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# 1

## HAPPY AND HUMBLE

(Matthew 5:1-5)

*Seeing the crowds, He went up on the mountain,  
and when He sat down, His disciples came to Him.*

*And He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:*

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

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

*“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”<sup>1</sup>*

**A**LMOST anyone you ask might say sermons are boring. This can be hard news to hear if you are a preacher. It is doubly hard if you find yourself studying this book on our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, which is essentially a series of sermons about a sermon found in Matthew chapters 5-7. But the Sermon on the Mount is far from boring. Many of those who love our Lord’s teachings tend to love it most. Whether one is a Christian or not, there is much to be both honored and emulated, for Jesus cuts straight to the heart. He confronts our human tendency toward “image religion” that is based on outward show and selfish attitudes. Jesus crushes our idols, especially those stubborn ones of entitlement and hypocrisy. In doing so, He demonstrates that a genuine relationship with God shows itself in selfless and humble-hearted obedience. It can be a mind-expanding and life-transforming sermon if we will take the time to truly hear.

One of Matthew’s concerns is to show how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament. We see Him going up “on the mountain” (5:1), which is Matthew’s way of signaling a *new Moses*—one who is greater than Moses. Just as Moses, from the mountain, delivered the ethics of the kingdom in a set

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Scripture throughout this book are taken from The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society), 2001.

of Ten Commandments, so now Jesus delivers the ethics of the kingdom in an even deeper way, beginning with a set of Eight Blessings (or *Beatitudes*), the eighth being highlighted with a double blessing.

These Beatitudes, as is the entirety of His sermon, are truly radical words and life-changing. But what things should we notice first as we begin the Beatitudes? Three things stand out: First, this whole sense of paradox that characterizes the Christian life; second, those things that Jesus places first, that are indeed first, and that must always be first; and third, the place where true happiness really dwells and where true happiness is really found.

### TRUTH STANDING ON HER HEAD

The Beatitudes appear to be a list of paradoxes. A paradox is a statement of truth that on its face seems contradictory. For example, let us paraphrase the second blessing (verse 4), *happy...are the unhappy*. These are two things that cannot be true simultaneously, and yet Jesus claims it is so. The Christian life, as Jesus brings it to us, is full of paradox; for example, we die to live. Or, as G. K. Chesterton describes it, “Paradox is truth standing on her head to attract attention.”<sup>2</sup> That is a fitting image.

This list of eight blessings I summarize in three basic categories: *happy* and *humble* (5:3-5), *happy* and *hungry* (5:6-8), and *happy* and *harassed* (5:9-12). These are not things we naturally associate with happiness. But this is the startling Christian paradox: Jesus’ opposite-world way, and how He brings us into the most blessed and happy life.

I am using the terms *blessed* and *happy* somewhat interchangeably—and I believe rightly so. The Greek term μακάριος on its face means *happy*, and it brings out forcefully the shocking import of what Jesus is saying. What we are to see is not the shallow and transient way we tend to think about happiness, but a deep and abiding happiness—the settled happiness, or *joy*, of those who know they have the favor of the Lord.

My encapsulation of the sense of the first three—poor in spirit, mourning, and meek—is *happy* and *humble*. Why would Jesus call these things blessed, and place them first on His list? We might say instead, “happy

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2 G. K. Chesterton, “When Doctors Disagree,” in *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), 35; [www.scribd.com/doc/222055/The-Paradoxes-of-Mr-Pond-1937-by-G-K-Chesterton](http://www.scribd.com/doc/222055/The-Paradoxes-of-Mr-Pond-1937-by-G-K-Chesterton).

are the rich,” or “happy are the powerful.” The poor do not usually appear to possess anything of real value, and the meek do not naturally gain any territory. But here, according to Jesus, the poor possess the kingdom of heaven, and the meek inherit the earth! That is paradox.

### **SPIRITUALLY DESTITUTE**

So, let us look at what Jesus places first. Jesus begins with an odd phrase: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (5:3). What does it mean and why is it first?

It is important to notice the *poverty* issue. As we look all around us, we notice in our affluent environment that physical riches often drive one *away from* God. Wealth can become a rival god (see Mt 6:24) which rarely admits a need for God. This is why Jesus says it is so difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (see Mt 19:23). Physical poverty, on the other hand, often drives one *to* God. One of the virtues we all must learn is our day-by-day dependence upon God for all things as we are taught in the Lord’s Prayer, “give us *this day* our daily bread” (Mt 6:11).<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is not speaking of a material or unqualified poverty. He is addressing poverty “in spirit.” To be poor in spirit is to be spiritually destitute. It is to acknowledge our utter spiritual need for and complete dependency upon God. Indeed, in the Psalms, this kind of poverty is a way of describing the basic sense of spirituality. Over and over, the one who seeks, and knows, and trusts in the Lord, is called “poor and needy.” Take, for example, Psalm 86:1-2:

Incline Your ear, O LORD, and answer me,  
for I am poor and needy.

Preserve my life, for I am godly;  
save Your servant, who trusts in You  
—You are my God.

We see this also classically expressed in Isaiah 57:15, from the lips of our exalted Lord “who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, *and also* with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.’”

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<sup>3</sup> All emphases or italics in Scripture quotations throughout this book are the author’s own.

If we want to possess heaven, we can never escape this first necessity. We can never grow out of, or graduate beyond, or be promoted out of being “poor in spirit.” It is the fundamental recognition of our need: that we stand before God as sinners, unworthy, unable, naked, and in need of His clothing grace. We all must begin our Christian journey here, and this is the foundation upon which the rest of the Christian life is built. That is why it is listed first among the Beatitudes. Do you have that spirit of humility? Do you have that need for God?

You see, the kingdom of heaven is not granted on the basis of merit or might, which is where the Pharisees and Zealots erred. It is granted to those who come to God knowing they have nothing to offer, who cry out to Him for mercy, and He hears them. It is granted to people who are well aware of their need, such as the poor, or women of ill-repute, or those loathed tax-collectors like Matthew himself (see Mt 9:9). All who would enter the kingdom of heaven must begin here. All who begin here—and continue here—have the blessing of heaven as a present possession. Notice how this focus on the present frames the otherwise future promises (5:3 and 10): “for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.” It bookends the Beatitudes as a marker of emphasis. Heaven is not something that we are able to attain, but it *is* something we can possess, by His grace.

To be poor in spirit is to come to the place of truly acknowledging our need before God—and never leaving that place. It is there that we find the real and lasting blessings of God.

### MOURNING OVER SIN

Next, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn” (5:4). Just as the poverty in verse 3 was an acknowledgment of spiritual need, so here mourning is principally a grieving over our sin. It is our sin that *separates* us from God—what a horrible thing!—but the brokenness of repentance is the path of life. As the Scripture teaches, “A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Ps 51:17).

Do you grieve over your own personal sins, or are you all right with them? We live in a culture that does not mourn over sin. Instead it minimizes sin, presents sin as the better life, and mocks the one with a contrite heart. But that attitude is like dancing on the deck of the Titanic while mocking those who are rushing to the lifeboats.

How serious are you about your sins? Notice the strength of language in James 4:8-10:

Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you.

This is the happiness that Jesus is driving at: He is offering the peace and comfort of complete forgiveness plus an endless life in the presence of God!

But our brokenness must go beyond ourselves and our own sins. Do you also grieve over the sins of others? Does it bother you when the world rejects God's laws or when a Christian goes on in flagrant sin? Do you mourn over the societal effects of sin, or even possible effects in a higher realm? Does it grieve you that so many people are rushing like proverbial lemmings to an eternal doom? There are also the larger effects of sin—particularly that specter of death that looms over us all, whether it be by the ravages of war, the murder of innocent children through abortion, or the death of a loved one as when Jesus wept over His friend (Jn 11:35).

Part of the blessing here must surely be *the knowledge* that although an individual or corporate lifestyle of sin is not right—it is Jesus that will make it right. Jesus defeated both sin and Satan at the cross, and still more: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor 15:26). There is true comfort in these truths.

### THE POSTURE OF PIETY

Thirdly, there is Christ's blessing on the meek (5:5). We all have trouble understanding what meekness really means. Surely it means that the essence of meekness, as lived out in our lives, is truly understanding our place as *humans* before Almighty God and our place as *sinners* who have received God's grace. It is from this standpoint of our finitude and our sinfulness that we can, and rightly ought to, respond to others in a spirit of patience, kindness, gentleness, and humility.

Meekness is not weakness, though the world always has and always will look at it that way. The world calls us to seize our selfish interests at

the expense of others, but Jesus calls us to “learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29, KJV). Will you respond to the call of the world, or the call of Christ? Which takes greater strength—to strike out and seize, or to restrain and relinquish? Men and women fight this temptation in different ways: for men, this typically comes out in *physical* violence or harshness; for women, this typically comes out in *verbal* violence or harshness. But in either case, it is the same lack of meekness that we must learn to forsake if we are to learn from Him.

While we can get what we want in the world’s way, because we can gain little bits of territory, seize a bit of prestige, conquer our own little dominions—whether that be the domination of a relationship, a workplace, or an entire nation—we can never seize true happiness. The ironic paradox is this: the meek, that is the gentle and the humble, will “inherit” the earth! Here, Jesus is quoting from Psalm 37:11, which pointed to the Promised Land, but which finds its fulfillment in something far greater: “a *new heaven* and a *new earth*” that awaits us (Rv 21:1), and all that is within them is ours in Christ! So let us be content to wait upon the Lord.

### THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

This is being written as we are about to enter into our July Fourth festivities once again—with “bombs bursting in air”—in which we celebrate the founding of our nation, in the Declaration of Independence from mother Britain on July 4, 1776. In this document, the signers declare “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>4</sup> These tenets are central to the American vision. Our nation was founded on these values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As it was envisioned by the Founding Fathers, even the pursuit of happiness was a noble call. But that is not what it has become. Rather, in our changing culture, it is an unfettered pursuit of personal happiness. Self-indulgence has been raised to prominence, taking precedence over all other things. Thus, for example, personal happiness takes precedence over that life growing inside of me, or that aging parent we would relegate to a stranger’s care. We pursue

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<sup>4</sup> The Declaration of Independence, paragraph 2.

happiness relentlessly; and yet, when we have caught what we pursue, we do not find ourselves happy. We look for happiness in wealth and power and fame, in a new wife, a bigger house, a better car; in “sex and drugs and rock-n-roll.” Yet, after we attain these things, happiness itself strangely eludes us. As Saint Augustine noted in the opening words of his *Confessions* some sixteen hundred years ago, “Our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”<sup>5</sup>

True happiness, ironically, is found in Christianity—and this happiness is twofold: it is not just for the future, in heaven, but also in the present, the here and now. We see this in the very tenses of the blessings: *is* and *shall*: “for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven...for they *shall* inherit the earth” (5:3, 5). This is the two-sided coin of the kingdom: *already* and *not yet*. Too often our picture of Christianity is “pie in the sky when you die,” but for now, only dullness and drudgery and no fun at all. But this is a horrible perversion. As we are told in the Scriptures, the purpose of all God’s commands is: “for our good always” (Dt 6:24). So, the promised blessings of Jesus are happiness *now* and happiness *then*.

If you are looking for real and lasting happiness, you will find it in things such as meekness and mercy. Look around you. The happiest people—the most blessed—are not those with the most possessions or the most money. The happiest people are those who understand grace and live selflessly in service to God and to others. Happy...are the humble. This is the Christian paradox; this is the primary thing and the path to lasting happiness.

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<sup>5</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 21.