

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

January 3, 2021

## *“Happiness”*

*Matthew 5:3-12*

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The Matthew passage Elizabeth and I are about to read is known as *The Beatitudes*. Each beatitude begins with a word usually translated “Blessed.”<sup>1</sup> In Greek, the word is rich in meaning and can’t be replaced with a single word in English, but one choice that is as acceptable as “Blessed” is “Happy.” At least in part, Jesus is speaking to a certain sort of happiness. Listen for who can be happy, and listen for the Word of God:

<sup>3</sup> “Happy are the poor in spirit, **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

<sup>4</sup> “Happy are those who mourn, **for they shall be comforted.**

<sup>5</sup> “Happy are the meek, **for they shall inherit the earth.**

<sup>6</sup> “Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, **for they shall be satisfied.**

<sup>7</sup> “Happy are the merciful, **for they shall receive mercy.**

<sup>8</sup> “Happy are the pure in heart, **for they shall see God.**

<sup>9</sup> “Happy are the peacemakers, **for they shall be called children of God.**

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> **Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

Scots like to be punctual. That is how they present themselves anyway. Consider the iconic clock on the tower atop Edinburgh’s Balmoral Hotel. The hotel was built next to the Waverley Station, and the clock runs three minutes fast to encourage Scots to be on time for departing trains.

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<sup>1</sup>*makarioio*



In its first 118 years, the clock was accurate only 118 times. Every New Year's Eve, it was set to the correct time so that revelers below can count down the seconds and welcome the new year.

That tradition ended three days ago. The hotel decided not to reset the clock because they thought that the good people of Scotland would appreciate having three minutes less of the year 2020.

Millie and I made a similar decision. On New Year's Eve, we went to sleep at 8:00. Sure, I woke up at 4:00 am, but at least it was 2021.

I know there are folks who will say that 2020 was one of the best years of their lives:

- a romance began,
- a baby was born,
- a dream job secured,
- a life was turned around.

But my guess is that most people, even those who enjoyed significant blessings in their lives, would not put 2020 high on their favorite year list.

Given that almost everyone worldwide is glad 2020 is over, one might assume that people were less happy last year. I was a bit surprised to learn that may not be so. An Ipsos survey is conducted annually to measure levels of happiness worldwide. I know that happiness is difficult to define and measure but, even so, I thought it at least thought-provoking to learn that while almost no one would say that 2020 was a favorite year, the average worldwide level of happiness did not drop. In fact, in some countries particularly impacted by the pandemic—countries like Brazil, China, Italy and Russia—happiness increased. Somehow, people in those countries found a way to be happy despite the circumstances of the year.

That was not the case with Americans, however. Americans found a way to become more miserable with a significant drop of 9%. Again, I know that the survey tries to measure something that is subjective and hard to define, but take an inventory of those around you. Based on what I have heard and seen, I easily can believe that the circumstances of life both local and national robbed Americans of some of their happiness. Aside from those who suffered severe loss like the loss of a job or even of a loved one, chief among the circumstances would be the restrictions of the pandemic, national social unrest with protests in the streets, and a very ugly election. Americans on average were more stressed, anxious, fearful and even angry.

*I wonder if perhaps some Americans allowed this past year to settle too much into their heads and hearts.*

I use the word “settle” intentionally. We are not supposed to always be happy. That's neither realistic nor healthy. We grow and learn through adversity. Injustice is supposed to anger us. We should care about such things as politics, policies and elections and we have a right to our disappointments and celebrations as to how they go.

- Of course we think about finances and how we are going to take care of ourselves and others.
- Of course we worry when people we care about are sick.



- Of course we grieve when loved ones die.

That's life.

My question is not about healthy and normal reactions to life's circumstances. I am talking about when reactions to circumstances become *lingering conditions*:

- when anxiety becomes depression,
- when stress becomes neurosis,
- when anger becomes hatred,
- when worry becomes despair.

Poor mental health is not always circumstantial or within one's control. That said, I wonder if some Americans ceded too much authority to outside circumstances in their experiencing a good or bad day? Circumstances will always affect our mood, but have some allowed their outlook to be controlled by outside events and voices?

An outside authority we might do well to listen to is Jesus. Only, it might be hard to take him seriously when he mentions some of those who are supposed to be happy: those who grieve, those who sacrifice, those who are persecuted. He says that people who are in difficult circumstances in life can somehow be happy; those crying by a casket or sitting in a jail cell for speaking out for justice.

If we think that Jesus is just offering simple explanations, then I would agree he is being unrealistic. But when I think of Jesus offering a possibility of happiness, even a gift of happiness, then he begins to make sense. Maybe he is not describing how difficult circumstances can make people happy. Maybe he is talking about the kind of people who are more likely to find happiness in *all* circumstances.

Consider for instance, the first beatitude: "Happy are the *poor in spirit*." Bible scholar, Ben Witherington, says that Jesus isn't spiritualizing poverty in saying "poor in spirit" and describing those who are feeling down for whatever reason. Jesus is speaking of those who, *because of real life circumstances*, have reason to be despondent; they are literally poor, or actually oppressed, or have suffered real injury or loss.

If that is the case, then maybe this first beatitude speaks most directly to those who would say that they have found 2020 depressing. Jesus is saying that a certain sort of happiness can be theirs.

And so it goes with the rest of the beatitudes.

Happiness can be known by those who are grieving.

Happiness can be known by those who are persecuted,

those who have been cheated,

those whose reputations have been slandered

those who have been outraged by injustice

Happiness can be known by those who sacrifice,



who show mercy toward those needing compassion,  
who at some cost forgive those who have offended or hurt them,  
who stick their necks out in some kind of stand for justice.

Jesus says that they can know a certain happiness.

Let's use a little *20/20 hindsight* on 2020, but let's stay focused on ourselves. For now, leave aside the important hindsight questions of what others should have said or done—  
what countries overseas did or did not say or do,  
or what leaders here at home did or did not say or do,  
or what police using force,  
or crowds protesting in the streets, did or did not say or do.  
or what family or friends around us did or did not say or do.

How did *we* handle the circumstances of the year?

- Though many were denied the pleasure of gatherings with family and friends,
- though many had legitimate reasons to worry about jobs and health,
- though many were reminded of gross inequities and racial bias,
- though many were caught up in the ebb and flow of an ugly election,
- though many are concerned about legal and illegal activity,

was it possible that some of us could have been happier even under the circumstances?

Jesus says we can, but to get what it is he is saying is possible—what he even might be offering as a gift to us—we need to understand what sort of happiness Jesus is talking about.

Philosophy major that I am, I am going to call on Aristotle to help us here. Aristotle described two different kinds of happiness that are well known to Jesus and his listeners. Jesus is Jewish, the Empire is Roman, but the culture is largely Greek. The problem for Americans today is that while psychologists today still see great validity in the great philosopher's two types of happiness, we tend to concentrate on the first, which Jesus *was not* talking about, and not on the second, which Jesus *was* talking about.

The first type of happiness—the one Jesus is not talking about—is *hedonic* happiness. Hedonic happiness is a feeling, a sensation, a momentary pleasure... that is a reaction to something outside yourself. It is a happiness largely based on circumstances. It might be

- food you eat,
- a chemical you ingest,
- a program you've seen.

It can come from

- a purchase,
- a seduction,
- an act of revenge,



- a joke,
- a game played,
- a song heard.

Those who rely too much on this kind of happiness tend to say things like, “Why can’t.” “If only,” and, “I can’t wait for...”

I can’t wait for this to happen,  
I can’t wait for this to be over with.

Because the power to make you happy is outside yourself, it is easy to see that this kind of happiness can be *manipulated* by forces outside yourself. While marketing is not bad in and of itself, many marketers have learned that while it is good to be happy, it is bad for business.<sup>2</sup> If they can peddle discontent and dissatisfaction, they can more likely convince you to buy what they have to sell. It could be a product, or a vote, or the one selling (“If you just bring me into your life, your problems will be solved and your dreams will come true.”)

There is a different sort of happiness though that cannot be so easily manipulated. Aristotle calls it *eudaemonic* happiness. Eudaemonic happiness, the philosopher said, is the *lasting sense of well-being* that comes from “living a good, meaningful and worthy life.”<sup>3</sup> This sense of well-being starts within as one consistently lives according to virtues that, when lived by, bring meaning and purpose to life. Circumstances will still impact you, but one’s perspective about and response to those circumstances begins within.

This kind of happiness goes against a “[market-led, sensation-driven, pleasure-seeking approach to happiness](#).”<sup>4</sup> Circumstances matter, but how one responds comes from the type of person one is. You can be sad because of the way you are treated or the way you see others treated... or because you are lacking a simple human need like food or sleep. You can get angry, you can grieve, you can have bad days. But Aristotle believed that those who lived by certain virtues more often find a way to discover meaning and joy within those circumstances.

Another way of putting it is that the virtues themselves give us a different way to look at and respond to what is happening around us.

Let’s look at a few virtues that Aristotle mentions.

Take **Loyalty**. Circumstances made us physically distance ourselves in 2020, but we did not have to socially isolate ourselves. Maybe, because we had to physically distance, we could have realized how important others are to us, and then that realization could have given a laser focus to what we needed to do to take care of each other. We could, for instance, love by refraining from embracing. And by protecting each other, bonds would have grown tighter. Maybe you did that.

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<sup>2</sup> A paraphrase of Jonathan Sacks, *Morality*, 2020, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 109



Or take **Gratitude**. How easy it was to be resentful for what was denied us; what we could not have or do. But we could have noticed the blessings we did have and been grateful for them. And we could have noticed the sacrifices made on our behalf by front line workers who put themselves at risk so the business of life could go on. Maybe we could have noticed the researchers who came up with treatment and vaccines, health care workers who exposed themselves treating the sick and been grateful for what we used to take for granted. Maybe we could have noticed how bright can shine courage and compassion when needed and been grateful. Maybe you did that, too.

Take **Love**. Some people today need to ask themselves why they gave anyone the power to cause them to hate more. There has been this past year a marketing of hate using the strategy of demonization. But it is the demonization itself that is demonic. As Maya Angelou says, “[hate has caused a lot of problems in this world, but it has not solved one yet.](#)” The problems hate causes begins with one’s own soul, for hatred stains the better parts of you. I want to ask those who learned to hate more in 2020: Was there a different way to respond to those voices calling for hate? Do you think that maybe in resisting that temptation, in throwing one’s self on the mercy of God’s love, that maybe even in 2020 one could have learned to love more in response to the hate? Maybe that was you.

One more virtue: **Generosity**. Perhaps more than any virtue, that is the one that most illustrates the difference between the two types of happiness. The logic of hedonic happiness, relying as it does on circumstances, operates on the assumption that the more we share the less we have to make us happy. Of course we never have enough, so lasting happiness remains this ever-elusive thing that we can’t have until we have more. If that is true, why do studies keep showing that generous people have a more lasting sense of well-being than greedy acquirers? Maybe it is because happiness that begins within is a happiness that grows when it is shared.

I do not know what the year 2021 will bring. But if Aristotle is right, whatever happens this year shouldn’t get in the way of our finding the joy Jesus speaks of in the beatitudes. What if we—and I know this is going to sound like making resolutions, but it is that time of year—what if we kept the disciplines that build the virtues of our inner life? Maybe then we will grow even more into being the kind of people who find happiness even in the hardest of circumstances. Those circumstances might even inspire how we express our joy as we do respond to circumstances: rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, share the blessings of our lives and be grateful for the blessings shared with us. That is how Jesus lived within the circumstances of his life. Maybe joining him in that kind of life will make 2021 one of the best years of our lives... no matter what the year brings.

