

Looking For Happiness In Strange Places

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I look forward to sharing with you a couple of things this morning in the brief time that we have together.

The title of my lesson this morning is "Finding Happiness in Strange Places." So, let's dig in, shall we?

You know, the Pearl is one of the most precious gems. It's a miracle of nature, but where does it come from? It is produced by the lowly oyster, an ugly creature inside and out. The oyster has little in the way of comeliness that would suggest the beauty that resides inside. You can find blessings in strange places.

You know, Jesus proved the truth of that statement in the spiritual realm when he preached what we call "The Sermon on the Mount." And that's where our lesson is going to come from today. Matthew chapter five, verses three through eleven.

Many modern translators have often used the words happy or fortunate instead of blessed. I think most of us are familiar with the Beatitudes. One thing that's kind of interesting about the Beatitudes is that they are not commandments, but blessings. They are descriptions of the kind of person who will receive the blessings of God. They identify a series of qualities that produce happiness, even though happiness is not readily apparent in a modern sense. This kind of statement is what we refer to as a paradox. Oftentimes, we've talked about how one of the interesting things about studying the Bible is that it contains many paradoxes.

Paradox is not a word we run around using every day. So here's a definition of a paradox. It's a statement that attracts attention because it seems to be contradictory. This arouses curiosity and we are puzzled. But as we meditate on the statement, we go deeper into some important facet of life and learn something new. Paradoxes are marvelous instructors. So, if I were to just grab ahold of you and say, give me some paradoxes from the Bible, you'd probably be like me. You'd have to stop and think a minute.

But let me see if I can bring this home by listing some. Here are eight paradoxes that Jesus himself brought up in the New Testament. To be last is to be first. Giving is receiving. Dying is living. Losing is finding. Least is greatest. Poor is rich. Weakness is strength. Serving is ruling. Those are all paradoxes because on the surface they don't make sense. But when we dig into

them as Christ explains them, then the light bulb goes off and we're like, "Ah, now, now I see what the Bible is getting at."

What I want us to do this morning is look at the beatitudes in Matthew, chapter five. And these are all paradoxes. When you first read through it, you think to yourself, "that doesn't make sense." But in reality, if we dig a little bit deeper, we'll find that it does make sense. So if you have your Bibles and can open up to Matthew chapter five, we'll start with verse three, which is the first Beatitude.

Jesus says, "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Now, some translators will say that the word "blessed" could mean "happy." I think it's important that we talk about the difference between being happy and being content. Are you happy all the time? Probably not, but can you be content? There's a difference. The term translated blessed is descriptive of the present state of those who have received God's favor and thus are to be congratulated. The disciple's deep joy and happiness is predicated upon God's gracious response to their condition, not upon favorable external conditions. They are blessed because they now experience a long-awaited saving presence of God. If we have obeyed the Gospel and if we're trying hard to be in the right relationship with God, we can be happy and content.

But here's the difference. Contentment is how our inner self is thinking about our life and framing what's going on in our life with our relationship with God, knowing that we are on a pilgrimage to heaven, and that heaven is our ultimate home. Contentment is putting all of that in a framework so that we understand it. Even though I could be going through the worst of circumstances in my life, I can be content yet not necessarily happy. I think the most obvious example of this might be a person like some of our members here who are going through tough times. They may be fighting cancer and are having cancer treatments. Now, if I were to ask those individuals, are you happy right now? They may not be because of all of the pain and suffering that they're going through with those cancer treatments. But on a spiritual level, they can be content because cancer will pass. But eternity is forever and we can be in a home in heaven with God.

And so when I read "blessed are those," I don't always just think happy, I also think contentment. If we get our contentment under control, I think we can also use that to increase our level of happiness.

So let's dive into this first Beatitude, "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The word translated "poor" here is a word which denotes absolute poverty. It describes not the condition of having a little bit, but instead, of having nothing. It is not financial poverty

that Jesus has in mind, but spiritual poverty. We must learn to admit our need and to recognize the only One who can fulfill it. John has brought lessons to us about godly Christian qualities in second Peter, chapter one, verses five through eleven. How each Christian quality builds upon the others. The beatitudes do exactly the same thing. They are going to build on each other. The first several Beatitudes have to do with our character. And there's a progression that you're going to see as we go through these Beatitudes.

So, this first beatitude is intellectual in nature. The idea here is a poverty so deep that the person must obtain his living by begging. Now again, the context here is not our physical poverty. It's about our spiritual nature, our spiritual sense. We need to come to God, in poverty when it comes to being spiritual. I have a need. I don't need to be proud; I need to be humble. I need to see that I'm poor in spirit because I'm going to look to God to help me address and fill that need. Just as a person that is suffering physical poverty is dependent upon others, when we are poor in spirit, we are totally dependent upon God for our spiritual-ness. A person who is poor in this context can't survive without help from the outside. We need help from God in order to live. So, in this first Beatitude, Jesus is saying that we are blessed if we are poor in spirit. And what that really means is we've emptied ourselves out so that we can fill ourselves up with God's teaching, or God's spirit, so to speak. So, this mindset is understanding our spiritual condition. We sin. And without the moral virtues adequate to recommend us to God, we realize that we are spiritually needy. That's the first beatitude.

Alright, so let's build on that. Let's look at verse four. Jesus goes on to say, "blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted." There's a hidden blessing in mourning. If our heart can be broken, then we know we have a heart. Those who cannot mourn cannot love either. It is better to have a broken heart than to have no heart at all. And this is part of what Jesus is getting at here. Now, this Beatitude is more emotional in nature. There are so many ways that we could look at this verse. However, if we look at it through a spiritual lens, it can start to make sense. If you look at this from the world's perspective, the world thinks mourners are crazy. The world regards pain of heart with suspicion and restraint. But the original Greek language in this verse is saying that we can have immediate comfort in Christ if we can mourn. What this verse is getting at, is that it's necessary that we face our sin and mourn. The saddest thing in life is not having a sorrowful heart, but a heart that is incapable of being sorry. The saddest thing in life is not a sorrowing heart, but a heart that is incapable of grief over sin, for that is outside of God's grace. True Christianity manifests itself in what we cry over and what we laugh about. So, the idea in this second beatitude is when we acknowledge our sinfulness, and our hearts are broken because of our sin, we can find comfort in weeping. There's a lot to unpack so far in just these two Beatitudes; being empty and mourning.

And then we come to the third Beatitude that says, “blessed are the gentle, or meek, for they will inherit the earth.” To the modern mind, meekness is a quality to avoid. To most, meekness is not for the faint-hearted or timid. But the definition of meekness here is not one that we typically would think of. It's a moral quality of humility and gentleness usually exhibited during suffering or difficulty. That's meekness. It's not weakness. And do you know what meekness or gentleness implies? It implies that we have self-control. So, self-control goes along with meekness. Now here's an excellent example of this. Jesus was the master of this particular paradox, “blessed are the gentle for they will inherit the earth.” Jesus appeared as the epitome of weakness. A poor Jew caught in the inexorable tides of Roman history. A man destined to be obliterated from the earth. Pilate was the personification of Roman power. The tides of history were with him as part of Rome. Pilate was heir to the earth. These two figures, Jesus and Pilate, are at opposite ends in this paradox. Jesus Christ, the prisoner was a free man. He was in absolute control. Jesus, the meek, would inherit not only the earth but the universe. On the other hand, Pilate the governor, was the prisoner of his own pride. He could not even control his soul. He had no inheritance.

Jesus not only taught the paradox, “blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth,” He lived it. He did it. So, the lesson in this Beatitude is that we cannot go around practicing retaliation and vindictiveness if we are to be meek. However, we're to be lions when it comes to our faith and the defending of our faith. So, a meek person possesses immense strength and self-control, which he exhibits in love rather than retaliation. When we stand up fearlessly in defense of others, and for the truth as the occasion arises, that's being meek.

Alright, let's keep going. We've got more ground to cover. The next Beatitude is in verse six. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.” Now, the type of hunger that's referred to here is not a missed meal, but it's the gnawing hunger that results from deprivation. So, if I've emptied myself out, and I've mourned my sin, what do I want to fill myself with? That's what this beatitude is getting at. It's not literal hunger of course, but a hunger and thirst for righteousness. And so, the step in this progression of ours, our growth, is to be hungry for righteousness.

You know, I think we talk about an expression we have: “You are what you eat.” Obviously, we understand that concept. Did you ever think about the appetites that Elvis Presley had when he was alive? He was a man of many appetites. And in his later life, he had trouble regulating those appetites and they took over his life and brought it to an unsatisfactory end. In the same manner, our spiritual health comes from hunger, and we need to feed it with a proper spiritual diet. That's what we need to do. So, if we are progressing in our Christian life toward maturity, we should be developing an increasing hunger for God's word. Christ declares that hunger for

righteousness builds spiritual health and satisfaction. The one who hungers and thirsts desires the character of the kingdom. He pants after the fruit of the Spirit; he wants God's will and all it entails. And the more we conform to God's will, the more fulfilled and content we become. We fill ourselves with Christ's word and it satisfies that spiritual appetite that we have.

So hopefully you're starting to see a trend here where we're adding one thing on top of the one before, trying to become more mature as Christians.

So now let's go to verse seven and look at the next Beatitude; "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy." Most will agree that mercy is a blessing when you receive it. Jesus says, blessed are the merciful, that is, those who give mercy. This is slightly long, but I thought this story was very interesting about us being merciful and driving the point home. So I'm going to read this to you.

"Years ago, a small-town merchant had identical twin boys who were inseparable. They were so close that they even dressed alike. It was said that their extraordinary closeness was a reason they never married. When their father died, they took over the family business. Their relationship was considered a model of creative collaboration. Because he was busy, one of the brothers neglected to ring up a sale and absent mindedly left a dollar bill on top of the cash register while he went to the front of the store to wait on another customer. Remembering the dollar, he returned to deposit it, only to find the bill was gone. He asked his brother if he had seen it, but the brother said he had not. An hour later, he asked his brother again. But this time with an obvious note of suspicion, his brother became angry and defensive every time they tried to discuss the matter. The conflict grew worse, culminating in vicious charges and counter charges. The incredible outcome was the dissolution of their partnership, the installation of a partition down the middle of the store, and two competing businesses. This continued for twenty years, as an open, divisive sore in the community.

One day a car with an out-of-state license plate pulled up in the front of the stores. A well-dressed man entered one brothers shop and asked how long the store had been there, learning it had been twenty years. He said, 'then you are the one with whom I must settle an old score. Some twenty years ago, I was out of work drifting from place to place, and I happened to get out of a box car in your town. I had absolutely no money and I had not eaten for three days. As I was walking down the alley behind your store, I looked in and saw a dollar bill on the top of the register. Everyone else was in the front of the store. I had been raised in a Christian home and I'd never before in all my life, stolen anything. But that morning I was so hungry, I gave into the temptation, slipped through the door, and took that dollar bill. That act has weighed on my conscience ever since. And I finally decided that I would never be at peace until I came back and faced up to that old sin and made amends. Would you let me now replace that money and

pay you whatever is appropriate for damages?' When the stranger finished his confession, he was amazed to see the old store owner shaking his head in deep sorrow and beginning to weep. Finally, the old man gained control, and taking the gentleman by the arm, asked him to go to the store next door and tell the owner the same story. The stranger complied. Only this time two old men who looked almost identical, wept side by side."

You understand the lesson from that story and the lesson in the Beatitude. We oftentimes let bitterness lead us to not forgiving others. And this causes problems in our lives. And we must not let this happen to us. Mercy means that we have active goodwill and true mercy demands that we take action. And so that is the message of that beatitude.

Let's go to verse eight. We're in our final sprint here. Matthew, chapter five and verse eight. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God." The non-Christian does not believe that the pure of heart are blessed. Yet the Christian knows a wonderful secret. Purity brings its own reward. It is a lifestyle that brings health and contentment. Now, purity in the context here is not only like sexual purity, it's much broader in scope than that. It means a heart that does not bring mixed motives and divided loyalties into our relationship with God. It's a heart of singleness and of devotion to God; pure unmixed devotion. James, chapter four and verse eight says, "purify your hearts, you double-minded." So, we can't serve two masters. We can't have some of the world and some of God mixed together telling us what to do. We have to be pure in heart. And what that means, if you cut to the chase, is that we're totally dedicated to God. We need to have 20-20 spiritual vision regarding God. And that's the Beatitude in verse eight.

Let's go to verse nine. Happiness can be found when there is conflict. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." It is interesting if we think about peacemakers in the church; if we think about it from that perspective. Peacemakers are willing to be honest and risk pain. Ephesians four, verse three instructs us to "make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace." But to do that we have to be peacemakers. Peacemakers maintain that bond of love and peace that we have in the church. We have to be at peace with God in our internal relationship with him before we can be a peacemaker in the church or in the world or in our business, interacting with others. So, it's get our own house in order and then we can step in and help be a peacemaker for others.

Let's start to summarize so we can bring the lesson to a close, bringing all of these paradoxes together. Let me just summarize them quickly so that the last Beatitude has even deeper meaning. In order for us to be peacemakers, we have to build on the beatitudes. Peacemakers have these qualities.

We have experienced poverty of spirit. That's the first Beatitude.

We have come face to face with our own sin and we mourn over it. That's the second Beatitude.

We are authentic in our poverty and mourn these experiences in gentleness and humility in dealing with others. That's the third Beatitude.

This causes us to hunger and thirst for all righteousness. That's the fourth Beatitude.

Which leads us to the fifth beatitude. The reality of our need has made us merciful to others in their need.

And then the sixth beatitude. We who have been cleansed by the blood of Christ, having pure lives are focused on Him, are blessed with an ongoing vision of God.

And then Beatitude seven. And now having been so infused by Christ's peace and the character of the kingdom we become peacemakers.

And so now, all the beatitudes are linked to each other. And then finally in verses ten and eleven, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."

Now verse ten is worded exactly like the previous beatitudes. It's in the third person. Blessed are "those," that's third person, who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness. But then in verse eleven, Jesus switches from talking in the third person to talking in the second person. He says, blessed are "you" who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for your reward in Heaven is great. So, if we can build and live these characteristics in our lives, we can become peacemakers and we can apply that in our family, in the church, in our work environment, and in the world. Jesus brings all of this together beautifully and says that if we have that mindset and that focus, we can be citizens of heaven one day.

We talk about being happy. If I can put all of what we've studied in play, I can be content and I can be happy. Think about all the persecution that Peter and the apostles went through when they were beaten and put in jail. And yet what were they doing when they were in jail? They were praising God, and they were joyful that they had suffered. It's a different mindset. The world doesn't understand it, but we can understand it because we understand this special relationship that we can have with Christ.

So that's the picture of a truly happy life. How do you like it? Do you want to accept it? There's a lot of things here for us to think about. And so, I want to close with this statement. The saddest thing in life is not a sorrowing heart, but a heart that is incapable of grief over sin, for it is a heart that is rejecting God. It is a heart without poverty of spirit. It is a heart that cannot enter the kingdom of God. Likewise, it is a heart without its emotional counterpart, grief over sin where no one receives the comfort of forgiveness and salvation.

The Beatitudes really help us frame our minds and understand what we need to do to live the Christian life. And if we can take that recipe and apply it to our lives and focus and think it all through, we may not necessarily always be happy, but we can be content. Happiness is more of an emotional state, but contentment is what our heart and mind understands when all the emotion is set aside. It is what we act on.

Here is an opportunity. All of us can enjoy the benefits of the Beatitudes. All of this can be realized in a covenant relationship with Christ. And so, this morning, if you need to be baptized for the remission of sins, we offer that opportunity to you. Possibly you've fallen away from Christ. If that's a private matter, you should pray to God for forgiveness. If it is something that's more of a more public nature, you may need to come forward, and let us know that you have had a change of heart with respect to that. If we need to pray with you, we'd be more than happy to do that as well.