

"THE JOYOUS LIFE"

Preached: Park Avenue
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Text: Matthew 5: 4-12

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In the year 1921, Lyman Abbott, one of the outstanding Christian leaders of that time, was seated in a pastor's study. His book, "What Christianity Means To Me" had just been published, and he was waiting to review the book before an audience in a particular church. The minister of the church asked Dr. Abbott to autograph a copy of the book for him. The minister said to him:

"Write in the book the ripest thought that has come into your mind during your sixty years of Christian growth and service."

Dr. Abbott pulled out a fountain pen and sat down to write. The minister left the study and returned some thirty minutes later. Dr. Abbott was still sitting there with the fountain pen in his hand trying to think of something to write. He was deep in thought. The minister quietly left the room, and returned some time later to take Dr. Abbott to the meeting. As they left the room, the minister noticed that the book was open on the desk and that the following words had been inscribed on the flyleaf:

"The Christianity of Jesus was not a philosophy which he taught, but it is a life which he imparts."

As we think through this observation made by Dr. Abbott, we begin to realize that perhaps this is a key to our understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, did not set up a detailed doctrine of human thought. Nor did he provide us with a definite plan for conduct. Rather he was seeking to impart or to share a way of life that is different from the ordinary. The sermon is a message designed to make life free and full. Behind the message of the master is the life of the master. The two go together. To understand the message, we must know him. Out from his mind, his spirit, and his experiences, there comes this life changing message of divine strength, power and hope.

It is interesting to note that the sermon begins with a note of joy. Jesus used the word blessed to introduce each of the nine beatitudes. As we read through this section, we see that they reveal to us a secret of human happiness which is quite contrary to the usual, accepted ideas on this subject.

(Read through the Beatitudes)

This joyous life of which Jesus is speaking is an outgrowth of inner strength and serenity. It is a by product of a life that is lived with God. The Beatitudes introduce us to at least three aspects of this joyous life which also serve as clues to its attainment.

IMPORTANCE OF HAPPINESS IN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

In the first place, the Beatitudes emphasize the importance of happiness in Christian experience. D. L. P.

Jacks, a British theologian, once said of Christianity:

"It is the most encouraging, the most joyous, the least repressive, and the least forbidding

of all the religions of the world. There is no religion which throws off the burden of life so completely, which escapes so swiftly from sad moods, which gives so large a scope for the high spirits of the soul, and welcomes with so warm an embrace those things of beauty which are a joy forever."

"Blessed.....blessed.....blessed.....happy.....happy.....happy". This is the one thought that is common to all the beatitudes. Nine times in nine verses Jesus drove home this idea. And then he climaxes it with a punch line, "Rejoice and be exceeding glad" This joyous note was not something superficial or false. It was a real and vital enthusiasm which grew out of his own life and experience. We can carry this further and point out that the theme of the New Testament from beginning to end is one of triumphant joy. It begins with the singing of the angels, and it ends with rejoicing around the throne of God. The word gospel means, "Good News!" And the greeting of Jesus was usually, "Be of good cheer".

What is the meaning of this? How does it relate to our own time? This feeling of quiet, uplifted joy is largely lacking on the modern Christian scene. Philosophers and scientists have filled our minds with dark and gloomy thoughts. Psychiatry has exposed and dwelt on the animal and ugly side of human nature. Many Christian teachers and theologians have retreated into a religion of crisis, pessimism, negation and helplessness. Our world depresses us with its terrifying events.

An interesting index of the effect of all this on our minds and bodies is found in the number of sleeping pills manufactured in this country each year. The production of sleeping pills has multiplied four times in the last twenty years. Enough sleeping pills are manufactured and sold each year to put everyone in the country to sleep for 22 nights a year - or to put nine million people to sleep for 365 nights a year. What would we do without the sleeping pills.

All of this leads to the question: is life so unhappy, so desperate, and so grim that even normal people must resort to drugs in order to blot it out. Are the sleeping pills a monument to our miserable lot? It takes more than sleeping pills to overcome the world. We need the renewal of a sane and solid faith that expresses itself in serenity and joy. This joyous life that Jesus was preaching about is a cure for many of our worries and mental road-blocks. It helps us to maintain healthy minds and bodies. It helps us to get along with others. It builds a margin of safety around our souls.

And so I would emphasize the idea that the Christian life is a joyous life. We have walked too long with downcast eyes and burdened hearts. We have talked too much of Christian sacrifice and service. We need to exhibit more Christian joy. Our faith should not be one of dark moods and somber shadows. It is glorified by a blessed lightness of heart. Our cheerful poise marks us as whole personalities....as sons of God. |

THE CONDITIONS OF THE JOYOUS LIFE.

The Beatitudes state the importance of happiness and joy in Christian experience. The Beatitudes also state the conditions of the joyous life. How do we go about gaining this degree of enthusiasm and joy that Jesus is declaring?

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This blessedness of which Jesus spoke is no surface matter. It is no back slapping, pleasure seeking type of experience. It is rather the normal expression of a dedicated life. We need to ask ourselves who are the happy ones? The rich - the educated - the successful - the healthy - the aggressive - - - these are not necessarily the happy ones. Rather, said Jesus, it is those who are humble of spirit.....who are seekers after righteousness, who are gentle, understanding, forgiving, those who are pure in heart, makers of peace, and who are steadfast in the face of evil opposition. To such as these, happiness comes naturally and unawares, without fuss, formula or fanfare. We don't go out and find happiness. It finds us when we fulfill the conditions.

The conditions set forth in the Beaititudes are interpreted by Fulton Oursler in his book, the "Precious Secret", as eight rules of mental health and happiness: He PRESENTS

POOR IN SPIRIT: becomes, "We will never be content with anything that we do".....in other words, we will always be seekers. Arrogance, conceit, and smug, self-satisfied complacency make happiness impossible.

THEY THAT MOURN: becomes, "We know that in grief we can grow strong." Dedicated sorrow is an open door to a new experience of strength and joy.

THE MEEK: The reference to the meek becomes, "We will accept misfortune in good faith. That is to say, happiness comes neither by submission nor by rebellion before the rough events of life, but by our acceptance and use of these things. We must be careful not to interpret meekness as weakness. It is the recognition that life is governed by wise and just laws and includes a willingness to cooperate with these laws.

THEY WHICH DO HUNGER AND THRIST AFTER RIGHTEOUSNESS: This phrase means that we should have an unquenchable interest in knowlege and truth. Happy people are never satisfied with what they know, but are endlessly seeking more from the mystery of life.

THE MERCIFUL: This beatitude is put into these words, "We will keep clean of grudges. Hate and anger tend to cause diseases of mind and body. When we persist in feelings of bitterness, envy, and jealousy toward others, we are merely forcing unhappiness on ourselves. The happy man is he who overlooks little slights and forgives larger offenses.

THE PURE IN HEART: What does this mean? It means that we will have a goal and pursue it faithfully. Singlehearted attachment to some worthy work or some lofty pupose is pureness of heart and brings happiness. Achievements do not matter as much as goals. When our heart is in our work, and when that work is big enough to give to it all that we are and have, then we discover joy and peace almost without knowing it.

THE PEACEMAKERS: This means that we will do more than is required to do. The happy person never lives just for himself. He does more than his duty. Deep personal satisfaction comes to those who serve others who may need the ministry of God's peace.

PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS'S SAKE: The eight and the ninth Beatitudes belong together. What is to be said for those who are persecuted and reviled.

"We will learn the true values of obstacles and even of viciously unfair treatment. In other words, even injustice and persecution have a constructive value. Happy is the person who is not crushed by them, but rises above them. He is greater than his persecutors and is always victor.

No matter how we interpret them, these are the conditions of the joyous life. These conditions may be met by any person, regardless of circumstance and environment. For human happiness is determined not by what goes on on the outside, but by what goes on on the inside!

RESULTS COME TO THOSE WHO MEET THE CONDITIONS OF THE JOYOUS LIFE.

All of this leads to the final thought of this sermon which may be stated in these words: THE BEATITUDES DESCRIBE THE RESULTS THAT COME TO THOSE WHO MEET

THE CONDITIONS OF THE JOYOUS LIFE. In other words, happiness and joy is not necessarily an end in itself. "Why be humble of spirit?" "Why hunger and thirst after righteousness". "Why be merciful and why be pure in heart?" Just to be happy and whole persons? Not at all! We're happy as we do these things because the doing of them brings us into a true and active fellowship with God.

"For their's ~~is~~ is the kingdom of heaven". "For they shall see God". "For they shall be called the children of God" "For great is your reward in heaven" These are the results that are promised. Those who grieve shall be comforted. Those who are meek shall inherit the earth. Those who show mercy shall get it. . . .

These are rewards that are worth having. They exalt life and make it great. These rewards do not come to the proud, the aggressive, the vulgar, or the compromisers. However, they are the normal possessions of those who live actively within the divine dimensions of life.

[All of this means that] the joyous life is not a matter of whistling in the dark. It's rather the true fulfillment for the child of God. It is not bounded or limited by environment. It's not dependent on money, nor on the achievement of our heart's desire. It is rather the discovery and the realization that the universe is on the side of goodness, and that when we forget ourselves and begin to live by his word, only then do we find a joy that is really complete and secure. For when we live in the spirit of God, then we begin to find God.

LET US PRAY:

Forgive us, Our Father, that we become unhappy so easily and often have a complaining spirit. Teach us Thy patience and help us to keep closer company with Thee. Give to us the happiness that no one can find by seeking, but which is the fruit of a kind and loving life lived in thy spirit.

In Thy name we pray. Amen.

Spirit of God descend upon our hearts. Wean them from earth, thro' all their impulses move. Stoop to our weakness, mighty as Thou are. And make me love Thee, as we ought to love.