

January 27, 2019  
**There Is a Path**  
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Matthew 5:1-20  
(Good News Translation)

**5** *Jesus saw the crowds and went up a hill, where he sat down. His disciples gathered around him, <sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them:*

<sup>3</sup> *“Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor;  
the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!*

<sup>4</sup> *“Happy are those who mourn;  
God will comfort them!*

<sup>5</sup> *“Happy are those who are humble;  
they will receive what God has promised!*

<sup>6</sup> *“Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires;  
God will satisfy them fully!*

<sup>7</sup> *“Happy are those who are merciful to others;  
God will be merciful to them!*

<sup>8</sup> *“Happy are the pure in heart;  
they will see God!*

<sup>9</sup> *“Happy are those who work for peace;  
God will call them his children!*

<sup>10</sup> *“Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires;  
the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them!*

<sup>11</sup> *“Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. <sup>12</sup> Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven. This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted.*

<sup>13</sup> *“You are like salt for the whole human race. But if salt loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It has become worthless, so it is thrown out and people trample on it.*

<sup>14</sup> *“You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.*

<sup>17</sup> “Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come true. <sup>18</sup> Remember that as long as heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the Law will be done away with—not until the end of all things. <sup>19</sup> So then, whoever disobeys even the least important of the commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be least in the Kingdom of heaven. On the other hand, whoever obeys the Law and teaches others to do the same, will be great in the Kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> I tell you, then, that you will be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven only if you are more faithful than the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees in doing what God requires.

Suffering exists. Suffering has causes. Happiness is possible. There is a path to happiness. These are the Four Noble Truths of one Eastern religion — and the distillation of Jesus' Beatitudes.

He is sitting on the side of the hill, a crowd of Israelites below him. Matthew has composed a remake of Moses on Mt. Sinai, the ancient Law remade for modern Jews in the modern era of *Pax Romana*, the era of world peace maintained by military might.

Suffering exists. Suffering has causes. Happiness is possible. There is a path to happiness. “There Is a Path” is Jesus' first sermon we are given to hear.

Let's pray: *How to hear you, O God, through the babble of voices in our minds, in our memory, in our world, on our screens? We pray to want to hear you. We pray to learn to listen. Amen.*

Sermons on sermons are tricky, the trick being to stay out of the way so that the primary preacher is primarily heard. Jesus is preaching — which in Matthew's gospel is nearly always called *teaching*. Here, in chapters 5, 6, and 7, he is *teaching* his disciples in such a way that bigger crowds overhear him. The distinction matters. Anyone may listen, but the teaching is NOT for everyone. It is for people interested in following Jesus beyond the free-food phase of his mission. This teaching is for people who, given the choice between feeding their own bellies and feeding their own spirits, choose *spirit*.

Remember, Jesus is just out of seminary – 40 days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness. And the language Jesus uses for this feeding of the spirit is *happiness*. Yet, his followers, on the western side of the world at least, felt the need to adjust his language. Make it more religious sounding, as though poverty is God-given rather than disciple-chosen. *Blessed*, we say, instead of *happy* — or better yet, *happier*. *Happier are the poor in spirit*. Happier than whom? Happier than the rich is spirit?

*Happier are those who mourn. Happier are the meek. Happier are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Happier are the merciful. Happier are the pure in heart. Happier are the peacemakers.* Say it just right and Jesus sounds positively frivolous.

Still, I wonder how I'd be different now, if I'd grown up as convinced that Jesus wanted me to be happy as I grew up convinced that Jesus wanted me to be good? If you had

asked me when I was ten years old what I understood the central message of the gospel to be, and if I'd had the nerve to tell the truth, I'd have said, "*Jesus loves us so much. Therefore, we should be very, very afraid.*" The Christianity that I ate and drank and breathed told me that Jesus wanted to save me. And to be saved, I had to be **good**.

I have always been very good at being good. Not perfect. Nevertheless, obnoxiously good. Nellie Oleson good. Mary Poppins good. Hermione Granger good. Was I happy? I'd have said yes. But I think that was because I assumed being good and being happy were the same thing.

What is more true, however, is that I was always just a little bit afraid. Afraid of disappointing God; my parents; the church. And the thing about fear is, it paralyzes. And if fear drives every decision, I am left to wonder "What does it mean to live fearlessly?" Is that the path Jesus is offering here?

*Happy are those who aren't afraid to be poor:*

*the entire kingdom of God is your home.*

*Happy are those who aren't afraid to be sad:*

*you can lose every friend you have and never be lonely because God is still with you.*

*Happy are the meek, the ones who expect nothing:*

*Then every day will be a gift.*

*Happy are those whose greatest desire is to be good:*

*they will discover more good than they ever imagined.*

And so on.

It's not rocket science why all those people followed Jesus around Judea in Matthew chapter 4. They were aching for decent healthcare and he healed them. They were hungry and he fed them. They weren't being selfish. They were being human. But for those ready to imagine there might be even more to life than food and clothes and a salary plus benefits, Jesus offered an entirely new way of life that he called *happiness!* Matthew 5:1-12 is the core teaching, comparable to Moses' Ten Words at Mount Sinai. The remainder of chapter 5, and chapters 6 and 7 are the exposition of the core. The Law remade, useful for modern believers of any era.

*Heaven is crammed into earth, Jesus will go on to say. Eternity into time. The kingdom of God crammed into the here and now. My love for you crammed into this package of skin and bone called human-ness. And it is possible for you to live and feed and drink and breathe from that reality, if you are willing to lift yourself from the fear that drives life in this modern era called the world.*

Imagine the possibility that Jesus means for you to be happy. Not to neglect the suffering and misery of this world, but to put all truth together. Suffering exists. Suffering has causes. Suffering around us is caused by human sin — greed and prejudice mainly. Greed is the engine; religion's foot is on the gas pedal. Jesus invites us to step out of that vicious, violent, hateful cycle.

This side of heaven, happiness consists of living truthfully in the world, aware of the suffering around us, causing none that we can help, relieving as much as we can.

An Eastern religious monk I love to read says it really very simply. “Every time you choose to say or do or buy something, take a moment to ask yourself, *‘Will this word, act, purchase cause anything to suffer: a human, animal, plant or mineral?’* If the answer is yes, simply don't say it; don't do it; don't buy it.” To our ears, the *animal, plant and mineral* part may sound a little extreme. But his thinking is right, it seems to me. *We humans depend on animals, plants and minerals for our very lives. So if they suffer, eventually we will too.*

These are very hard teachings. And if it is too stressful hearing them from a Buddhist perspective, consider the 18th-century Quaker John Woolman, who wrote much the same thing from his study of Jesus and chose a life in which he would buy or use nothing the production of which profited slavery, or war, or the abuse of workers.

Of course, finally, we don't need a Buddhist monk or a Christian Quaker to tell us these things. We have Jesus' masterpiece: the Sermon on the Mount, his Path to Happiness — for those brave enough to imagine that God wants something as sweet as happiness for our lives and our life together.

Would you pray with me?