

## Matthew 5:1-12

Everyone of us, so says our Declaration of Independence, is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Happiness is seen as something we pursue. I suppose some never find it. What about you. Are you happy? You might answer that some days you are more happy than other days. I've heard it said that if mom ain't happy, ain't no one happy. Next Sunday evening either New England fans or Atlanta fans will be happy; but not both.

So our happiness seems to depend upon our circumstances. If a person is healthy, wealthy, successful, and has lots of friends, he may be quite happy. But the person who is sick, poor, a failure in his own mind, and forsaken by family and friends, will likely be very unhappy.

So, therefore, I prefer the Bible translations which interpret Jesus' beatitudes here in Matthew 5 as "*Blessed* are the poor in spirit...*Blessed* are those who mourn...and so forth, rather than "*Happy* are the poor in spirit...*Happy* are those who mourn..." Happiness, by how we view it, depends upon us, but blessedness depends upon God. Some of the most blessed people are living lives of unhappiness. And some of the happiest people are not blessed in any way.

"*Blessed*," says Jesus, "*are the poor in spirit.*" The world honors its own. It seems like every few weeks the Hollywood elite are giving awards to each other for being so great. This is not how we are in the church. The rewards come later, at the end, when Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats, and reward His sheep with a place in heaven. Jesus does not say: Blessed are you if other church members speak well of you and reward you for your dedicated service. He says, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*"

Those of us who are helpless, weak, ignorant, troubled, depressed, forsaken, running on empty, are to see ourselves as blessed. Not that we are to seek and pursue unhappiness. We're not 15th Century monks living in dark monasteries. But when life throws us into the darkness, we do not lose our blessedness. In fact, the worse life becomes, the more we are able to see how blessed we are. For when God takes away every earthly prop, He is allowing us to see that He alone is our strength, our help, and our hope.

Our text says of the poor in spirit: "*theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" This is not a place, a specific location. We tend to think of kingdoms in this way. A kingdom is that land area where the king rules. It has borders, boundaries. This is not the way St. Matthew uses the word *kingdom* in his Gospel. Rather, he uses the word to refer to the activity of God. So the *kingdom of heaven* means the rule, or reign of heaven; God's reign among us. Where God is reigning as king; where He is active among us, here are those blessed ones who are poor in spirit.

Scripture says that *God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.* God reigns, not within those who uplift themselves, but within the downtrodden, who are poor, not rich, in spirit. And in fact, to be poor in spirit is a result of God reigning within the heart.

To be poor in spirit is like falling. It's a helpless feeling. We don't like to fall, so we guard against it. We prop ourselves up, and not just physically, but also mentally, emotionally, and also spiritually. But in boosting ourselves up so that we don't fall, it becomes so easy to lose sight of

God's mercy. The tightrope walker who becomes too sure of himself has the safety net taken away.

And so God reigns among us in mercy by removing one prop after another. He sends weakness, poverty, troubles, sickness, darkness. Through such things God turns us away from ourselves to Him. He leads us to repent of our pride, to accept our helplessness, and to cry out for His mercy. These are His blessed ones who have become poor in spirit. They may not be all that happy in life, but they are truly blessed because God is acting in mercy within their hearts and lives.

To be poor in spirit, therefore, is to be constantly falling, but falling into the mercy of God. This is why the poor in spirit are blessed; not because they never fall, but because God is reigning in their lives with His mercy.

There are many places in the New Testament where imperatives are used; imperatives which tell us how we, who are God's people, are to live. *Love one another. Children, obey your parents. Be imitators of God. Abstain from every form of evil.* These are just a few of the imperatives in Scripture.

Here in Jesus' beatitudes we do not have a list of imperatives, although many see them as such. If these were imperatives, then we, here, are being commanded to be poor in spirit, to mourn and to weep, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, to be pure in heart, and so forth. But these are not imperatives. These are declaratives. These beatitudes declare who you are in Christ, not who you can be if you live a certain way.

They declare that Jesus came to be poor in spirit for you; that He came to mourn and weep in your place; that He became meek; that He hungers and thirsts for righteousness; that He is pure in heart; that He is the peacemaker; and that He is the one persecuted for your sake. Jesus came to fall; to fall into the hands of an angry God so that you fall into God's mercy. Jesus fell into the hands of a mob who crucified Him. Jesus fell so that you are raised up. Jesus died so that you live. He rose from death so that your life is unending. Through Jesus, God reigns within you. Through Baptism, Absolution, Communion, God reigns in mercy for you. He reigns with forgiveness for all of you; the forgiveness of sins Christ Jesus won for you on the cross.

And so be happy...if you want. But whether you are or not, you are blessed, for you are in Christ. You are the poor in spirit because God is reigning in your heart and life. You may be entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but in Christ Jesus, God gives you, in mercy, true blessedness. Amen.