

## “Upper Level Discipleship”

Date: February 17, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Luke 6:17-26

Theme: Beatitudes, discipleship,  
happiness

Occasion: Epiphany 6, Year C

Anyone who has been a teacher will appreciate this story I'm about to read. And if you've ever been a student, I think you'll find it amusing as well. It's a humorous rendition of the Sermon on the Mount, where the Beatitudes come from. It goes like this:

<<Jesus took his disciples up the mountain, and gathering them around him, he taught them saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are they that mourn. Blessed are the merciful. And blessed are you when you are persecuted.”

Then, Simon Peter said, “Do we have to write this stuff down?” Andrew said, “Are we expected to remember this?” James said, “Will we have a test on this?” And Judas asked, “What does this have to do with real life?” As if that wasn't enough, one of the Pharisees asked to see Jesus' lesson plan and course objectives. And Jesus wept.>>

Anyone who has ever taught students knows how resistant they can be to their lessons, especially to the lessons that really challenge their intellects. So we smile, knowingly, at the prospect of the disciples resisting the hard lessons of Jesus.

And it was a tough lesson. It was an upper level course, if you will. What amazed me, when I read the text, is that this upper level course on Christian discipleship did not come years into his ministry. Jesus had just started his ministry and was gaining in popularity.

Large crowds were gathering. He had just picked out his disciples. And in the quiet of the rolling hills of northern Israel, by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus delivered a sermon to a multitude. Acres and acres of human faces. The crowd represented a cross section of humanity. There were rich and poor, young and old, doubtless varied races of people, those who were successful businessmen and those who were failures. In fact, the crowd that Jesus spoke to that day represented the world in miniature.

Unlike Matthew, where Jesus preaches this sermon on the mountain, Luke places it on the plain, on a *level* place if you will. In Luke, geography is just as important as any other part of the story. Here, Jesus places himself on the same level as everyone else. He identifies with the people, just as he did at his baptism.

He's not high and mighty, up on the mountain. But he's down on the same level as the people – the rich and the poor, the college educated and the high school drop-out – they were all on the same level. As different as they were, Jesus understood they were all on the same quest.

They were all after the same thing. They all wanted happiness. Well, aren't we just like them? Isn't that what we want for ourselves? Isn't that what we ultimately want for our children: happiness? The problem is we really don't grasp the true nature of happiness.

We think that happiness deals with our outer circumstances. We think the truly happy person is the one who has achieved outer success. Thus, our beatitudes read: Blessed is the man who makes a fortune. Blessed is the woman who earns six figures. Happy is the person who has a palace in the city and a summer home in the mountains. Blessed is he who has won the applause of his peers. Blessed is the woman who is recognized as a darling of society.

But on this special day, Jesus shared with his disciples, and indeed with all of history, that the concept of happiness is very different than we imagine. They are on the plain, on the same level as all the people gathered: Jesus begins to teach. There was no introductory course. Jesus hits them with the hard stuff, the upper level discipleship, right away. In essence Jesus said:

“For people who live according to God’s way, here are the blessings. For people who choose not to follow God, here are the curses. No threat, this is just the way it is.” And he gave four blessings and four curses.

Those who are considered blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are rejected. On the other hand, woe to those who are rich, who are full, who laugh, and who are socially acceptable. O my, in one sermon Jesus just turned the American Dream upside down.

Jesus didn’t pull any punches with his new disciples. He told them quite frankly what it meant to be one of his followers. And it’s not easy. It’s a challenging lifestyle that directly clashes with the values of our society.

Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are rejected. Don’t get Jesus wrong; He’s not saying that it’s great to be poor. But the poor realize they need God in a way that rich or comfortable people often forget.

For Jesus, the main issue is one’s relationship to God. It is easier for people who are weak, who are poor, and who are beaten down by life to realize they need God. They need God’s strength and support in their lives. For people who enjoy good health, good job, nice family – the need for God’s presence and guidance in their lives isn’t so obvious. They think they’re doing just fine on their own. For such people, who needs God?

Each of us has areas of our life where we think we're doing great. Maybe we're retired and we're enjoying a comfortable life. Maybe we've just started our career and things seem to be going well for us. Maybe we're in a relationship, either dating or married, and life seems wonderful. Cupid has struck our hearts and we've found our sweet valentine.

The curses that Jesus ascribes to the rich and successful should warn us that these are the very places where we need God most: in our jobs, in our homes, and in our families. You see, when we're satisfied we're in danger of smugness. When life is wonderful, we often fail to see our need for God.

For Jesus, a happy life is a life that is centered in God. The key to understanding these beatitudes, the key to passing the test to this upper level course in discipleship, is the idea of being poor in spirit, what we call humility. Humility is not the same as humiliation; it's different. I like the note in *the Life Application Bible* on this passage. It says:

- You cannot mourn without appreciating how insufficient you are to handle life in your own strength.
- You cannot be meek unless you know you have needed gentleness yourself.
- You cannot hunger and thirst for righteousness if you proudly think of yourself as righteous already.
- You cannot be merciful without recognizing your own need for mercy.
- You cannot be pure in heart if your heart is full of pride.
- You cannot be a peacemaker if you believe that you are always right.
- You cannot identify with Christ in the face of negative reactions from others without dying to yourself and renouncing your own rights.

All of these beatitudes are rooted in humility, being poor in spirit. The beatitudes describe what life with God is like. Blessed, or happy, are those who know they really need God, and they call upon his name every day. Woe to those who get so smug they think they don't need God.

But this is no mere list of suggestions of what to do in order to be happy. The beatitudes is not a list of do's and don'ts. Instead, it is a description of what life is like when you let God take control. This is God's word to us: "Love me, trust me, call on me, and you will be blessed. Forget me, ignore me, insult me and your life will be cursed."

That's not a threat. It's just the way it is. Trust your life to God and you will be blessed; you will be happy. Not because of your outward circumstances. They can still be pretty lousy at times. But you will be blessed because of your relationship with God, which does not depend on outward circumstances.

May all of us live happy and blessed lives. Amen.