

**“LIFE’S LODESTAR”**

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Mt. 5:3

Several years ago Maxim Gorky, the great Russian author, visited America. One of the first places to which he was escorted by his American hosts was that brightly lit, gayly colored, carnival land called Coney Island. Anxious to get the author’s reactions, his American hosts asked him what he thought of this colony of fun and amusement. Maxim Gorky’s simple reply was, “What a sad people American’s must be!”

Well, of course, it’s unfair to conclude that a picture of a pile of people at an amusement park is a true reflection of America, for that isn’t so. And yet, it is all too obviously true that many people in our society are unhappy and, primarily, because they are trying so desperately to be happy in the wrong way.

Billy Graham records the comments of several people who have failed to find happiness. He tells of Texas millionaire who confides,

“I thought money could buy happiness. I have been miserably disillusioned.”

A famous movie star who had just experienced a nervous breakdown admits,

“I have money, beauty, glamor and popularity. I should be the happiest woman in the world, but I am miserable.”

A man went to see a psychiatrist. “Doctor, “I am lonely, despondent and miserable. Can you help me?” As part of his treatment the psychiatrist suggests the man go to a circus and see a clown who is noted for his ability to make even the most despondent laugh. The patient replies, “I am that clown.”

From a multitude of people in every walk of life comes this same complaint,

“Life has lost its meaning. No matter where I search there seems to be no happiness. It continually eludes me. I feel like a ship at sea in the thickest fog without a rudder. I long so much for something to believe in, for a star to follow, for a song to sing.”

Well, I’m happy to be able to tell you that God’s design and purpose for you is that you be happy. That’s the reason he sent his son into the world,  
“That you might have life and have it more abundantly.”

God made you to know him, to love him, to serve him, and to be happy. You do not need to be afraid of or shy away from that word “happy.” To be something less than completely happy is to be something less than completely Christian. That’s what the beatitudes are all about. That’s why they have been given to us. To teach us how to be happy -- here and now!

To our astonishment, they tell us that the way to be happy is to quit trying to be happy. They tell us that happiness is not the result that happens to us, but what happens in us. It is the product, not so much of what we do, but of what we are.

In the last few years we have been deluged with a wealth of books describing techniques by which we may be happy. But none have yet improved upon the beatitudes, or as someone calls them, “the blessed attitudes.”

Here in eight simple, but profound sayings, Jesus sums up and clears up the secret of happiness. Eight times he uses the word “blessed.” Or, as many contemporary translators put it, “happy.” He was not referring to that superficial, lighthearted, fleeting thing we so often associate with happiness today. The happiness he is referring to is divorced completely from mere hedonism (which is a \$10 word meaning the pursuit of pleasure). It is a far cry from that fleeting thing we eagerly grasp and gain only to have it evaporate in our fingers.

Jesus was speaking of an experience much richer, deeper, and enduring than that. He was referring to a right relationship with God, and the sense of security, serenity and joy which come from that relationship.

He was speaking of a state of mind, an attitude of heart, a rightness of soul, which transcends all earthly happiness.

He was saying that happiness is a by-product of what is going on inside us. Therefore, it remains undaunted by that which is taking place outside us. The beatitudes, he said, are the keys to this happiness. These eight progressive steps are an ascending scale which leads to a state of perfect blessedness. And, as you climb that scale, you are given the resources to live as Christ lived: with calmness, certainty, and strength.

The beatitudes are like the rungs in a ladder, or better yet, they are like grades in a school. We begin in the first grade and pass from it into the second, and thus onward and upward from one grade to the next, until we graduate complete in Christ.

Because each step to happiness is based upon those which have proceeded it, there are many scholars who believe that the first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” is the root from which the others spring. There are many who would place it as a flaming headline over all the others. Or, to use a different figure, to take it to the broad foundation upon which the others rest.

To me, it is life’s lodestar. Life’s pole star. Life’s guiding star. It is that which determines our course. Which points our way. Which establishes our destination.

It is a summary of all the rest. It is *the* note which strikes the key for this symphony of happiness. And why? Because it zeros in on pride. And, though it hurts our pride to admit it, is our pride which has been and always will be the root cause of our unhappiness.

In the words of C. S. Lewis,

“(Pride is) a spiritual cancer which eats up the very possibility for love or contentment, or even common sense.”

Now please don’t misunderstand me. There is a place for justifiable pride in either progress made or accomplishment won. It is only right that you should take pride in your work. That you should find a sense of gratitude in the fact that you are a child of God, and that you are the central object of his divine affection. That’s all legitimate and good.

A difficulty lies when your pride gets out of hand, or as we sometimes put it, “goes to your head.” When that happens it ceases to help you and begins to hinder you. Instead of enabling you to grow, it actually destroys you.

Ralph Sockman likens pride to the light inside a car. When we turn the light on at night, it transforms the windows of the car into mirrors. We can see our own reflection, but we can’t see well to drive. We have to turn off the interior light, if we wish to get a clear view of the road ahead and that which lies outside.

Pride is like that, Sockman says,

“It makes us ego-centric or self-centric. It transforms all of life into a mirror in which all we can see is ourselves.”

Our focus is on our needs, our hungers, our desires and we become blind to other values which are often more important. We must turn off the interior light of false pride in order to get a clear view of where we are going, or we will rush headlong in our blindness to our destruction.

Another vivid illustration of pride as our preeminent problem is given in Virgil’s poem, “Divine Comedy” when he has Dante meet the angel of humility. The angel strikes Dante’s forehead with his wings, and erases the pride-mark, while the angel’s choir sing, “Beati Pauperes Spiritu.”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” From that time on Dante walks with a lighter step. Because, with the pride-mark erased, all his “other sins become lesser burdens.

Now, because pride is the root of all sin, humility, or as Jesus called it, being “poor in spirit, is the root of all virtue. Because false pride is the source of all unhappiness, real humility is the secret of all true happiness. The reason for this is that humility is the direct antithesis of nearly every human value.

If the Madison Avenue Boys, the merchants of discontent who largely order our lives today, were to write their supreme key to happiness it might be,

“Happy are the pushers for they get on in the world.”

They have a lot of flashy evidence to support their claim. But its been run through the wash, and it turns out they’re wrong. Tragically and terribly wrong. For when God looks down upon the pushers, the self-sufficient, self-made souls, he says,

“They are so full of self, I’ll just let them be. They are so full of self, there is no room for me.”

As one writer says succinctly,

“The wealthy in spirit are such that they can get along quite well without God. Pride is a declaration of independence from God. Jesus declared that the one hopeless condition was when a man was satisfied with himself and sure that there was nothing wrong with *him*. The story of the Pharisee and the Publican asserts that it is better to be a sinner and know it, than to be a so-called good man who does not recognize the evil in his own heart, for God can do nothing with a self-righteous and self-satisfied man.”

So you see, the beatitudes are right. Pride does belong at the *head* of our list of the seven deadly sins. And, it must be conquered first before the soul can enter into that higher happiness which Jesus called abundant living.

Brian Keith tells about a missionary who was stranded on a remote island. In a year he taught the cannibals how to build houses, how to sow and raise wheat, and how to grow other crops. He soon became the pride of the island. However, a year later the crops failed and when times got tough these cannibals reverted to type and swallowed their “pride.”

Well, that may be rather bad humor, but it’s good sense. And, it is exactly the thing Jesus is talking about when he said,

“Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”

He wasn’t talking about those who suffer from an absence of cash. If so, all of us would be rewarded with the Kingdom. No, there are many poor people who are exceedingly proud and many wealthy people who are incredibly humble. Poverty, as well as wealth, can be degraded.

We know, of course, that wealth can be a stumbling block. The monied man who is used to seeing the doors opened because of who he is and what he is, will be frustrated when he stand before the gate to the Kingdom, for entrance there is gained,

“Not by might or by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord.”

I believe it was John D. Rockefeller who declared,

“The poorest man I know is the man who has nothing but money.”

Many of us would want to go on to say that some of the wealthiest people we know are those who have had very little in the bank.

But, in actual fact, this first beatitude has nothing to do with material poverty. While Jesus cared about people who were hungry and ill-clad, while he was greatly concerned about the state of their body, he was infinitely more concerned about the welfare of their being, their true self, or, as we often say, their soul.

As he spoke these words, Jesus was not talking about a man's relationship to gold, but a man's relationship to God. "Blessed are the poor in *spirit*," he said. The key word in that sentence is, "spirit." And what does it mean to be poor in spirit? Well, certainly it does not mean that we are to go around like a bunch of dejected, cringing, defeated, spineless, self-pitying creatures. Not at all! But it does mean that we are to see ourselves as God sees us, so we will be awakened to our needs for his love, his strength, and his forgiveness.

The one who is poor in spirit knows that without God and God's help in his life he is licked.

The one who is poor in spirit is the good man who never forgets how it feels to be bad.

The one who is poor in spirit is the popular person wh never forgets how it feels to be unpopular or on the outside looking in.

The one who is poor in spirit is the teacher who never forgets how it is to be a pupil.

The one who is poor in spirit is the officer who never forgets how it feels to be a private.

The one who is poor in spirit is the rich person who never forgets how it is to be poor.

The one who is poor in spirit is the one who has seen a vision of Christ on a cross, held there by nails which that persons own sin has driven into the hands and feet of Jesus. Therefore, whatever confidence the one who is poor in spirit may have had in himself and his own righteousness, is washed away and replaced by confidence in Jesus only.

The one who is poor in spirit does not glory in his own talent or attainment, for he knows that these are but gifts in God.

The one who is poor in spirit does not boast of his own righteousness, for he knows that within his heart there lies the same capacity for evil that has brought others down..

The one who is poor in spirit is not impressed with himself, but is only staggered by the fact that God, in his gracious and redeeming love, has often protected him *from* himself.

The one who is poor in spirit does not despise himself, for he knows that he is a child of God.

But neither does he elevate himself, for he knows whatever he has and whatever he is, is but a gift from God.

The one who is poor in spirit lives somewhere between, “Oh what a worm am I” which denies the image of God in him, and “Oh what a good boy am I” which denies the presence of the glory of Christ in him.

The one who is poor in spirit says,

I am not good, I am not bad, I am both bad and good.

I am not weak, I am not strong, I am both weak and strong.

I am not foolish, I am not wise, I am both foolish and wise.

I am not lustful, I am not loving, I am both lustful and loving.

In other words, I am a total human being, a confusing, bewildering, often self-defeating conglomeration of moods and emotions, thoughts and desires.

Because I am a total human being I must surrender that humanity totally to Christ, or I will forever remain in the seventh chapter of Romans with Paul, doing the things I shouldn’t do, not doing the things I should do, and never reach the place where I become more than conquer through Christ.

The one who is poor in spirit has gotten rid of self-filling, self-defeating egoism and has made room in his life for God. Because he has escaped from the isolated island of self-centeredness, he has time for others. And, by becoming interested *in* others, he becomes interesting *to* others. The result? A radiance of heart and life which can only be classified as “blessed!”

This conquering of pride is not accomplished overnight. The key to happiness is simple, but it isn’t easy.

“Humility is a medicine which must be taken daily, drop by drop.”

It calls for painful honesty and courageous action over and over. For no state of grace is permanent. It must be won daily!

They tell us that Saint Francis of Assisi had a simple and effective method of conquering pride.

Whenever anyone praised his virtues, he would ask a fellow monk to sit down with him and tell him his faults. (Someone has suggested that obviously Saint Francis wasn’t married, or he could have had that service performed for him at home!)

The point I want to make is this: For the person who is poor in spirit there is a total absence of conceit and self-sufficiency. And my, how few of us have ever come close to that state. How few of us have ever come close to the place where we are prepared to say,

“Nothing in my hands I bring.

Simply to the cross I cling.”

To say *that* is to admit that in no way and by no means can we enter into the Kingdom under our own power. In other words, it is to slay pride. And yet, the negation of all false pride is life’s lodestar. It is that which sets our course and starts us toward our ultimate destination of happiness -- here and now.

The Christian life is not “pie in the sky by and by.” As William Lawson has said,

“Our Lord never promised you happiness tomorrow at a cost of unhappiness

today. There is only one true happiness, and it runs from time into eternity. When you receive the prescription for it in this life, you have it for the next life, and vice versa, for the prescription is the same.”

Look at the tense which Jesus used in linking up the person who is poor in spirit with the promise of heaven’s happiness. It is not future tense. It does not speak of “the sweet by and by.” It is the present tense.

“Happy are the poor in spirit for their’s *is* the Kingdom of heaven.”

It refers to the here and now. Hell, you see, is composed of people who are completely self-centered, while heaven is the place for those who have crucified themselves. And, when the ego dies, regardless of the time or place, heaven springs to life.

As someone has said so powerfully, “The way to heaven is through heaven.” To be poor in spirit is to be rich in God, and that can happen in time, as well as, in eternity. When it does, you enter immediately into happiness -- here and now. You begin to share immediately into the riches of God’s grace and goodness -- here and now. Which is to say,

God is not slow in giving.

You may have all of him right now.

All of him you want.

All of him you’re ready to accept.

All of him you’re prepared to hold.

For the promise is

“Happy are the poor in spirit for their’s *is* the Kingdom of heaven.”

Or, to come at it another way, they have already entered heaven -- here and now.

John Baillie recalls a story about one of his fellow ministers who went to the house of a poor woman with a contribution of money to help her pay her rent. Although the woman was in the house, he knocked several times without any response. Later, she explained,

“I heard the knocking, but I thought it was the man who had come to ask for the rent.”

Baillie adds,

“The Savior who stands at the door has come with a gift, but so very often we fail to answer his knock because we fear he has come to ask for a payment.”

God grant that this morning, as you hear his gentle rapping at your heart’s door, you’ll invite him in. For he has come with a gift. And the gift is: happiness for you -- here and now!