

# The Beatitudes: A Second Look

A sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, January 29, 2017,  
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 5:1-12

Some people's narrow and dangerous ideas about success are often alarming. Achieving more, getting more, becoming number one. Not that there is anything wrong with healthy achievement. It's just that there is a difference between earning well and living well.

A CEO of a large corporation in her letter of resignation put it this way: "I spent my life frantically climbing the ladder of success. When I got to the top I realized my ladder was leaning against the wrong building." There is no merit in being first to arrive at the wrong place in life. You CAN BE successful in ways that matter. And your life can be truly meaningful. If you're leaning your ladder against the right building, it doesn't even matter if you make it to the top.

Jesus has just begun to choose his disciples. He summons Peter and Andrew, James and John. Jesus took them apart and began to teach them the meaning of discipleship. He begins, according to Matthew's Gospel, with what we have come to know as the Sermon on the Mount. They must have been thunderstruck at its austere demands-even as we are today.

The sermon begins with a series of revolutionary statements which we know as the Beatitudes. Each beatitude is a challenge. They take the accepted standards of that day, and ours, then turn them upside down. Then Jesus the Teacher launches into a careful extension of the law from deed to motive. Murder is evil, as the law says, but so is the anger and hate which lead to it. Adultery is evil, but so is the lust which causes it. Love of neighbor is good, but to love one's enemy is better.

Jesus warns them of the perils they will face. "Enter by the narrow gate: for the gate is wide and the way is easy and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Daily, you and I find ourselves face-to-face with eternal choices. Those choices begin early and never end until life ends. Do we choose the easy way, the pleasure and profit for the moment? Are we willing to look ahead and sacrifice momentary gain for the greater good? The challenge of the Beatitudes is "Will you be happy in the world's way or in Christ's way?" Jesus is saying, "If you set your heart and spend your energies to obtain the things the world values, you will get them - but that's all you will ever get." It's too soon over. So, Jesus proposes the inauguration of a new age, a new reign of God, a sort of stepping into your own future and the beginning of your date with eternity, your date with destiny.

You would be right if you imagine the disciples were startled by Jesus teaching, if not bewildered. Happy are the poor? (What was that?) Happy are the sad? Happy are the humble? Happy are those who hunger and thirst? (Jesus, what are you thinking?) Happy are the merciful? Happy are the persecuted? (You have got to be joking!) How can that be? Hello, Jesus! Wake up! In the real world happiness has to do with being rich and famous. Happiness means being well-fed and feeling good. Happiness is getting your own way. Happiness is playing it safe and going along to get along. We all want to be happy. So much so that many philosophers over the centuries have held that happiness is the *summum bonum*, that is, the highest good in life. We crave happiness; we demand it as our right; we pursue it with all our energy. Most of us may not admit that this is so, but is there any goal in life which we desire to reach unless it does bring happiness, contentment and inner peace? So, where is happiness in poverty? How does one find happiness in sorrow and grief? How can a person who suffers or is persecuted find happiness? The Beatitudes are not so much a recipe for happiness, as they are a description of the Christian life.

Perhaps the biggest surprise in the Sermon on the Mount is that God's favour seems to be granted to those whom society regards as the ones left out or left behind, namely the poor, the meek, the mourners, the merciful, those who hunger for justice, the peacemakers, and those mistreated in a cause for justice.

The real question raised by the Beatitudes is how do we secure happiness and how is it retained? The world offers a thousand formulas, but in the Beatitudes we have Jesus' answer to the question - his guide for true abiding happiness. Ponder Jesus' words and it becomes increasingly plain that in Jesus' estimation of true happiness depends more on the inner person than on the outward circumstance. Happiness, we are inclined to think, depends upon the possession of material goods – a new car, a better house, a larger income or the means to satisfy all our desires. No doubt these things could bring us joy - at least for a while. God wants us to enjoy the fruits of his creation but these things come with no guarantee for happiness.

Most of us have known people who have money, business success, envied-positions in society – all the things for which the world seems to be striving with such feverish haste and anxiety; everything except one thing – happiness. Towards the end of his life, Sir Cecil Rhodes, the empire builder of South Africa, was congratulated by a reporter on his success. "You ought to be a happy man," said the reporter. Cecil Rhodes replied, "Happy? Good Lord, no!" He went on to say that he spent all his life amassing a fortune, only to find that he now had to spend it all, half on doctors to keep him out of his grave, and the other half on lawyers to keep him out of jail. The answer, to be sure, was touched with humour and hyperbole but it points the proverbial truth that worldly achievement and wealth do not insure happiness. In fact, many discover their lofty monuments turning to dust even before they die.

So, where does real happiness begin? In loyalty to Jesus Christ as the revelation of God's Will for our lives; in belief in his teachings; in commitment to Him as our Lord and our leader; in fellowship with those who still follow him to the mountaintop to hear that remarkable sermon on the mount, and then down into the valley to meet the challenge of daily human needs.

Christ came to save us, not to satisfy us and The Beatitudes need a second hearing in a day when the secular cult of happiness has displaced the divine gospel, ministry and service. But that gospel is what leads to fulfillment.

*This is the word of The Lord. Thanks be to God!*