



SERMON RECAP

JANUARY 11, 2026

The Sermon on the Mount: Salt and Light Matthew 5:1-16

What do we have against happiness? In churches we talk about joy and hope as if they are more important than happiness. We are comfortable with saying we are blessed, or that we are pursuing justice. Why does it make us uncomfortable to say we want to be happy? Does it feel selfish? Are we so caught up in the struggles of the world or the value of self-denial that happiness seems like a petty pursuit?

I feel like this comes up every time we look at the The Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the beatitudes. Some scholars call this list of eight sayings “makarisms” from the Greek word *makarios*, which is used repeatedly to describe the otherwise dire situations of people that Jesus is describing.

Traditional translated to “Blessed” (in Latin, *beati*, which is where we get the term “beatitude”), this list of eight blessings seem to flip conventional wisdom. The poor in spirit, those who grieve, the meek; these are not the people generally thought of as blessed. Yet the word *makarios* is difficult to pin down. Many years ago I started using the Common English Bible as my primary translation. For many reasons, I feel it is the best available translation for people to read. One controversial thing it does however, is to translate *makarios* to “Happy.”

Many objectors say that happy cannot capture the idea because it is too temporary. Happy feels too dependent on the mood or on immediate conditions. I am happy when I find cash stuffed in my pocket when I put on a well-worn pair of jeans. I am happy when the light changes to green just as I am starting to slow down.

So Jesus couldn’t possibly be talking about happiness, right? Why not? Why can’t Jesus care about our happiness. Of course our happiness matters. Remember our nation’s founding documents, the right to pursue happiness is as fundamental as life and liberty. Go to any book store and find the Self Improvement section and you will find dozens of books offering the secrets to happiness. If it is such a trivial thing, why do so many consider finding it to be a secret? Yet Jesus tells us the secret to

happiness in these beatitudes, and they are surprising.

This might be the biggest take away from the Sermon on the Mount. It is surprising. It is baffling. It turns everything that is common sense upside-down.

In both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, Jesus’ first public speech is his thesis statement. John the Baptist proclaimed that the Kingdom of Heaven (or Kingdom of God in Mark and Luke) is at hand because Jesus has arrived. Jesus now picks up this mantle and his entire ministry is about the Kingdom of Heaven. In Luke 4, he tells us that the Kingdom of God is about proclaiming release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind... (Luke 4:14-21).

In Matthew he is more loquacious. He gives us three chapters (5-7) of a speech that describes the Kingdom of Heaven, which he is bringing to earth. Jesus is bringing the way of God down to earth, and everything about it is surprising. The Kingdom of Heaven inverts everything we thought we knew about blessing, honor, happiness, and power; and he begins this sermon by telling us the secret to happiness.

the Kingdom of Heaven begins when we stop depending on ourselves. When we let go of the lie of being “self made,” or the absolute absurdity of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” or the lonely and isolating idea of “looking out for number one.”

Happiness is found in the Kingdom of Heaven when we are dependent on others, when we refuse to run the rat race. Happiness is found in taking time to grieve - not just fulfill the contractual obligations of bereavement leave. Happiness is found in simple living, in not trying to keep up with the Joneses. Happiness is found in pursuing right relationships that are marked by integrity, compassion, and mutual respect.

Jesus names the hopeless, the grieving, the humble, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure hearted, the peacemakers, and the harassed. The beatitudes are about happiness, not blessing, not honor, not contentment. The key to happiness is putting aside individual gain for common good.

Happiness is simplifying and stripping away everything that props up the illusion of self-sufficiency, until what remains is a life open enough, humble enough, and spacious enough for God’s grace to flow through it for the sake of others. This is how we bring Heaven to earth. This is the Kingdom of God.