

CITIZENSHIP IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

MATTHEW 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

When my children were young I used to engage them in philosophical discussions about the meaning of life. When my daughter was one, I asked her what she thought the meaning of life was, and she looked at me, tilted her head, smiled, and said “Mommy.” Remembering what she said, I asked my son the same question a few years later when he was one, and he had the exact same response! So I decided to wait until they were in their teenage years and ask them again: “What is the meaning of life?” to which they both responded, “happiness.” “ You are wrong”, I replied. “The meaning of life is independence. The reason I wasn’t willing to accept happiness as the answer was because I have always found happiness to be fleeting and dependent on one’s circumstances in life.

So a couple of years ago I sat down with Alex, a 14 year old high school freshman, and I asked him what he believed the meaning of life was, and he said “happiness”. Why do humans place so much importance on happiness? What is it that makes you happy? Is there a daily quota of happiness that we need to achieve in order to be content and get a good night’s sleep?

If anybody knew about the meaning of life, it would have been Jesus, and he begins his ministry, his very first sermon, talking about it. Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are they that mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are they that hunger and thirst for God, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peace makers, blessed are those who are persecuted.” The word blessed carries a variety of meanings, and one of those is happy. Could it be that the teenagers were right about the meaning of life? Is happiness the secret?

The happiness or blessedness that Jesus is talking about is not the same as the happiness in our consumerist and feel-good culture. After all, who is happy to be poor in spirit, or happy in mourning, or happy being persecuted? The happiness and blessedness that Jesus is talking about is not how we are happy as citizens of earth, but rather, as citizens of God’s kingdom. In God’s realm, God’s kingdom, our happiness is not dependent upon our circumstances, such as whether we are rich or healthy or popular. As citizens of God’s kingdom, we are promised a rich life, an abundance of blessings, true happiness.

Only in God’s kingdom can we experience being blessed when we are poor in spirit. When one is poor in spirit, one is emptied, free of clutter, available and

roomy. When we are “wealthy in spirit,” we are full of ourselves, eager to display how much we know, how much we can do. Or we are filled up with multi-tasking, preoccupied by busy-ness. When we have emptied our heart and mind from all of our self-preoccupation we leave room for God to do a new thing. Blessed, then, are the poor in spirit, these ones not so full of themselves.

Jesus even says that those who are in mourning can find happiness, because even though they are mourning God promises to comfort them. God never abandons us when we are mourning, for God enters into our mourning by sitting right down next to us and mourns with us, wiping away our tears, holding us when we are shaking, and allowing us to question why bad things happen in life. In the realm of God, there is still sadness and loss, but there is also comfort and hope. Whatever we have lost does not have the final word on our life or our happiness.

In God’s kingdom where we have citizenship, our lives are reordered by following a new spiritual path. According to Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, “Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it. You must make a mighty effort to keep swimming upward into that happiness forever, to stay afloat on top of it.”

As a citizen of earth, I would rather be wealthy than poor, joyful than mourning, and self-assured than meek. Jesus does not offer such blessings, because such a world where there is no suffering is merely an illusion. Jesus offers blessedness to heal our hurts and transform our sorrows. We may want to bask in the good life, but Jesus is willing to accompany us into the valley of the shadow of death and he promises to bless us.

How do you measure your happiness? Do you measure it by the amount you have in the bank, or how much you have set aside for your retirement? Is your happiness measured by your own personal health, or the health of your loved ones? Is your blessedness determined by your happiness in your love life or the plans you have made for your children? All of these are circumstances that you may have some control over, but certainly not full control. Stuff happens, life happens, and

circumstances can be altered and there is little we can do about that. But our circumstances need not be determinative of our blessedness.

For those who are citizens of God's kingdom, those who make a conscious effort to follow the spiritual pathway of Jesus, happiness is assured. When we have lost our sense of direction and have wandered away from God and into sin, we are still loved and forgiven. What a blessing! When the burdens of life become unmanageable, Christ is right there, walking beside us, helping us manage the load. What a blessing.

In order to experience this blessedness, happiness not dependent upon life's circumstances, requires that we respond to Jesus' invitation to repent and follow him. If we chose to follow Jesus and conform to his way of living, we become citizens of a kingdom that bestows blessedness upon all. Kingdom life is a happy life, always moving forward, with Christ and his followers as our companions on the journey.