

THE BEATITUDES: JESUS' CALL TO HAPPINESS

Introduction

Matthew 4:17-5:12

The scripture for our series *The Beatitudes: Jesus' Call to Happiness* begins, “**From that time** Jesus began to preach...” *From that time...* What time? From the time of Jesus call and commission by God through baptism, from the time of Jesus acceptance of that call, and from the time he was tempted to abandon the call. **(Read the text.)**

“*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” is the theme of Jesus life and message. It is the identical message that Matthew records in 3:2 that John the Baptizer was sharing. Jesus role was not to present a new message but rather to breath life and meaning into an everlasting message. He was to give it a personal touch. He was to take the words that the people were so familiar with and give them fresh meaning. He was to give substance to their religion of law, regulation and ritual. He was to make relationship with God living and dynamic.

Jesus called people to follow him; and they did! He preached and he taught in their synagogues, their places of worship. Unlike John, who was an itinerant street-corner preacher, Jesus began his ministry within the established system of religion. He was not a rebel, he was a reformer. He did not come to destroy their established religion and beliefs but to bring them meaning and fulfillment. Jesus message was that God is concerned about the entire human condition—spiritual, emotional, mental and physical.____

It is with this background and in this context that Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount which begins with the Beatitudes. At the conclusion of the sermon Matthew writes, “*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teachings, for he taught them as one who had **authority**, and not as their scribes.*” Jesus was not just another teacher—he taught with power and authority. It is one thing to think that you have authority it is another when that authority is recognized by others.

Who are these others that recognize Jesus authority; that become his followers, that listen to his teachings? They are people who share the faith and religion of Jesus—they are Jewish. They have a keen sense of responsibility toward God and toward their nation. These are people who have thought a lot about God and prayer and faith and sincerity and loyalty; yet, they are far from any clear understanding of these things. Their country

is occupied by the Romans; so they wrestle with the ever-present issue of the right attitude toward their enemies. Race prejudice is so prevalent that one hardly knows who their neighbor is. One-third of their income goes to pay Roman taxes. The middle class has nearly disappeared. You are either rich or poor. Slavery is rampant. It truly is a dark hour.

Some approach their situation by basically giving up; thinking, just enjoy life the best that you can. Eat, drink and be merry because we are just going to die anyway. Others, approach their situation from the perspective of fighting—we will reclaim our freedom. Some just grit their teeth and tolerate what is so intolerable. Still others, the Sadducees, decide that compromise is the best approach—give a little to Rome, take a little from Rome. And then there are those like the Pharisees who feel that if you live a clean, pure life, as defined by religious law, and you trust God, then in return God will protect and prosper you. The Sadducees bargained with Rome; the Pharisees bargained with God!

It was in the midst of this political and religious confusion and chaos that Jesus began his ministry. He knew the people because he was one of them. Jesus knew their hopes and fears, their longings and frustrations, their confusion and hunger for the truth. Jesus knew that they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he came preaching a familiar message; yet, with a fresh meaning, *“Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

The question becomes, what does Jesus mean? Repent from what and to what? I believe the answer to this question is found in his Sermon on the Mount; and is understood in its condensed form—the Beatitudes. In many ways the Beatitudes become the Christian form of the Jewish Ten Commandments.

Repent means to change one’s mind and life for the better. When Jesus called on people to repent he was asking them to commit to a new way of thinking and living, to abandon their false concepts—including bargaining with God—to forsake their wrong methods, and to enter upon a new way of life. Something that I think people still need and seek today.

The Beatitudes offer the key to authentic Christian living; the key that can unlock the door to genuine happiness; an ever present human desire—happiness! The Beatitudes all begin with, *“Blessed are...”* The best way to understand what “blessed” means, in this context, is to think happy; *“Happy are the poor in spirit, happy are those who mourn, happy are the meek, happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, happy are the merciful, happy are the pure in heart, happy are the peacemakers, and happy are the persecuted.”*

The concept of happiness that Jesus speaks of in the Beatitudes is in

clear contrast to what the world usually considers the source of happiness—power and money. Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “*For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*” In the Beatitudes Jesus is teaching the way of authentic meaningful life; a life that can bring true happiness, a life that keeps us from being the walking dead. Yet, there are many believers, Christians, who see Jesus words as foolish, idealistic, unrealistic, and even impossible. But Jesus was aware of this when he said that few believers would embrace his teaching that leads to true happiness. They are still believers; yet sadly, unhappy, because they are unwilling to embrace and to practice Jesus teachings.

Although Jesus’ teachings of love, compassion, peace, and forgiveness may not always appear attractive or practical, the alternative leads to selfishness, greed, cruelty, and even destruction. The way of Jesus teaching is a call to a higher way. For example, being a peacemaker is not an easier way yet Jesus defines it as the higher way that leads to true happiness.

Jesus came preaching, “*Repent (Change your mind and life for the better) for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” Friends, our challenge for the next few weeks is to hear Jesus’ Beatitudes, and to dare to embrace them as the way to a higher life of happiness. I ask that you join me on this journey.