

WAY TO HAPPINESS

By

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The great contrast between Christ's Kingdom and the world is seen in the values he described in the Sermon on the Mount. He gave a list of requirements for happiness, beginning with "Blessed (happy) are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3).

This is the very first sentence of the greatest sermon of Jesus on record. It established the attitude that must underlie the successful application of all the rest that He taught. It is at once the opposite of what the world teaches and yet the most natural for one who recognizes his true self before God and desires God to make his life what He wants it to be.

By saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus was not pronouncing approval of all the poor. Marxist revolutionaries often gain sympathy on the basis that the mobs they lead are the "poor" who are blessed by Christ. Were poverty a virtue, they would be doing the poor no favor by promising them riches of the new world order! The fact is that the poor are as prone to evil, envy, idolatry, covetousness and sin as the rich.

While there is no virtue in being poor, certainly there is none in being rich. Jesus warns of grave dangers for those rich in the world's goods. "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God." Those evangelists (?) who preach a "health and wealth" gospel should take heed to Christ's warning. Not only does Jesus say that we should be "not anxious" for things such as food, clothing and shelter, but he warns that riches are deceitful and seeking them may very likely result in losing out on eternal life.

The world order of society is under the heavy curse that fell upon it because of sin, and as it further embraces and practices sin, it will disintegrate more and more. To seek its wealth, its methods, its esteem, its security and its joy is to seek destruction. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world...the world passes away and the lust thereof..." (I John 2:15, 17).

Modern preaching which promises "health and wealth" to believers is insulating them from the happiness Christ gives and steering them down the broad way to destruction.

When the Pharisee went up into the temple to pray, he considered himself spiritually rich. He belonged to an orthodox sect, kept all the traditions, observed the forms of worship and did not violate the ethical standards. He duly thanked God that he was such a privileged and good religious man. But the publican knew he was despised and that he had no standing with God or with man. He was conscious of his sins, not his importance. He knew he was undeserving and spiritually poor. He could only ask, "Be merciful to me a sinner," and God blessed him with an answer to his prayer. Jesus said that he went home "justified."

This is what it means to be poor in spirit, to claim nothing except that one is dependent upon God.

The apostle Paul suffered from some severe affliction he called a "thorn in the flesh." He prayed fervently for the Lord to remove it. Finally the Lord said, "My grace is

sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (II Cor. 12:9). Paul found that in his physical weakness and suffering he became strong. He had once been a healthy, wealthy, influential and successful Pharisee, but it was after he had given all that up and become truly poor in spirit that he learned the meaning of joy and contentment.

Not only did Jesus refuse to promise health and wealth to His disciples but instead He promised suffering and self-denial. Happiness never comes to those who think they are missing the blessing because they do not enjoy perfect bodies and affluent lifestyles. But the disciple who comes to God as a beggar, recognizing that he deserves nothing but death for his sin and seeking only mercy that he might have the least place in God’s Kingdom, finds every grace and gift as a great bounty. Once free from the false hope of physical and material reward, he can set his mind on the “things that are above where Christ is seated on the right hand of God” and concentrate on growing in godliness and being a faithful servant to the absent King.

Dispensational and millennial hopes also stand in the way of receiving the blessedness of the poor in spirit. The hope of a millennium, whether before or after the return of Jesus, focuses one’s desires on a worldly kingdom, and the satisfaction of carnal desires, which the Lord has admonished us to crucify.

Although every true Christian is a child of the King, we are instructed not to live like worldly kings, but as servants, aliens and sojourners. Christ “redeemed us from this present evil world” (Gal. 1:4) then sent us into it to give it the light of God’s purpose; not to rest in it but to call it to repentance; not to indulge in its excesses but to resist the; not to gain what the world offers but to give it what God offers.

The men who cried out for the murder of Jesus were proud and respectable men. On the day of Pentecost they were confronted with the fact that this Jesus they had murdered was now risen from the dead and was Lord. Then all pride was gone. Suddenly they realized that their status as Jewish leaders meant nothing at all; they were helplessly guilty before God and cried out, “What shall we do?”

It is when we realize that we have nothing to offer, when we know that at our very best we are unprofitable servants, when we see that all we are and have is worthless apart from God’s power and use, when we understand that everything connected to us is of value only as it fulfills God’s purpose —then we may qualify as the poor in spirit.

From there one can go on to understand what it is to be comforted in mourning; what it means to be meek; he will have a true hunger and thirst for righteousness; he can be merciful even as he has been granted mercy; he can set his heart on the one thing of pleasing God (which is what it means to be pure in heart) and he can turn his mind from vengeance and defense to become a peacemaker.

But until he becomes poor in spirit, none of the rest is available. Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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