

September 7, 2014  
The National Presbyterian Church  
**The Pursuit of Happiness**  
**Jesus the Teacher – A Happy Kingdom**  
Psalm 1, Matthew 4:23-5:12  
Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons through the fall we're going to be thinking together about Jesus' teaching as we find it in the gospel according to Saint Matthew, and in three chapters in particular: the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Chapters of Matthew's gospel – a section of scripture that we call the "Sermon on the Mount" – the very heart and core of Jesus' teaching to his disciples. In this sermon, Jesus covers numerous topics about "life as God wants it to be lived."

- Jesus speaks about our lives making an impact on others. He calls us "salt" and "light" and wants our lives to have the impact of salt that it has on food and of light that it has on life.
- He calls us to restore our broken relationships. And it's here that we find him saying that we are to love not only our friends but we are to love our enemies.
- Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that we are to control our thoughts; our thoughts about sex, our thoughts about judging others, the way in which we criticize others sometimes without knowing exactly what we are doing.
- Jesus tells us to be careful about our words. He speaks about promises (or "oaths"): we are to make promises, but more important is that in our daily speech we are to be simple truth-tellers. We are also to be careful about the way we pray! We are to be careful that our intention is never to impress others with our prayers, but simply (and amazingly) to speak to the living God.
- Jesus tells us that we are to let go of certain things, that we are to let go of our anxieties. And we're also, he says, to let go of our money, that we are to become generous people who are able, able to let things go.

Jesus covers all of these topics and more topics in this wonderful sermon, the heart of his teaching that we call the Sermon on the Mount. But before he does that he prefaces everything that he says in the Sermon on the Mount with a group of statements in Matthew 5, eight statements (some would say nine; but there are eight themes) –that we call "The Beatitudes":

- 1 Blessed (or Happy) are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 2 Blessed (or Happy) are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- 3 Blessed (or Happy) are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- 4 Blessed (or Happy) are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- 5 Blessed (or Happy) are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- 6 Blessed (or Happy) are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- 7 Blessed (or Happy) are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- 8 Blessed (or Happy) are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed (or Happy) are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds

of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

These eight statements, or “beatitudes” are about happiness. Happiness! Jesus wants those who listen to him to know where happiness lies. And since these statements function as a preface to the whole of this section of Scripture, what Jesus says in those eight statements is intended to influence our understanding of everything else that Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount and beyond. So that when Jesus tells us how to live, he does so, ultimately, because it is in this path that our happiness is to be found. To put it another way, the Beatitudes form the lens through which the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is to be understood – and over the course of the next few weeks, we’ll often be weaving together the themes in the Sermon as a whole with the themes in the Beatitudes.

Of course finding happiness and the pursuit of happiness should be right up our alley as Americans. Its part of the way we do things here, and has been for over 200 years. 237 years ago, the pursuit of happiness was declared to be one of our rights in the Declaration of Independence:

*We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal and they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*

*And that . . . whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and to institute new government laying its foundation in such principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and their happiness.*

Since these words were written I do not think there has been any nation on Earth which has pursued happiness with the vigor and with the emphasis and the gusto that we in our nation have pursued happiness. We may not have found it as much as others but we have certainly invested in it to our fullest capability. In fact a couple of years ago the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network published a report on nations around the world (see “Happiness Scores” Kim Painter, USA TODAY September 9, 2013) and they gave them a ranking on their happiness. I don’t know if any of you saw this particular ranking. The Scandinavians are right at the top. We in our nation we are number 17 which may be surprising. Only 17!

The Canadians to the north are way above us (#5) and what may be surprising is that the Mexicans to the south are one notch above us on this. But if that does not make you happy to hear (!) then what may make you a little happier is that we are happier than our brothers and sisters across the ocean in Britain and Germany and France. So we do beat out those folks in the happiness quotient and that may make you a little happier than you would be otherwise!

So we may not have achieved as much happiness as is possible, but we certainly have pursued it as much if not more than others, and we have made it our way of life – which probably is an explanation for Walt Disney’s confusion (if you saw the movie *Saving Mr. Banks*) at the self-inflicted misery that P.L. Travers, the author of *Mary Poppins*, seemed to live with all her life. She couldn’t get out of a certain sense of misery. He just wanted her and the whole wide world to be, well – to be happy! And this was his calling in life. And his impact on our nation in the last 50 years or 60 years has been simply enormous.

The pursuit of happiness also leads to confusion and to questions of all kinds in more serious and public areas of life.

So here I am today speaking about “happiness” in a time in our world’s history where there are lots of people who are not happy. In fact there are many people in this world whose lives seem to be utterly miserable, or their circumstances seem to be utterly miserable (think of the Middle East), more so it would seem than at any other time in recent history. And this perplexes us as a nation – when others aren’t happy. We have said in the Declaration of Independence that happiness is not just our right it’s our creators’ endowment on *all* people . . so what are we to do when other people are not happy? And how are we to involve ourselves in their lives around the world when we see nations that aren’t happy? The pursuit of happiness for ourselves and for others has enormous ramifications and whether or not even if we pursue happiness for others we can give it to them, well that, of course, is one of the major questions that is up for grabs in our public life today.

So this question leads to perplexing questions down the line and those questions are not just about the international world in which we live: they are about our own world and our own neighborhood. If we want to find unhappiness in our world we don’t have to go overseas, we just have to cross a river in our own town and go to Anacostia or we head west to Ferguson, Missouri. Or closer to home than that, we know there are people (and maybe we are among them) wrestling with happiness and unhappiness in very serious ways all the time.

Which leaves us with the dilemma: how do we solve that? How do we share happiness? How do we give it to as many people as possible? And if we commit ourselves to doing that, will we be happy in the process? Isn’t it a full time job simply taking care of our own happiness? What happens if we involve ourselves in the happiness of others? Will we lose our happiness or gain our happiness?

Plenty of questions arise as soon as happiness comes into focus as something that we are to pursue, or that is in some sense a goal of life. And some of those questions are easy to answer and some are not so easy to answer including I suppose the key question which is this: *where exactly is happiness to be found?* If we are to pursue it, where is happiness to be found?

I suspect the easiest answer to give to that is that it all depends on who you are. For each one of us today we’re going to find I suspect happiness in all kinds of different places.

- Some of us are going to find happiness in excitement and adventure. And others of us in just a little bit of peace and quiet (“Just leave me alone and I’ll be happy”).
- Some of us are going to find it in the great outdoors – we want to be outside in this marvelous creation that God has made; others of us just want to be inside in a special place, our happy place. And sometimes really inside: inside ourselves – when we dig deep into ourselves that’s when we find our happiness the most.

- Some of us find happiness in books and some in meals and some in games; some in hobbies, some in accomplishment, some in achievements; some in what we have and some in what we do.
- And most of us find happiness and unhappiness in great quantities of course in our relationships with other people – other people and who they are and where they are in our lives. Relationships influence and affect our happiness a great deal!

One of my favorite stories is a story told by a woman Laura Elliot about her father Jack returning to the United States after World War II. He'd been a German prisoner of war and the family had presumed that he was dead. They hadn't heard from him after he had gone missing in action. But on December the 15<sup>th</sup> 1944, he turned up. He turned up here in our own city, at National Airport, and called his sister in Northern Virginia who almost dropped dead when she heard him speak. They talked together about how he was going to break the news that he was alive and back home to their mother, Martha, who lived on a farm just outside Richmond, Virginia. They decided that they needed to go down to the farm together, which they did. Laura, who was young at the time, wrote up the story many years later like this.

Inside the house [the farm near Richmond], Martha heard the sound of car wheels on gravel and wondered who would visit so close to dinner time. Then she froze. The Army delivered death notices in person. She walked to the door telling herself "don't cry in front of a stranger." Then she looked out to see Jack's aged dog, a pointer by the name of Speed dancing around a terribly thin man bent over trying to pet him. "Strange," thought Martha, "I haven't seen Speed act that way since Jack left." And then it hit her. "Oh my Lord," she said to herself. "Jack!" she cried out, throwing open the door. Jack stood and opened his arms. They held each other for a long time not saying a word. Finally Martha pulled away and put her hand over her heart. It hurt in the most wonderful way and she was sure it was the first time she had felt it beat since Jack had left home.

I think most of us can feel that can't we? We know that kind of a situation. We know that sense of loss and that sense of discovery which is all wrapped in a person – that sense of love and that sense of unadulterated happiness when somebody who is of enormous significance to us comes into our life, and is with us, and we are with them.

So happiness arises very clearly not just from things and not just from deeds but it also arises from people.

- Sometimes its spontaneous, it's out of the blue, nothing happens it just occurs when we least expect it.
- Though sometimes happiness occurs when we have worked at it. There are relationships which have been unhappy and we have worked on them, and there comes a moment (sometimes!) when all of a sudden the relationship is new and happiness appears precisely because we did work on it. And this is the case with crafts and skills that we work at. We're miserable for a while and we work and we work and we work and we put in Malcolm

Gladwell's ten thousand hours (see his book, *Outliers*) and we reach that point where all of a sudden it clicks, and there is enormous happiness that comes from that.

In fact there is growing evidence, research recently especially at the University of California at Riverside (see, e.g., Sonja Lyubomirsky, <http://psych.ucr.edu/faculty/lyubomirsky/>) indicating that the role of our choices and our decisions and whether or not we are happy is far more significant than many of us realize. There are clearly factors with regard to happiness beyond our control (so not surprisingly, way down at the bottom of the list of happy nations are clearly those nations which are in chaos and confusion, war and anarchy – there are circumstances in life that we cannot control). But, what the researchers have discovered is that there are *far more things than we imagine that we **can** control* with regard to our happiness, and decisions we can make ... and whether we make those decisions or not, well, our happiness in some measure depends on that.

If you are in any doubt about this, let me urge you to read the *New York Times* bestselling book, it's been on the list for a couple of years called *Unbroken*, by Laura Hillenbrand. It's about to be a movie so I won't give away all the story; but, in a sense, the name tells it all. In the story, somebody suffers a great deal more than you could ever imagine, but emerges as the most remarkable, remarkably happy person that you could ever imagine. Indeed it should come as no surprise (though maybe it does!) that this person is actually a Presbyterian like us!

So where happiness is to be found? Can it be found? Where do our choices fit into all of this? *Well, all these questions this bring us back to the teaching of Holy Scripture and to the specific choices and ways of thinking that scripture brings to our minds and to our hearts which may lead to happiness.*

In fact as I read Holy Scripture, I reach the conclusion that God is far more interested, far more interested in our – yours and mine – happiness than many people, many Christians and many Presbyterians are willing often to acknowledge..

Sometimes we're slow to admit this or to acknowledge this because we are afraid that if we speak about happiness we're going to end up with something that is so light and so trivial and so shallow that it really has nothing to do with what God wants for our lives. Sometimes we're afraid that if we focus on the word "happiness" it will cause us to descend into the emptiness and the mindlessness of so much of our entertainment culture today.

Back in 1985 Neil Postman expressed this kind of a fear in a book with a great title, called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. And in the book he wrote many sobering words, among which were these:

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby talk; when in short a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act then a nation finds itself at risk and culture death [the death of a culture] is a clear possibility.

These are scary words – though I think he’s right. I think he’s right. Speaking about happiness involves a risk that we will in fact descend into the trivial. But having said that, what also needs to be said was that that was a risk which the framers of the *Declaration of Independence* were willing to take. And, more importantly, that was a risk that the writers of Holy Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, were also willing to take.

The scriptures along with the Declaration of Independence speak about happiness far more than we realize.

- Sometimes that happiness is disguised in the word “joy” which you find on the parament on the Communion table today. Joy is about happiness though it brings, perhaps, a more sober element with it. But, for all the distinction, it nevertheless is about happiness. So the scriptures speak about joy.
- The scriptures also speak about “blessedness”; and blessedness is about happiness as well. God wants our blessedness and God wants our joy.
- But there are times when the scripture brazenly speaks about happiness by itself. And about God’s passion that you and I be happy that we make the right choices and think the right thoughts that will not lead us astray but will lead us to the happiness for which God created us and through Jesus Christ redeemed us.

Sometimes we miss this simply because of Bible translations. I hate to say it but the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (which I use most of the time) and the New International Version of the Bible (which many of you use), when it comes to translating the Beatitudes translates the Beatitudes (in my opinion at least) incorrectly, by using the word “blessed” in each statement – the word that many of us have heard from childhood in relationship to the Beatitudes . . . “blessed are the . . .”. In this case it’s the Catholics (and some of you I know are Catholics or former Catholics) who get it right! In the *Jerusalem Bible* translation, the word with which the Beatitudes begin, each of the statements begin, is the word “Happy!” Happy statemenst one after the other! Not happy clappy! But happy as a word that the scripture is willing to use.

And when you do not use that word you hide something really important that the gospel writer Matthew is wanting to say. And that is this: that Jesus the teacher of the Sermon on the Mount is a king like King David before him (who wrote and inspired the Psalms), and like King Solomon before him (who wrote and insoired the Book of Proverbs), who wants his kingdom to be happy! Who wants his people to be happy! These themes are frequent, and repeated in King David’s psalms, and in King Solomon’s proverbs.

Look at the appendix below. It has references repeatedly from the Psalms and from the Proverbs which speak about happiness and I’m certainly convinced that Jesus in sharing the Beatitudes is declaring that like King David the author and the inspirer of the Psalms before him he too is a king who is passionate about the happiness of the citizens in his kingdom. And, declaring, too, that Jesus, like King Solomon before him is passionate about your happiness and about my happiness as citizens of his kingdom. Take time. Read through all these scriptures, and note that the very first word of the Book of Psalms is the word HAPPY! -- “Happy is the person

who does not walk in the way of the wicked but on the Law of God meditates both day and night.” The very opening word of the Psalms. And in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (which was the Bible for the early Christians) the word with which it begins is the word *makarios*, which Jesus uses, the gospel writers’ use, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

Of course when we drill down in Jesus’ teaching on happiness we find that Jesus’ teaching is not light-headed. It’s not flighty. It’s not weak or thin. This happiness is profound. But it is nevertheless happiness about which he speaks.

Of course he wants us to be blessed (and we’re going to sing about that in a minute) and of course he wants us to be joyful. But he also wants us to be happy.

Jesus himself attended parties like the party we are having at the church today, and did so in such a way and to such an extent that people became upset with him! . . . Why was he having such a happy time? And they couldn’t put two and two together. But his passion for happiness in the midst of a life that was deadly serious, is a passion he wants to share with you and me today.

And I trust that in the days ahead as we look at the Beatitudes, at these statements about blessedness and happiness, we will find a path to happiness which will stand us in good stead forever and forever. Not casual life but the life of eternity is what Jesus wants for us.

Happy are the poor in spirit says Jesus. That should cause us to think. In his kingdom the rules seem to be different from other kingdoms.

Happy are those who mourn. This is strange. Does Jesus know something we don’t know?

Happy are the meek. Those aren’t really good words at the beginning of football season.

Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Happy are the merciful.

Happy are the pure in heart.

Happy are the peacemakers. . . . And then at the end . . .

happy even are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

There’s nothing trivial about this. But, let me be clear: it’s not just joy and blessedness that Jesus is speaking of— it is our happiness that he wants, and I hope that this morning that you have begun to think perhaps in a new way about that fact. That the God of the universe wants your and my happiness. And if we pay attention to him he will lead us on that path and to that end.

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## **SERMON NOTES**

*The Scriptural Connection Between Psalms, Proverbs And the New Testament*

David Renwick. National Presbyterian Church. September 7, 2014

Greek: *makarios* – translated inconsistently: often as “blessed”, but sometimes (especially in The ancient Greek translation of the Psalms and Proverbs) as “happy.”

## PSALMS & PROVERBS

### RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Psalm 144:15 **Happy** are the people whose God is the LORD.

Psalm 65:4 **Happy** are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.

Psalm 84:4-5 **Happy** are those who live in God's house, ever singing your praise.

**Happy** are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

Psalm 33:12 **Happy** is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

Proverbs 16:20 **Happy** are those who trust in the LORD.

### HAVE GOD AS A SOURCE OF HELP

Psalm 34:8 O taste and see that the LORD is good; **happy** are those who take refuge in him.

Psalm 40:4 **Happy** are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods. (84:12)

Psalm 146:5 **Happy** are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God

### WITHIN FAMILY

Psalm 127:5 **Happy** is the man who has his quiver full of children.

Proverbs 31:28 (The virtuous woman): Her children rise up and call her **Happy**; her husband too, and he praises her:

### KNOWING FORGIVENESS

Psalm 32:1-2 **Happy** are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. **Happy** are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, in whose spirit there is no deceit.

### FOLLOWING THE PATH

Psalm 1:1 **Happy** are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate both day and night.

Psalm 119:1-2 **Happy** are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.

**Happy** are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart

Proverbs 3:13,18 **Happy** are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding. . . She (Wisdom) is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called

**Happy**. (also 8:32, 34)

Proverbs 20:7 The righteous walk in integrity **Happy** are the children who follow them!

### CARE FOR OTHERS

Psalm 41:1-2 **Happy** are those *who consider the poor*; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble. 2. . . they are called **happy** in the land.

Psalm 106:3 **Happy** are those who *observe justice*, who do righteousness at all times.

Proverbs 14:21 **Happy** are those who are *kind to the poor*.

### LIVE UNDER GOD'S AUTHORITY

Psalm 94:12 **Happy** are those whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law

Psalm 128:1 **Happy** is everyone who fears the LORD (112:1)

Proverbs 28:14 **Happy** is the one who is never without fear of the Lord (NIV), but one who is hard hearted will fall into calamity.



Proverbs 29:18 Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint, but **happy** are those who keep the law.

## NEW TESTAMENT

### RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS

Matthew 16:17 Jesus answered Peter, ‘**Happy** are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed (who I am) to you, but my Father in heaven.’

John 20:29 Jesus said to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? **Happy** are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Luke 1:48 (Mary’s Song: ) God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me **happy**;

Matthew 11:6 Jesus said: “**Happy** is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

### FOLLOWING THE PATH (EVEN WHEN HARD)

Luke 11:28 . Jesus said, “**Happy** are those who hear the word of God and obey it!”

Luke 12:43 **Happy** is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives.

Acts 20:35 (Paul) remember the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘There is more **happiness** in giving than receiving.’

James 1:25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be **happy** in their doing.

1 Peter 4:14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are **happy**, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

### KNOWING OUR PRESENT AND FINAL DESTINATION

Luke 14:15 One of the dinner guests said, "**Happy** is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

James 1:12 **Happy** is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Revelation 14:13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: **Happy** are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them."

Revelation 19:9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: **Happy** are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

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