universal desire.

Every man, woman, and child hopes for happiness. It is the pursuit of happiness that drives us. 1,600 years ago, the most influential theologian in church history wrote, "Every man, whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy." 1,300 years later, French mathematician, philosopher, and Christian apologist Blaise Pascal wrote, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception."

And yet, the truth of the matter is this. Many of us are unhappy. Some of us are profoundly unhappy. If happiness is something everyone is looking for, how come so few of us find it?

We pursue happiness in many ways. We seek it in pleasure. Pleasure certainly makes us feel good. A rush of endorphins is released from the hypothalamus. They latch onto receptors in your nervous system, and everything feels wonderful. Surely, this is the source of happiness.

But it lasts only a moment. It is over in a flash. Many things give us this rush, but none of them last. Sex won't do it. Accomplishment won't work. Food is fun and delicious, but too much makes you fat and sick, and there goes the pleasure. Drugs don't last and they come with such a price to pay. Pleasure is fleeting. Enjoy it while it lasts because it never does.

So, we chase happiness in money. Nothing makes you feel good like a wad of cash. If I just had enough of it, I could buy what I want, do what I want, go where I want, whenever I want. This leads to something psychology calls the "hedonic treadmill." This idea posits that we quickly return to whatever level of happiness we had before we bought the new car or the new boat or the new 4K 75" TV. The happiness high quickly wears off. We get used to new thing we wanted so badly. Soon it becomes the old TV or the old car, and so we have to take another step on the treadmill. As soon as happiness is in our grasp, it rotates out of reach.

If not pleasure or wealth, then maybe happiness is to be found in fame. The applause of people could give our lives meaning. If we could just have a million followers on Instagram. If it was our picture on the back of the bestseller, if it was our #1 song people hummed as they drove in their car, then life would have to be fulfilling. Or would it? The applause always fades. Cheers turn into jeers. Today's bestseller or number 1 hit is tomorrow's yard sale fodder. Every week the news is filled with rich and famous celebrities whose deeply conflicted lives are dominated by drugs, despair, desperate dalliances, and depression. Nobody believes that Beverly Hills is the happiest place on earth.

Maybe happiness is found in power? Influence could be the key to happiness. Imagine people listening to your every word. Your thoughts carry weight with people. Your decisions and desires set entire companies into motion. Trends, fads and fashion all swaying based on what I do and say. The stock market rises because of your latest idea. You're featured on the covers of the most influential websites and magazines. Wouldn't that make us happy?

But think of everything that might threaten your power. Fashions and trends change. Some video you posted 8 years ago where you say something that is now politically incorrect. The board of directors could vote you out of your own company. One wrong move could send your stock price plummeting. Along with power comes fear of losing that power, and you become the target of everyone else who wants that power.

If happiness is all predicated on things largely beyond our control, then we may never find it. Maybe happiness just a mirage in the desert of life. Maybe we should give up on the idea, and learn to be satisfied with less.

Can I share with you another observation about happiness. God wants you to be happy. I realize that's not what most Christians would say. They would say that God wants us to be obedient, to be holy, to be loving, to seek peace and justice, but most Christians wouldn't say, "God wants us to be happy." In fact, some Christians seem convinced that God wants us to be gloomy and sour.

In Isaiah 52:7, the prophet calls the gospel "*the good news of happiness.*" Psalm 37:4 promises to fulfill our hearts desires with this invitation, "*Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*" Think about that. God promises to fulfill the desires of your heart. The problem is we so often desire the wrong things. We pursue things that, ultimately will not make us happy. All those others things that God wants from us- our obedience, our holiness, our love, and all the other things, God wants us to have those things, because they are what leads to happiness. Scripture promises happiness, true happiness, lasting happiness through words like joy, rejoicing, blessing and delight.

When we get to the New Testament, Matthew begins Jesus' ministry with a speech known as "The Sermon on the Mount." It is one of the most famous of all of Jesus' teachings, and it is the lengthiest. Even so, it takes up only three chapters, Matthew 5, 6, and 7. The whole thing can be read comfortably in less than fifteen minutes.

Yet, in these three chapters Jesus sets forth a bold, daring vision for a new way to be human. He tells us what it really means to follow Him. This isn't merely about what Jesus wants us to do. It's about who he wants us to be. Jesus goes to the very core of our being— our attitude, our motivation, our ambition, and our commitment.

Jesus introduces the Sermon on the Mount with a promise of happiness. The Sermon opens with 12 verses known as "the beatitudes." There are 8 beatitudes altogether, and each one

begins with *“Blessed are.”* The word *beatitude* comes from the Latin word for blessed. In addition to blessing, you could also read these verses as *“Happy are.”* In fact, in most other languages, that’s how they are translated. But most English versions shy away from this translation.

I need to address something here that is often taught in Christian circles. I have taught it myself, but in recent years I have begun to question the accuracy of this teaching and that is this. Blessing and happiness are two different things. That God wants us to have joy, but he never promises happiness. It’s not uncommon to hear sermons or read in Christian books about happiness vs. joy. Conventional Christian wisdom says that these are two different things. Happiness is based on external things. Joy is based on internal things. Happiness is a feeling while Joy is a state of being. Happiness is temporary while joy is lasting. Many of us have been taught that joy and blessing are Christian, but happiness is secular or worldly.

While that all sounds good. It is also not true. The Bible never makes those distinctions. The truth is that the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments use a whole host of words interchangeably and they all have overlapping meanings. Words such as– happiness, gladness, merry, joy, and delight and if you look them up in Hebrew or Greek lexicons, you’ll find that all these words share *Happy* as a definition. Happiness and joy are synonyms.

The Greek word used repeatedly in the opening verses of Matthew 5 is *makarios*. In most English translations, it’s translated as *blessed*. But if you look it up in a Greek dictionary *makarios* means happy, fortunate, lucky, blessed. Here’s how one of my Biblical Greek dictionaries defines this word in Matthew 5, *“An adjective describing a person as experiencing positive circumstances or a happy disposition.”*

It’s not a matter of joy vs. happiness, but true happiness vs. false; lasting happiness vs. temporary pleasure. God wants you to be happy, and eight times in the beatitudes God shows us the path to what Max Lucado calls *“sacred delight.”*

This is Jesus offers. This is the way our Lord shows us. God wants us to be happy, and he made us for happiness. Let me read the beatitudes from a different translation than you’ve heard before. Perhaps it will help you look at them in a new light.

<sup>3</sup> *“Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.*

<sup>4</sup> *“Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.*

<sup>5</sup> *“Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.*

<sup>6</sup> *“Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.*

<sup>7</sup> *“Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.*

<sup>8</sup> *“Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.*

<sup>9</sup> *“Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children.*

<sup>10</sup> *“Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.*

<sup>11</sup> *“Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. <sup>12</sup> Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.*

The surprise here is not that Jesus wants us to be happy, it's where He tells us to find happiness. Jesus says that true, lasting happiness, that joy and blessing, do not lie down the roads we usually travel in search of happiness.

The world would not give us the beatitudes. Instead, it gives us the me-attitudes.

Happy are the self-assured who feel good about themselves, for theirs is this world

Happy are those who celebrate, for they will be popular.

Happy are the self-assertive, for they will be able to take before others can get it.

Happy are those who hunger and thirst for pleasure, for they will be amused.

Happy are those who get even, for they will have the last word.

Happy are those with ulterior motives, for they will get what they really want.

Happy are the troublemakers, for they will get all the attention.

Happy are those who keep their faith to themselves, for great is their reward on earth.

What we thought leads to happiness, does not. The me-attitudes, in the end, only lead to isolation, anxiety, fear, and unhappiness. The secret that Jesus reveals, is that happiness comes from the places we least expected it.

*Happy are the hopeless.* We know this one as “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” This means blessed are those who recognize their own spiritual poverty before God. Happy are those who realize they have nothing before God and those who know they can't fix their own problems. They will find happiness, because it is at the point of spiritual poverty that you will finally look to heaven for help. When you look to heaven for help, you will find heaven itself.

They are not happy because this is a pleasant experience, but because it leads to the next stop down the road. *Happy are those who grieve.* Blessed are those that mourn over their spiritual condition, who are sorrowful and wish it wasn't that way. This sounds so contradictory to our ears. Jesus is basically saying, “Happy are the sad.” How can He say that? Because, as He promises, they will be made glad. They are now on the path to true happiness.

Jesus continues, *“Happy are the humble.”* When we realize we have nothing before God and we grieve over that condition, we then realize we are no better than anyone else. We realize we are all sinners, and pride has no place in our hearts. When we realize we are no better than anyone else, we will also understand we deserve no more than anyone else. You can quit trying to scratch, crawl, and climb trying to position yourself first in line. You can quit trying to get, and discover the happiness of what God freely gives.

*Happy are the hungry and thirsty for righteousness.* We think happiness is to be found in satisfying every physical desire. We eat and drink to our hearts content only to be left empty. Happiness is found when we discover not that we desire too much, but we desire too little. Happiness is to be found when we hunger and thirst not for the trinkets of earth but for the true treasures of God. That is what will lead to full satisfaction.

Next, Jesus says *Happy are the merciful.* Blessed are you when you can get inside another person and see what they see, hear what they hear, and feel what they feel. When you understand that you're no better than your neighbor, you're much more willing to show them mercy. This opens the door to God's mercy. Happiness comes in knowing God will give you not what you deserve, but what you need.

*Happy are those with pure hearts.* Blessed are the genuine and true. When you hide behind a mask so that others can't see you as you really are, you can't see God as he really is. But when you are authentic and real, with no hidden agenda, you can see the face of God.

*Happy are the people who make peace.* Joy is to be found in living at peace with your fellow man and helping them find peace with their God. Doing so makes you a son or daughter of God.

Then Jesus drops the final beatitude. *Happy are those who are harassed for doing the right thing.* And our core verse this week comes from verses 11 and 12,

*Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. <sup>12</sup> Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you*

All of the beatitudes run contrary to expectations, but none seems more contradictory than the eighth beatitude. Those whose idea of Christianity is positive thinking don't know what to make of this verse. There is a Bible version out there called The Positive Bible. Only the verses that make us feel good and happy about life are included. Not surprisingly, Matthew 5:10-12 is not included.

Yet, Jesus says that those who are persecuted for their faith will find happiness. He says in verse 12 that they have reason to rejoice and be glad. TV preachers might sugar coat the Christian life, but Jesus never sugar coats a thing. He knows that if we follow him, we will deal with some incredibly unhappy things.

The fact is that while we strive to build peace in this life, we will often be the objects of hostility. Our sinful nature fights against peace with God, even though it is what we need most. Our sinful nature also fights against righteousness. Righteous people are a reminder of our own shortcomings. The mere presence of righteous people make the unrighteous uncomfortable.

When we think of persecution we tend to think of early Christians being thrown before the lions in the coliseum. We think of believers being burned at the stake or thrown into prison. But the word translated persecution here means to be pushed, pressured, or pursued. This can come in all shapes and sizes. For Christians in modern America, these pressures may seem far more subtle, but they can be just as tempting and dangerous. These may be as simple as pressure to keep our faith hidden at school or work. We may face ridicule for our faith and beliefs.

Persecution will be a growing reality in our lives. This should not come as a surprise. This is not unexpected. Are we ready?

Jesus doesn't promise that this persecution will be easy or pleasant. He doesn't say we won't feel it, or if we just pray, it will go away. But he does promise we will be blessed. He promises a heavenly reward. He promises temporary suffering will lead to eternal happiness.

The beatitudes and Jesus' view of happiness is built on the idea of delayed gratification. Delayed gratification is the ability to deny our happiness now, in exchange for even greater happiness in the future. M. Scott Peck writes in *The Road Less Travelled*, "Delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure of life by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with. It is the only decent way to live."

But human nature and our sinful nature demands instant gratification. It's like those annoying J.G. Wentworth commercials, "It's my money and I want it now." We're like a bunch of petulant children stomping our feet demanding "I want it now." And from comfort food to massive amounts of debt, we live in a culture designed to give us what we want now.

Have you heard of the marshmallow experiment? It is a famous series of tests conducted by Stanford University professor Walter Mischel in the 60s and 70s. They tested hundreds of 4 and 5 year olds by bringing them into a room and setting a marshmallow in front of them. They told them they could eat the marshmallow now, or if the child waited while the researcher left the room, they could have two when he came back. The researcher would then leave the room and the film would roll. The results were hilarious and telling.

Of course some kids jumped up and ate the marshmallow as soon as the door closed. Others wrestled with the decision. They covered their eyes or turned around so they could not see the marshmallow. They kicked the desk or played with their pigtails as a distraction. They even stroked the marshmallow as if it were some beloved pet. The majority of the kids lasted less than 3 minutes on average.

However, about 30% waited 15 minutes for the adult to return with a second marshmallow. The most interesting thing though is they followed up with these kids over a period of 40 years, and the kids who delayed their gratification were much more successful in life than their

counterparts. In other words, the kids who were willing to delay their gratification, had much greater long-term happiness.

You won't find the term "delayed gratification" in the Bible, but the concept is all over the place. It begins in Genesis when older brother Esau sells his birthright to his kid brother Jacob for a bowl of soup because he was hungry. The beatitudes are all about delayed gratification. They simply apply the concept to an eternal perspective. Let me summarize it with one simple statement:

Don't give up what you want most, for what you want now. Let me say that again. Don't give up what you want most, for what you want now.

Apply Jesus' point of view of happiness to other areas of life. Instead of entering the kingdom, we could apply it to education. Blessed are those who are ignorant and know it, for theirs is learning. Blessed are those who wish they were not ignorant, for they are on the path to knowledge. Blessed are those who enroll in school, for they shall be taught. Blessed are those who submit to the teacher, for they shall inherit wisdom.

Or compare it to health and wellness. Blessed are those who face up to their illness, for theirs is health. Blessed are they who go to the doctor, for they will be helped. Blessed are those who listen to the doctors instructions, for they are on the path to healing. Blessed are those who take their medicine as prescribed, for they will be healthy.

Just as education begins in ignorance, health begins in illness, so happiness begins where there is no blessing. I don't care where you are in life. Blessing may seem to be the furthest thing. The world promises happiness by offering you short-term pleasure up front, but it gives you long-term misery in return. But God shows you the way to true, lasting happiness.

To get on God's path to blessing takes a first step anybody can take. All you need to do is realize where you are. You can take that step. "God have mercy on me a sinner."

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2016/05/24/the-top-8-things-people-desperately-desire-but-cant-seem-to-attain/#4e58ba127086>