

“Happiness Begins with Discipleship”

Matthew 4:17 - 5:12 ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. ²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. 5:1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. *"Happiness Begins with Discipleship"*

There is an Appalachian Old Time tune called "Sourwood Mountain." The lyrics as I know them paint a picture of a man stating what he thinks will make him happy.

"All I want in this creation, hi-dee-ho-dee-diddle all day.

Is a pretty little wife and a big plantation, hi-dee-ho-dee-diddle all day.

Chickens are crowing on Sourwood Mountain, hi-dee-ho-dee-diddle all day.

So many pretty gals you can't a-count 'em, hi-dee-ho-dee-diddle all day.

All I want to make me happy, hi-dee-ho-dee-diddle all day.

Is two little youngun's a-calling me Pappy, hi-dee-ho-dee-diddle all day.

I love my wife and I love my babies, hi-dee-ho-dee-diddle all day.

I love my biscuits a-sopping in gravy, hi-dee-ho-dee-diddle all day."

The song definitely highlights that men are not all that hard to please...a wife, kids, big plantation, and biscuits and gravy. But seriously, I think we all live with certain ideals about what it takes to make us happy. I think for many of us, a

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suitable mate, a family, meaningful work, and material comfort are on that list...and especially biscuits and gravy. There are others of us who can be happy without a mate and without family, who can find meaning in any kind of work, and are content with living quite simply. Happiness is in the eye of the beholder. The point I wish to draw out is that we all have these ideals and indeed, we will strive for them. Most assuredly, we will spend our lives in pursuit of them. There's a dark side to it as well. Some of us will waste our lives in bitterness at not achieving what we believe will make us happy. To be even more blunt, some of us will do everything we can to keep ourselves from being happy.

The problem that we have with our ideals of happiness and our pursuit of them is that they too often do not include the pursuit of what God wants for us so that we may be truly happy. Sometimes we make God fit by looking by saying God has blessed *my* efforts to make *me* happy without having for a day considered what God might want for my life. God created us to be happy. Therefore we will pursue it, one could say, as a matter of instinct. The challenge we face is whether to pursue the happiness God created us for or to pursue our “me” oriented ideals of happiness.

The Beatitudes are eight pronouncements by Jesus concerning what he says is the blessed or happy life, a life upon which God's favor rests. Considering who Jesus is as the Son of God become human, the Lord of the Cosmos, and the one through whom and for whom all things were created and by whom everything is sustained and held together perhaps we should take him a bit more seriously than we do on this matter of happiness. If living in his life is ultimately the reason why this cosmos was created, maybe he knows a little bit about what will make us happy. Maybe, happiness begins with discipleship.

To set the context for the Beatitudes, in Matthew's Gospel they are Jesus' first words of instruction to his disciples. Jesus sees this huge crowd coming to him and realizing things are going to be quite busy from there on out, he calls his disciples together to give them the “Cliff Notes.” In the verses immediately prior, we see Jesus calling the twelve, particularly James and John. He sees them tending their nets on the shore of the Sea of Galilee for they were fishermen and he simply says, “Follow me and I will make you fishers for people.” Then seeing him to be someone to whom they could/should entrust their lives, they immediately drop their nets and follow him as his disciples.

A disciple is a student, a student who seeks to study the way of life and teachings of a particular teacher in order to make it his or her own way of life. Jesus' way of life and teachings concern righteousness, which means living in a right relationship with God, one another, and God's creation. Jesus' own righteousness begins with faith, utter dependence on and obedience to his Father. For his disciples to learn his way of life, indeed to ultimately partake of his life, they simply had to leave their lives behind and share in his life of faith in and obedience to the Father, and in Jesus' mission of bringing near the kingdom of heaven. The Holy Spirit opened the eyes of these twelve to see that they needed to entrust their lives to this Jesus of Nazareth and become his disciples. They did. For the next three years they would go everywhere with him and do everything he asked them to do. When he died and was raised and ascended

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into heaven from where he sent the Holy Spirit, they, filled with his life continued on his mission of proclaiming the Good News that in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit the kingdom of heaven is at hand. To be a disciple goes beyond simply a matter of personal faith. It is to leave one's life behind, to participate in Jesus' life and ministry. We are not his disciples if we are just fitting Jesus into our own lives as a system of beliefs. To be his disciple is to come and to find where your life fits in his.

Back to the beatitudes, they all begin with “blessed are.” Blessed means happy, but not this “me” oriented sort of happiness that our ideals of happiness entail. It's God's happiness, God the Father's delight in his Beloved Son placed in us by the Holy Spirit. Happiness is sharing in Jesus' relationship with his Father by means of the Holy Spirit. The first twelve disciples were not simply working out their own little, individual faith journeys. They were leaving everything behind to follow Jesus and participate in *his* faith journey. I hope that this makes sense to you. If not raise your hand and I will try a bit better to explain it. They were depending on his faith in God, his trust and obedience, to be the means of finding their own. Somewhere deep within them the voice of Jesus said, “Here is your life. Follow me.” He indeed is our Savior. He by his life, death, and resurrection has made us righteous. He has given us access to God through himself in the Holy Spirit. That is the new reality we are called to proclaim. In life and in death we belong to Jesus Christ who has saved us all. That being the case, we in response need to come to grips with his Lordship by becoming his disciples, full-time students of his life.

These eight pronouncements of happiness come, as I said, as Jesus' first teachings to his disciples. Take note that they concern happiness. If we have said yes to his invitation to be his disciples, we should take great comfort in knowing that the first thing he wants us to know is that in him we will find the happiness for which we are created, God's own happiness. Yet, it won't be a life free from suffering or struggling for these blessings concern being poor in Spirit, mourning, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, being merciful and pure in heart, and to become peace makers...and we will be persecuted on account of him. These are all things that don't jive with the ways of this world. But the life he gives to us in himself by the Holy Spirit, the life of his Kingdom coming, is a life of living within the very blessedness of God's own happiness, his delight, his joy in his beloved children. Come. Trust your lives to Jesus and be his disciple.