

How to be really, really happy: Jesus on Attitude

Extreme Makeover: Soul Edition (Episode 1)

Matthew 5:1-6

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 22 May 2005

An Extreme Makeover

Have you seen the television series, *Extreme Makeover*? The show takes people who are dissatisfied with their physical appearance and gives them the makeover of a lifetime. For several weeks the participants are subjected to a battery of different treatments: plastic surgery, cosmetic dentistry, liposuction. You name it, they get it. The results are incredible. Take a look at these: some before and after shots of participants who received an extreme makeover...

Our culture is obsessed with physical appearance, the way we look. Jesus is more concerned with the way things are underneath the skin. It's not how we appear, but who we are that really matters. In his Sermon on the Mount – Matthew chapters 5,6,7 – Jesus provides a series of incredibly profound (yet remarkably practical) principles that can transform not our bodies but our souls – who we really are. We're going to explore these principles over the next few weeks as we work through the Sermon on the Mount:

- How to live with purpose
- How to handle anger
- How to manage money
- How to live with integrity
- How to conquer anxiety
- How to handle criticism
- How to build a secure future

But today let's look at the introduction, Matthew 5:1-6. The word "blessed" has been translated in some Bibles as "happy." But happiness is a subjective feeling, a passing mood. The word used by Jesus carries the sense of being approved and favoured by God. It suggests a deep inner satisfaction that doesn't depend on outward circumstances. Jesus is saying here, "If you want to have a God-blessed life, a richly satisfying life, a brand new life, it begins with your attitudes."

Blessed are the poor in spirit

"Blessed are the poor in spirit" (v 3). The word used for "poor" is a strong one. It means poverty-stricken, bankrupt. It comes from the word meaning "to cringe." The poor in spirit are the spiritually bankrupt, those who know they have fallen so desperately short of God's standards, and are so powerless to live the kind of life he wants them to, that they fall on their knees and cry out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13) It's these people, Jesus says, who are blessed. That runs right against the grain of our culture. I was reading this week about a survey in which some young single women were given a theoretical choice about what they might like to do the following day. They had the choice to (a) fall in love with the man of their dreams, (b) assume a rewarding new career that would define the rest of their lives, or (c) get \$10,000 to go on a shopping spree. Eighty-five percent chose the money. The riches. The kingdom of this world says, "Blessed are the rich." And yet the people on the covers of glossy magazines – the people we tend to admire and imitate – the glamorous actresses, the successful sportsmen, the rich and wealthy – they are not usually the fulfilled and happy people you'd expect.

It's the poor, Jesus says – the poor in spirit – who are truly blessed. Those who know they can't succeed on their own. Those who admit their desperate need of God. But generally we don't like to admit desperation. I was at the gym a while back, doing some bench presses. Now, although you might not believe it, I'm not the most heavily muscled man at the gym I attend. But that didn't stop me from trying to bench press as much as the hairless gorilla working out next to me. The crazy thing is I was able to lift the weights. The problem was I couldn't get the bar back down into position. It ended up, I recall, somewhere over my throat, pinning me to the bench. I should have asked for help. But I didn't want to. Yet Jesus says that it's those who cry out, "God, help! I need you. Have mercy on me. I'm so preoccupied with how I appear to others, and what they think of me. I've barely learnt to love. I've barely learnt to pray. I hardly hear your voice. My faith is so weak. My experience of you and your power so pitiful"... it's these people – the poor in spirit – who are open to receive and experience the grace and presence and power of God. "Theirs is the kingdom

of God.” It’s when we feel spiritually desperate and a complete failure, that is the very moment to take heart.

Blessed are those who mourn

Then Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn” (v 4). Again the Greek word is a strong one. If I dropped a glass and it broke into pieces, the Greek word I would use to describe the scene is the root word for “mourn.” In other words, Jesus is saying, “Blessed are those who are shattered or broken by the realisation of their poverty. How happy are the unhappy.” Again, that’s counter-intuitive. Our world says, “Blessed are the laid-back, the care-free, those who laugh a lot.” Jesus is not saying that we shouldn’t laugh a lot. No one likes a wet blanket. He’s simply saying that there’s such a thing as godly sorrow. When we are grieving over the extent of our own selfishness, and the extent to which our world is broken by sin and suffering, we’re wide open to receive the comfort that God’s Spirit wants to bring.

The greatest comfort is the assurance that we are forgiven, that Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for you and me (Mark 10:45). There’s the comfort in knowing that one day at the final judgment there will be no more sin and suffering. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21:4). And there’s the comfort of finding, as we mourn for others, that God is answering our prayers, maybe even working through us. I saw a film the other week about a little Albanian nun called Agnes, who spent sixteen comfortable years in an exclusive convent teaching geography to the daughters of some of the wealthiest families in India. Then one day her eyes were opened and she started to grieve over the plight of the poorest of the poor dying on the streets of Calcutta. Her godly grief compelled her to spend the rest of her life caring for the poor and dying of India. Who can honestly doubt that Mother Teresa has received far more comfort and joy on the streets of Calcutta than the classrooms of that convent? Blessed are those who mourn. For they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek

And then Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek” (v 5). Now by “meek” he does not mean weak and spineless and feeble: Mr Bean or Ned Flanders. Some translations say, blessed are the “humble” (CEV) or “gentle” (NLT). Blessed are those who are so broken by their own spiritual poverty that they are willing for God to do whatever he likes in them, and so aware of their own failings that they treat other people with the same grace and patience that God has shown them. They will inherit the earth. They will win in the end. That’s not what our culture usually tells us, though. Who’s going to win the upcoming Lions series? The All Blacks! The stronger team is going to win. Whether it’s a rugby game or a reality TV show, we assume that the strong and self-assertive will win. But not necessarily. A few years ago a company called in some consultants to find out why the people in that business were not getting on with each other. Tension was high. Productivity was down. The company bosses expected the experts to produce a detailed report identifying multiple complex factors. But the consultants came back with one simple solution. You know what they said? “Ninety per cent of your problems are related to the tone of voice that people use with each other.” If they would just talk more nicely to each other – show a little meekness – all sorts of good things could happen. “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”

Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote this: “The man who is meek is not ... sensitive about himself. He is not always watching himself and his own interests. He is not always on the defensive. We all know about that, do we not? Is it not one of the greatest curses in life as a result of the fall – this sensitivity about self? We spend the whole of our lives watching ourselves. But when a man becomes meek he has finished with all that; he no longer worries about himself and what other people say.” He goes on to quote John Bunyan: “He that is down need fear no fall.” When we are in this position, we are in a position to receive and enjoy all that God wants to give us, both in this life and the life to come – everything.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness

Finally, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness” (v 6). I wonder whether “hunger” and “thirst” are words that many of us in the West can really understand. I was watching *The Pianist* last week, a film about the plight of a Polish Jew starving during World War Two. He was so hungry that just finding a crust of bread became his consuming passion, his absolute priority. Jesus says, “If this is your attitude towards righteousness, if you are committed above all else to living according to God’s will, reflecting his character, being filled with his Spirit, it will happen. You “will be filled.” The problem is that we’re not usually that desperate, that hungry. Many of you know Geoff McNaughton. He had surgery on his

back this week. Over the last few weeks he's been struggling with terrible pain. His life has been on hold. But what's amazed me is that every Sunday morning I've seen him sitting down the back of this church. Why bother coming? At least part of it is that he's hungry for God. It's made me think about myself: I'm so casual in my commitment to worship and prayer. Am I determined to be with God's people each Sunday without fail? Am I determined to structure my life so that I am free to serve God in the church and build friendships outside?

But there's another dimension to all this. When Jesus was speaking these words, he was addressing a motley bunch of Jews, a group of people oppressed and tyrannised by the occupying forces of an imperial power. There's a sense in which Jesus is referring here not just to those who long to live in a right relationship with God personally, but to those who long to see his righteousness – his will – reflected in the world around them. Am I devoted to seeing God's righteousness – God's will – reflected not just in my life, but in the lives of those around me? Are you? "If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" That's a question that was once put to Jimmy Carter, ex-President of the United States. He thought to himself, "No. There probably wouldn't." After leaving the White House, instead of cashing in on his celebrity status, he devoted himself – like Mother Teresa – to serving those around him. He set up a democracy project to begin monitoring elections all over the world. He established a foundation to eradicate a handful of major diseases that plague poor nations. As a result guinea worm and river blindness have nearly been eradicated. He has raised thousands of dollars in funding for Habitat for Humanity. Every weekend he teaches Sunday School at his local Baptist Church. Every other month he takes his turn cutting the grass outside that church while inside Rosalynn, his wife, cleans the toilets. He has been a successful nuclear engineer, gentleman farmer, governor of Georgia, and president of the United States. But when he was once asked to reflect on his life and name the chapter that has been the most fulfilling, guess what he said, "Now." Blessed are those who hunger and thirst – not for success and popularity – but for righteousness, for they will be filled.

If you were watching the news a week or so ago you will have seen that a plane recently went down in North Queensland. A terrible accident. I heard this week that some air accidents like this occur because pilots can suffer from a condition known as spatial disorientation. Pulling back on the controls, to go into a steep climb, they instead send their plane crashing into the earth below. They thought they were facing up, when they were actually facing down. The principles in this Sermon on the Mount sometimes seem a little upside down. But actually they show us how to live right side up. Listen, if you sense this morning that your life needs reorientation, an "extreme makeover," it starts with honestly admitting you need it, crying out to Jesus for help, submitting your life to him, and then seeking first – above all else – his righteousness, his will. What do you stand to lose?

Questions

1. Do you think our culture is obsessed with physical appearance? Give some examples.
2. What do you understand by the phrase, "Blessed are the poor in spirit?" In Luke's gospel Jesus, is recorded as saying simply, "Blessed are you who are poor." How would you account for the difference? Does Luke 1:53 help? ("He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.")
3. "Blessed are those who mourn." What does this phrase mean? Does Ezra 10:1; Romans 7:24; Psalm 119:136; Ezekiel 9:4 and Philippians 3:18 cast any light on this phrase? Are you someone who "mourns" in this sense? Over what are you mourning at the moment?
4. What do you understand by the phrase, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth"? See Numbers 12:3; 1 Corinthians 3:22; 2 Corinthians 6:10 and Revelations 21:1. Who do you know that has exemplified this characteristic?
5. Take the phrase, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteous, for they will be filled" and put it in your own words. Have you ever been really hungry or thirsty? What does it mean "they will be filled"? See Psalm 107:9; Revelation 7:16-17; and 2 Peter 3:13.
6. In what ways are you hungering and thirsting for righteousness?