

Matthew 5:1-12
Happiness: A Life That Is Home to God
Grace UMC
June 28, 2009

In Psalm 16, King David is thinking of his home with God and he says: "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

David says, "You have made known to me the path of life. This morning we are beginning a series of sermons on the Beatitudes. These 8 statements of Jesus are his roadmap to a life of blessing. They show us the path of life. They are the real highway to heaven. They are the road that leads us home.

I don't know if you have ever noticed this, but the Beatitudes begin and end with the promise of receiving the Kingdom of heaven. The Scriptures clearly tell us that heaven is our true home. So the Christian life, the life which is outlined in the Beatitudes is a sacred journey home: where God will wipe every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. We will feel at home. We will know beyond the shadow of doubt that we are accepted, valued, loved.

Several centuries ago, the great Bible commentator Matthew Henry, anticipating that some would unduly mourn his death, wrote these words of comfort and assurance: "Would you like to know where I am? I am at home in my Father's house, in the mansions prepared for me here. I am where I want to be - no longer on the stormy sea, but in God's safe, quiet harbor. My sowing time is done and I am reaping; my joy is as the joy of harvest. Would you like to know how it is with me? I am made perfect in holiness. Would you like to know what I am doing? I see God, not as through a glass darkly, but face to face. I am engaged in the sweet enjoyment of my precious Redeemer. I am singing hallelujahs to Him who sits upon the throne, and I am constantly praising Him. Would you know what blessed company I keep? It is better than the best on

earth. Here are the holy angels and the spirits of just men made perfect...I am with many of my old acquaintances with whom I worked and prayed, and who have come here before me. Lastly, would you know how long this will continue? It is a dawn that never fades! After millions and millions of ages, it will be as fresh as it is now."

Friends, we'll be home sooner than we think. Each moment is a step taken. Each breath is a page turned. Each day is a mile marked, a mountain climbed. You and I are closer to home than we've ever been. Before we know it we will be welcomed home. We'll see faces that are waiting for us. We'll hear our name spoken by those who love us and we'll be home. This is what Jesus promises to those who follow Him, from poverty of spirit to persecution.

This morning we're not home yet, but that doesn't mean we can't experience a great measure of God's blessing right now. The happiness Jesus promises is not just for heaven. It's for today. **If we can't yet know the complete happiness of being home with God, we can at least know the happiness of a life which is home to God**, a life in which God is pleased to be present with us through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The question is, "How can we be people in whom God feels at home"? How can we build characters in which the blessed presence of God is pleased to dwell? **How can we live lives which welcome God's presence and are filled with God's blessing?**

I suspect that all of us have been invited to homes where the host was not very hospitable and didn't know how to make you feel welcome. Other times we've been in homes where you felt right at home and hated to leave. We know the difference. The question then is how can we be people in whom God feels at home? That's the question that Jesus answers in the Beatitudes. **The Beatitudes describe a series of steps which lead us to become the persons whom God would have us be.** They lead us to a Christ-like character, in which God is pleased to dwell.

As I've studied the Beatitudes, I've come to see the **first four as a means of descent and the last four as a means of spiritual ascent.** First we empty

ourselves of all our wrong notions about ourselves and then God fills us with the qualities which reflect his nature. **We have to be emptied in order to be filled.** We are invited to follow the Lord Jesus who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself.

We begin emptying ourselves by recognizing our spiritual poverty. The world's gospel, the gospel of success says: "Blessed are those believe in themselves, for theirs is the kingdom of success." The world places its emphasis on its belief in self-reliance, self-confidence and self-expression. The gospel of success says, "If you want to get on in this world, you have to believe in yourself."

Against this Jesus says we will find happiness and wholeness and joy through recognizing our spiritual poverty. Heaven and happiness can't be bought. They are a gift for those who know their true poverty. When we are poor in spirit we admit that we have lost control, we never should have tried to take control, and never again want control.

Admitting we are spiritually poor is like the alcoholic at an A.A. meeting, saying for the first time, "Hi, my name is Mark, and I'm an alcoholic." That's a statement of spiritual poverty in which one admits that he or she is not in control. It's the beginning of recovery. Admitting our spiritual poverty is the first step in emptying ourselves so that God can fill us.

The second step is mourning, mourning for our own sins and the devastating effect of sin on all of creation. The philosophy of the world is, "Forget your troubles, turn your back on them, do everything you can not to face them." But Jesus says, "Happy are those who mourn."

The third step in emptying ourselves is attaining a proper estimate of ourselves. This is known as meekness. Meekness is having a right understanding of who we are and whose we are. Our happiness does not come from trying to be our own gods. It does not come from trying to tell God what ought to be done for us. Happiness does not come from prolonged arguments with God in which we demand our rights. Happiness comes from meekness, in humility thanking God for grace and mercy and blessings we never deserved.

In the fourth beatitude, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." When your stomach is empty you want it to be filled. You hunger and thirst. That's the sign of real emptiness physically and the same thing is true spiritually. This morning if you're not hungering and thirsting to be filled with God, then you probably haven't emptied yourself. Maybe you've said to yourself, "I'm basically okay, I've only done a few things wrong. I'm basically a good person: I only need a little help, now and then." If that's what you are telling yourself, then you're not seeing, you're not admitting your spiritual poverty, you're not mourning your sin. You haven't yet attained a proper perspective on yourself in relation to God. You don't understand your own emptiness, and you're not opened to God filling you. If you've emptied yourself, then you are hungering and thirsting for righteousness, you're hungering and thirsting for God to fill you.

Beginning with the fifth beatitude we begin to ascend, becoming more and more like Jesus. The fifth beatitude says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." In this fifth beatitude we are taught that the mercy we have received ourselves, we must give away. Some things must be given away or they'll be lost, they must be offered with open hands or they'll slip through clenched fists. If you hoard certain gifts you lose them. Mercy is one of those gifts. God freely offers it to us; we cannot earn it, we don't deserve it. It's ours for the receiving. But we must pass it on. Mercy stored is like fruit kept too long: it spoils and goes sour.

If we have emptied ourselves, recognizing how poor in spirit we are then, it becomes easy to be merciful. We recognize how much mercy God has shown to us and we know we cannot refuse to show mercy to others.

The next step up is becoming pure in heart. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Purity of heart is having proper motives. It's having a singularity of purpose, not being double minded, unstable in all our ways. Being pure in heart is being committed to doing God's will not just when people are

watching, but when we're alone. Purity of heart may seem like it is beyond us, but it is possible in Jesus. He is the pure of heart one. When we entrust our lives to Him, his life becomes our life, his obedience our obedience, his purity our purity. The important thing is for us to keep looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. As we keep looking unto him, we will find that by the grace of God we are transformed into his likeness and we become pure in heart. As we mourn over our sin, as we are broken hearted over it, we open ourselves up to God filling us with a pure heart. Our mourning deeply, creates in us more and more of a desire for a pure heart.

The seventh beatitude, and the third step up says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." Peacemaking was the ministry of the Lord Jesus, who made peace through his blood shed on the cross. When we seek to make peace, we are following in his steps. Remember peace is not the absence of conflict. Rather it is *shalom*, which is the desire for wholeness, the desire for completeness and the enjoyment of God's blessings. Peacemaking requires meekness. You can't make peace if you are trying to defend yourself. You can't make peace if you are insecurely trying to defend your reputation. You can't make peace if you are looking at everything in terms of its effect on you. That's what leads to quarrels and misunderstandings. To be peacemakers we must be neutral so that we can bring reconciliation. We are called to let go of self-protection in order to take hold of mutual shalom.

Will Willimon tells the story of a student who, in his senior year of college, felt called by God to spread the gospel, but how? Should he go to seminary? Should he be a missionary?

Waiting for guidance, he took a job as a bus driver in Chicago. Driving his bus through the inner-city streets seemed an unlikely place for ministry. "Some place to serve Jesus," he thought to himself.

Every afternoon a group of young hoods boarded his bus for a ride downtown. They had a routine: they would get on, stroll past the fare box without putting a dime in, intimidate the other passengers and slouch to the back of the bus. They were daring him to make them pay.

Finally, the day came when he met them at the door and said, as courteously as he could, "Look guys, you've got to pay. Everybody else pays. It's not fair. If you don't pay, you can't ride." But instead of paying, they dragged him off the bus and beat him until he was unconscious, leaving him a bleeding, half-dead mess on the sidewalk.

The police caught the young assailants, easily identified by the terrified passengers on the bus and charged them with assault and battery.

At their trial a month later, the driver was called to testify against them. He was still bandaged from his beating, but hurting even more because he felt like a failure in his Christian faith; he hadn't convinced anyone about the truth of the gospel.

The defense lawyers pleaded for mercy, arguing that the boys were high-school seniors, and a conviction would keep them from graduating, marking their records for life. The judge was unmoved. As he prepared to sentence them, he turned to the driver to ask, "What would make you happy? What would make you feel better? You're the one who suffered from these worthless thugs."

"The thing which would make me happy," he said, "would be to serve their sentence for them, to go to jail on their behalf so that they could go back and finish school and do better."

The judge laughed in disbelief, "What? That's ridiculous! Absurd! Impractical! Nobody has ever done that!"

The young man replied, "Oh, yes He did, yes He did."

Jesus made peace through his blood shed on the cross. As God fills us with his presence we will go in meekness and make peace.

The last beatitude says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If we are following Christ and increasingly filled with the fullness of God, if we show mercy, seek purity, and make peace, then the world will hate us. They will despise the righteousness of God in us and we will be persecuted. Persecution is the mark of the true church. Persecution for the sake of righteousness is the evidence that

we are true disciples. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be persecuted for the righteousness they crave. If we are true disciples of Jesus Christ our very character and conduct will inevitably lead to conflict with the world. Jesus says that when this happens, we are to rejoice because we have a great reward in heaven. Persecution makes us long for home. But it also tells us that we are on the way, we are not lost.

This morning we've looked at eight spiritual steps which lead us home and at the same time make our lives hospitable to God. Before I close there is one caution I must share. These eight steps are not a list of things to achieve. They are not a list of things to do, which we can complete by checking them off one at a time. They are a way of life. They are steps which need to be repeated again and again.

In his book, *Simple Faith*, Chuck Swindoll suggests that we try applying one beatitude a day. On Monday work on dependence, consciously focusing on being "poor in spirit." On Tuesday, apply repentance. On Wednesday, try gentleness as an attitude for the day. On Thursday, go after righteousness. Friday, make it a full day of mercy. Saturday, think on integrity. Sunday, deliberately be a peacemaker. And the next Monday? Cultivate joy.

That's a plan. But the reality is that by ourselves we can't build characters in which God joyfully dwells. Even as we follow the eight spiritual steps of the Beatitudes we must have faith in the grace of God, and trust in the working of the Holy Spirit, because it is God underneath us, behind and before us who truly builds our godly character.

We become kingdom people through the reign of the King who refashions us into the sort of men and women Jesus declared blessed. The Lord Jesus alone has the power to dislodge and discomfit our self-centeredness; the King alone can make us blessed.

It's like the story told about a mother who, wishing to encourage her son's musical abilities, bought tickets for a performance by Ignace Paderewski, Poland's famous concert pianist and prime minister.

When the night arrived, they found their seats near the front of the auditorium. Soon the mother started speaking with a friend, and, without knowing it, the boy slipped away.

At eight o'clock the house lights dimmed, the stage lights came on, the crowd quieted, and the curtain opened. Only then did the mother notice the little boy on the bench of the grand Steinway innocently plunking out "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

His mother gasped, but before she could retrieve her son, the master appeared on stage and quickly moved to the keyboard. He said to the boy, "Don't quit - keep playing." Leaning over him, Paderewski reached around with his left hand and filled in a bass part, and with his right he added a running obligato. Together the master and novice held the crowd mesmerized.

As we practice the steps of the Beatitudes, playing our little tunes with unruly fingers and botched notes, the Master comes and, with loving arms around us, creates music we could never play, and changes us into the persons in whom He is delighted to dwell, until we finally arrive at home, see him face to face, and realize that we have become like Him. May it be so.