

CHAPTER THREE

Happy Are the Helpless and Hungry

Matthew 5:5-6

Jesus Christ is in the process of giving the believer the formula for genuine happiness. And it is upside down from conventional thinking.

In fact, throughout His Sermon on the Mount, beginning in Matthew 5, He will reverse the wisdom of the world:

- Those who come in *last* are *first*;
- *Giving* is really *receiving*;
- *Dying* is actually *living*;
- *Losing* is truly *finding*;
- The *least* is, in reality, the *greatest*;
- Being *poor* is becoming *rich*;
- *Weakness* is *strength*;
- *Serving* is actually *ruling*.ⁱ

“Blessed are they,” Christ will say nine times as His radical sermon begins. And He began with these shocking statements:

Happy are the beggars . . . Blessed are the brokenhearted . . . [paraphrased]
(Matthew 5:3-4).

Now our Lord delivers another surprising step toward true happiness.

Happy Are the Helpless

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:4).

“You’ve gotta be kidding. The meek are doormats—and doormats are to be stepped on!”

Matthew Henry, the Puritan pastor of the late 1600s, wrote that modern audiences recoil at this path to happiness. His words:

“Common sense dictates that people who are meek will suffer insult and abuse, unable even to find some small corner where they can draw their breath—they are lambs among a pack of wolves; we know [by nature] that we must hunt with the hounds, because to be a sheep is to risk becoming someone else’s dinner.”ⁱⁱ

Most modern dictionaries will define the English word *meekness* along the lines of “deficient in courage,” or “one who lacks spirit and backbone.”ⁱⁱⁱ

My online dictionary defines it with words like, *docile; overly submissive; spiritless*.

Of Doormats and Weaklings

This is like the kid on the bus who finally got fed up with having his lunch money taken away from him by the neighborhood bully. Every day the bully demanded a dollar bill, which amounted to a whopping five bucks a week. One day the harassed boy saw an ad for karate lessons and was so

excited—until he found out the lessons cost five dollars a week! So, he just continued to pay the bully . . . it was a lot less work.

The opposite approach was taken by a teen in New York City. The fifteen-year-old was almost robbed by two young thugs as he was walking from the bus depot to his father's apartment in Upper Manhattan. A gun was trained on him and the demand was made that he hand over his wallet. He said, "No!"

The toughs tackled him and went for his back pocket, but he yelled and fought back until people came to help and the would-be-thieves ran away. One of his rescuers said, "They had a gun—why didn't you just give them your wallet?"

He said, "No way, my learner's permit's in there!"^{iv} In other words, he'd rather die than not be able to drive. That's more like it!

Let's face it, the meek do not inherit the earth—they get ground *into* the earth. The meek lose their lunch money and their driver's permits . . . and everything else.

So you might expect the Lord to say, "Do you want to be happy and on top of the world? Well then, you need to know that the powerful and well-connected inherit the earth!"

Instead, He says, "Blessed are the meek."

But . . . isn't meekness *weakness*?^v

Actually, nothing could be farther from the truth!

The Meaning of Meekness

The Greeks used this word translated *meek*, or *praus* (πραυς), in a number of interesting ways—all shedding light on what Christ is talking about:

- **a comforting fire in a fireplace**—when controlled, fire brings warmth; when out of control, fire brings destruction.
- **a gentle breeze**—just the right amount of wind can sail a boat or cool a hot afternoon; too much wind and we call it names like Hurricane Katrina, bringing death and destruction and loss.
- **medicine**—a patient struggling with a fever could be given medicine that was *praus* [πραυς]; that is, capable of relieving the burning fever and allowing the patient to sleep.^{vi}

What do all these things have in common? They can be comforting and helpful if they are contained

and experienced in the right amount, but too much—and they become deadly.

Meekness is not weakness. The truth is, the biblical idea for meekness is *power under control*; it is *strength contained*.

Meekness is having the ability to strike back but resisting the urge to get even.

It is the power of Jesus Christ cleansing the temple with a whip, to defend the honor of His father.

It is the silence of Christ before Pilate, unwilling to defend Himself.

It is not being *defiant* about yourself. It is not *standing up* for yourself. It is not *defending* yourself.

One author wrote, "Meekness is being *done* [finished] with *me*."^{vii}

Meekness is *dying* to me. It is replacing the spirit of Me-attitudes with the principle of the Beatitudes.

Notice the promise again:

. . . the meek . . . shall inherit the earth.

The word *inherit* is a future tense verb. One day future, the meek are going to rule the planet.

Now think about the fact that we do not receive an inheritance until somebody dies—right? In this case, it is *we* who die—we die to self, to our demands, to our rights, to our way, to our will.^{viii}

In dying to self, we find true happiness—when we are finished with ourselves. Then we are actually free to revel in the truth that one day we will fully share in the inheritance of Jesus Christ.

This is the promise of Paul to the Corinthians:

So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's . . .
(I Corinthians 3:21-23a).

Your spirit can reflect happiness even when you have been stepped on and mistreated and abused and ignored. How? By recognizing that one day, because of your relationship with Jesus Christ, you will rule the world.

Imagine that—the slaves of Christ will one day rule the world. Evidently Paul thought this was a pretty exciting prospect.

A Self-Exam for Meekness

So how do we know if we are dying to self and developing meekness? Take this pop quiz:

1. When confronted with the truth, I . . .

The word *meek* appears in James 1:21, which reads,

. . . receive with meekness the implanted word . . .

When confronted by the Word of God, the response of the meek is not to defend themselves, but to submit themselves to the truth.

2. When challenged about my faith, I . . .

Peter wrote,

. . . always be ready to give a defense . . . for the hope that is in you, with meekness and [respect]; having a good conscience . . .

For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (I Peter 3:15-17).

Here again is the nuance of dying to self rather than defiantly standing up for self. It appears as voluntary helplessness in the face of those who might grind us into the dirt.

And just look at who wrote those verses:

- *Out-of-control, sword-swinging, ear-chopping-off* Peter
- *Talk first/think last* Peter
- *Control-my-emotions? . . . what-fun-is-that* Peter

That's right—Peter wrote those verses! And this should give us all hope—not only in surrendering to this attitude of meekness, but in the fact that the person who wrote about that attitude was Peter. Evidently *he* had grown in meekness over the years, which means that we can, too.

3. When others are caught in sin, I . . .

What's your response to discovering sin in another person's life? Does your phone bill suddenly go up? Are you leading the pack in gathering stones for throwing? Are you making notes for the speech of your life?

Paul told us how we should respond in Galatians 6:1:

. . . if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual . . . restore him in the spirit of meekness.

This is a warm fire; a gentle breeze; just the right dose of medicine.

Perhaps you're thinking, *I'd like to do better on the next pop quiz. How can I cultivate more meekness in myself?*

Before you write down ten ways toward becoming meeker and buy a coffee mug that says, "I'm Committed to Meekness," I have only one reminder—don't forget that meekness is a fruit of the Spirit, translated *gentleness* (*Galatians 5:22-23*).

We can't drum-up meekness. The Spirit of God *develops* meekness over a lifetime [think: Peter] as we surrender to Him.

So let's review the pop quiz:

How do you respond when confronted with the truth?

How do you respond when challenged about your faith?

How do you respond when another Christian falls into sin?

Now let's move on as our Lord brings up another distinctive of true happiness.

Happy Are the Hungry

The Lord delivered yet another stunning declaration:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied

(Matthew 5:6).

In order to understand what the Lord meant, we have to answer a couple of questions. Was He referring to an *objective righteousness*—the righteousness of God imputed [credited] to our account at conversion?

It can't be, for we already *have* this righteousness as a gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ (*Romans 3:21-22*). We have been declared righteous—that is, right with God.

Okay then, is this some kind of *social righteousness* in the just treatment of the poor and oppressed?

It could be . . . however, every one of the seven occurrences of *righteousness* in this Sermon on the Mount refers to *subjective righteousness*.^{ix}

The Lord isn't talking about *being* right with God as much as He is talking about *living* right for God.

Simply put, *hungering and thirsting* after righteousness refers to a passionate longing for living a life pleasing to God. And when God is pleased, we are pleased. Paul wrote,

. . . *it is my ambition to be pleasing to God* [paraphrased] (II Corinthians 5:9).

Our greatest happiness is found in God's happiness. Our greatest pleasure is found in bringing God pleasure. What satisfies genuine believers most is found in satisfying God.

Jonathan Edwards, who pastored in the mid-1700s, wrote,

The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends are but shadows, but enjoyment of God is the substance. [Family and friends] are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.^x

How's Your Appetite?

The paradox of this beatitude is that we are satisfied with that which makes us hungry. We are hungry for right living and satisfied in living it, which makes us only hunger for it all the more.

This sounds like Thanksgiving dinner to me! We are stuffed—we can't eat another bite—we are satisfied beyond reasonable proportions . . . *ahem!* But a couple of hours later, what are we doing?—making a turkey sandwich!

Does this prove we're gluttons? Maybe. But more than likely it simply proves that we are *alive!*

Think about it: the deceased have no appetite . . . only the living do.

So, this is a beatitude, like all the others, for the living. And solid proof that we are alive is the fact that we are constantly hungering and feeding our hunger, and quenching our thirst—only to realize that we must have our thirst quenched all over again . . . and again.

Now, we could rewrite this beatitude in the form of a two-fold question: What exactly are you hungry for, and just how hungry are you?

Aristotle wrote of a time when one of his young students came to him and said, "Aristotle, you have wisdom that I so desire to have. How can I have it?"

Aristotle said, "You really want it?"

The young man said, "Master, I do."

Aristotle then said, "Well then, follow me."

He walked across the portico of the building, out into the courtyard, and without hesitating, waded

directly into the pool of a fountain with water nearly waist-high. The young man hesitated, and then thought, *Well, he said to follow him in order to find wisdom.* So, gathering up his robe, he climbed over the edge and joined Aristotle.

When they were in the middle of the pool, Aristotle suddenly turned, grabbed the young man by the nape of the neck, pushed him under the water, and held him there. The youth thrashed his arms and kicked his legs, desperate to breathe.

At the last moment, Aristotle picked him up and carried him to the side of the pool.

The young disciple was coughing and sputtering in shock and rage, but Aristotle ignored it all until the young man stopped gasping. Aristotle then asked him, "When I held your head under water, what did you want more than anything?"

"Air, sir, *air!*" the young man cried.

His teacher then said, as he climbed out of the pool, "When you want wisdom as badly as you wanted air, you will have it."

That incident makes me ask the question, "What do you want more than anything? Do you want to please God? How badly do you hunger for His pleasure in your life?"

Frankly, a starving man doesn't want food *and* a new car. He just wants food.

A man dying of thirst doesn't want water *and* a business promotion. He just wants a drink of water.^{xi}

Nothing else matters to him; we don't have to add anything to the list to satisfy him after giving him food or water.

If you ask the average Christian, "Do you want to please God with your life?" the answer would probably be, "Sure—and I also want Him to give me this, and this, and this, and that."

Perhaps the average Christian isn't quite famished enough for holy living.

For those who aren't all that hungry, they may not recognize the fact that their lack of hunger and thirst for *righteousness* is their greatest obstacle to genuine *happiness*.

So praying a prayer like this is entirely legitimate: "Lord, give me a longing for You; give me a hungering after You; give me a thirst for pleasing You."

For these happy ones, God alone satisfies.

Satisfied beyond Measure

Given what we have discovered in this chapter, I have rewritten these two beatitudes which enable us to overcome the Me-attitudes:

“Blessed are those who refuse to stand up for their own rights, willingly helpless as they refuse to exercise their power, even when it means they get bruised in the stampede of life, yet happy in knowing that one day, they will rule the world with Christ.”

“Happy are those whose primary appetites in life are living for God’s pleasure—assured that God will satisfy them and deepen their hunger to grow and be filled, and grow even more and be filled again, over and over—until perfected in holiness one day in His presence, completed with satisfaction in heaven . . . *forever.*”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/6/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Crossway Books, 2001), p. 33.

ⁱⁱ Matthew Henry, *The Quest for Meekness and Quietness of Spirit* (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996 ed. of 1698 ed.), p. 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, *Kingdom Living Here and Now* (Moody Press, 1980), p. 77.

^{iv} Michael Hodgin, *1001 Humorous Illustrations* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994), p. 96.

^v Warren Wiersbe, *Live Like a King* (Moody Press, 1976), p. 63.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 64.

^{vii} MacArthur, p. 85.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 77.

^{ix} Hughes, p. 40.

^x *Heartcry!*, Issue 26 (2003).

^{xi} MacArthur, p. 100.