

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today is the second in a series we're calling, "What would Jesus preach?" So if Jesus walked through the door and took the pulpit here at Good Shepherd, what would he say to us? To answer the question, today we begin to look at a sermon Jesus preached on a hill side in Galilee... it's usually called his "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew chapters 5,6,7. Today we'll look at the first 12 verses of chapter 5. In this section, Jesus reveals the secret to true happiness. That's really what Jesus is all about. He wants to give you happiness. A lot of people don't believe this. They look at Jesus as a stern judge, or as a restrictive parent that makes rules that rob a person of freedom and joy. But that is just not true. Jesus is in the business of giving happiness to his people. His primary concern is about your happiness. And that's what Jesus would preach about if he were with us today.

We all want to be happy. Yet happiness seems to be as elusive as ever in our modern world.

Everywhere in the world we are seeing instability, destruction and hopelessness. The civil war rages on in Syria. Libya remains in chaos. Egypt is still unsettled. Iran will soon have weapons grade uranium. Threats of terror attacks overshadow the winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. In the South Sudan, thousands have been killed and half a million driven from their homes in fighting that could lead to a full blown civil war.

Here in the United States, faith in our government is at an all-time low. Unemployment remains stubbornly high, and our strongest diplomatic tie to North Korea is retired NBA star Dennis Rodman. Things are not exactly looking good.

And how is your personal happiness? In our own homes and families you face challenges, heart aches, health issues, financial crises, job concerns and more.

I'm not describing a world that sounds very happy, am I?

For the last five years running, the Legatum Institute has been trying to index the relative happiness of people in nations around the globe. Legatum scores the world's countries on entrepreneurship, personal freedom, health, economy, social capital, education, safety & security, and governance. According to their index, the top three are Norway, Switzerland and Canada. Where does the U.S. fall? Number 11. We have dropped out of the top 20 in the economy sub-index. Our unemployment rate is twice that of South Korea's.

Now, take all of this with a grain of salt, because the index has a fair amount of subjectivity, because besides raw data, the index includes answers to questions like: "Is it a good time to find a job?" And "Are you satisfied with the quality of education?" The expectations of the people in one country may be very different than the expectations of people in another country.

And then we have to address the very basic question: Is the measure of overall prosperity a good measure of happiness? And how exactly do we define happiness anyway? I think if you asked 100 people to describe what happiness is and what it looks like, you may very well get 100 different answers. It has been noted that people who have spent time in the capitals of the number 1 and 2 ranked countries of Norway and Switzerland have noted that Scandinavians really aren't happier, but are prone to nihilism, alcoholism and suicide. So if those at the top of

the prosperity scale really aren't happier in their daily life, how can we be happy? I will suggest to you that moving to Norway is not the answer, although you're welcome to try it. So what is it? We want to be happy. But how?

In the first part of the sermon on the mount, Jesus relates a series of "Blessed are..." statements. In fact, there are nine of them in all. What does "blessed" mean? The most straightforward translation of the Greek word is simply, "Happy." In this context we might narrow the definition slightly and say it means happy because divine favor is given you.

In other words, Jesus defines for us who is truly happy. He wants us to be happy. Let's read through the whole section and then look at it again in more detail:

**Matthew 5:1-12 Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:
"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.
Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

So these verses in a sense make up the introduction to Jesus' sermon. And right in the introduction he makes his goal very clear to his listeners. Their blessing, their happiness is his goal.

To properly understand this, I want to you pay attention to a few things. Note that Jesus speaks these words primarily to his disciples. It says his disciples came to him and he preached these things. In other words, Jesus isn't teaching the way into the kingdom of God, or the way into a relationship with God. Rather he is describing the happy life of one who is in the Kingdom of God... one who already has a relationship with God.

Jesus is recasting the worldview of his disciples. Jesus is essentially saying, "All your life people have been telling you the secret to happiness. All your life you've believed certain things about happiness. And I'm telling you that you have been believing a lie. I'm telling you that real happiness can be yours, but the world has it all wrong. To see the happiness you have as a disciple of Jesus requires flipping on its head everything you think you know about happiness in this world.

So if you had asked a person in Jesus' day what the key to happiness is, what would they have responded? If you had interviewed people in Israel and asked the question, "Who are the ones that are happy? Describe what it would look like for you and for the nation to be happy?"

The answers would have sounded like this:

Happy are the people freed from Roman oppression, for they shall be free.

Happy are those bold enough to fight them, for they will be heroes.

Happy are those who follow the laws of God and traditions of our forefathers, for with them God will be pleased.

Happy are who perform the correct rights and rituals, for they will be saved.

Others would say: Happy are those who reinterpret Scripture to fit our modern understanding and worldview... happy are those who go with the flow of current thinking, for they will truly understand God in our current context.

Happy are those who separate from this world and isolate themselves from it, for they will not be corrupted by it.

Others would say, "Happy are those who have power and money and influence, for they are the ones God clearly favors."

The truth is there is nothing new under the sun. Everything I just described also describes people today. People have all sorts of notions as to where to find happiness. Some think it will come from our country. If we could just pay down our debt, defeat our enemies, lower the unemployment rate, and... fill in whatever other political agenda a person may have... then we will be a happy and blessed people.

Some see happiness coming from following God's rules and traditions. If we do enough, God will be pleased and we will be happy.

Some see happiness coming from modernism. We are unhappy because we interpret Scripture according to an ancient and obsolete world view. Change everything in the Bible that doesn't fit with modern thinking and you will be happy. Declare that the truth of God's Word is not absolute... it must be adjusted and adapted to our times... and then we will be happy.

Some continue to insist that true happiness comes from isolating yourself from the world and devoting yourself to religious activities.

And some preach a prosperity Gospel not unlike what the Legatum Institute apparently holds to: that if prosperity is increased, so is happiness. Some fall into the never ending trap of believing that if I just made a little more than I make now, I'll be happy. If I could just increase my income another 10%. And when it is, readjust, "Just another 10%. Just another 10%. More money will not bring happiness.

So what is the real key to happiness? Listen carefully once again to Jesus words.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

These first four talk about the same general cause of happiness. They speak of our attitude and our heart before God. What Jesus describes is the opposite of our heart by nature. The world would say, "Happy is the person who with tremendous self-confidence. Happy is the person who doesn't apologize for anything ... who is proud of himself and everything he does. Happy is the person who hungers and thirsts after the things of this world. But Jesus teaches the exact opposite:

The person that approaches God as a beggar will truly be happy. If we approach God with empty pockets and the knowledge that we are short of his requirements, we are lacking holiness, we are sinners, we need righteousness, because what we have doesn't cut it. A person with such an attitude before God receives from God good news and amazing blessing.

The good news is that in Christ Jesus, all that you lack is given. You are made rich by Jesus' poverty. You become a possessor of eternal riches. When we approach God and say, "I

have nothing.” He responds, “Well, I have everything!” And everything we truly need is provided in Jesus. His holiness. His perfection... are given to us by faith. The sin we have is removed in full through Jesus sacrifice on the cross.

Approach God poor, beggarly in spirit; mourning over sin and it’s horrible consequences; humble before the Lord understanding he owes you nothing; hungering and thirsting for righteousness because you know you have none... God turns you to Jesus and shows you that he has given you everything. In Christ Jesus you have the kingdom of heaven. In him you will be comforted. In Christ you inherit the earth. In Christ you will be filled with all righteousness.

And with all these things, you will find that you are happy. When God fills your spiritual needs, you will be happy... no matter what circumstances you face in this world.

The next three talk about our humble, loving spirit toward our neighbor:

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Again, these are the opposite of what the world says. Happy are those who are merciless and trample others to advance self. Happy are the they who do whatever their heart desires, for they satisfy themselves. Happy are the rabble rousers, the fighters, and those who can win arguments, for they shall get their way. Serving yourself, self-actualizing, personal fulfillment, getting your way... these are the keys to happiness... so the world says.

But Jesus says the the opposite. Followers of Jesus know they have been shown mercy from God that they did not deserve, so they show mercy to others. They are happy when they do so. Because God has created in them a new heart in Christ Jesus, they strive to keep that heart pure... they guard there heart... and they will see God. Followers of Jesus have peace with God through Christ, and so they strive to keep peace on earth as well... and are called sons of God. And they are happy!

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Again, the world says the opposite: Happy are you when you go with the crowd, share the views of the world, and do what everyone else does. Happy are you when people agree with you because you sound just like them. This is a lie!

True happiness comes from following Jesus and living like him to such a degree that you are persecuted and insulted for his names’ sake.

What is the key to true and lasting happiness? It’s transforming your worldview to match up with God’s worldview. Talk to those who appear to have achieved their life long worldly-focused dreams, and they will tell you how unhappy they are. The rich man never says, “I am rich and I am now happy.” Rather he never has enough... he’s never quite there. The person who becomes a ruler or has authority never says, “This does it! I am complete and happy.” Rather he craves more power. The person who lives to 114 does not say, “I attained my goal of living well into a 2nd century of life. I will die happy if I don’t make 115.”

True happiness comes from sharing God's worldview. This world is broken, decaying, evil, wicked, and doomed for destruction. And each of us is by nature the very same. But God love us so much that he sent his Son Jesus to live for, die for us, and rise again. And this means we are right with God, and we are heirs of God's eternal kingdom. But here's the thing: we still have some time to spend in this broken world. Your time here will be short... maybe months, maybe a year or two. Maybe a few decades, but not more. In the grand scheme of things... your time here is short. Do you want to be happy? The key to happiness is humility before God, living in the fullness of Jesus Christ, and giving glory to Christ by showing his love to others. When you do that, you will be insulted and persecuted. But that's no big deal. You've got an incredible heavenly reward waiting for. Knowing this will make you happy no matter what you must deal with in this life. Happiness is... found in a close relationship with God, which is established through your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and then living *for* God. Friends, in Christ... be happy! Amen.