

HappinessRobinson 10/5/2026*Psalm 1**Luke 6:20-26; Matthew 5:1-12*

'I'm H A P P Y; I'm H A P P Y.

I know I am, I'm sure I am –

I'm H A P P Y.'

One of my earliest memories is of cheerfully singing this terrible piece of doggerel. You will notice that the verse supplies no explanation for my happiness; this had to be discovered in the context in which the words were sung. Since this was in a Sunday school, the cause of my happiness must be assumed to be nothing less than God's love for me.

Without this explanation, the words could be taken as a suitably vacuous anthem for the modern pursuit of happiness – what Simon has called 'the Happiness industry'. For half the world's inhabitants today, facing starvation, warfare, disease and natural disasters, the main aim is to survive; for the rest of us, it is apparently to be happy. My e-mails arrive adorned with smiling faces, presumably designed to encourage me to be happy, and in American style we urge one another to 'have a good day' – presumably a happy one. Happiness is seen as the goal of life.

So what does it mean to be happy? The modern cult of happiness assumes that I am the centre of the universe. It is *I* who am happy. Looking at designs for Birthday cards, it seems that if someone wishes me a 'Happy Birthday', this is primarily to express the wish that I will have the opportunity to indulge myself; to consume luscious cakes, for example, or chocolates and wine, and enjoy some kind of outing. And since happiness is clearly based on *my* welfare and emotions, the day will undoubtedly be rounded off with a 'selfie', showing me at the centre of it all, enjoying some of these goodies.

I remember overhearing a snippet on the radio once in which the presenter of a news programme announced the result of a survey, which demonstrated that the people who considered themselves to be happy were *not* primarily those who were wealthy and well-positioned. Money did not equate with happiness. He seemed surprised. I concluded that he had been brainwashed by the happiness industry.

The word 'happiness' is derived from the mediaeval root 'hap', meaning 'luck' or 'fortune', so to be happy means to have good luck or fortune. To be happy means to be content with my situation. All's well. A very positive outlook, surely.

I was therefore somewhat surprised to discover that the New Testament has little or nothing to say about happiness. In one modern translation I discovered the word ‘happy’ being used just once. The Old Testament, to be sure, has more to say about being happy. Our first reading tonight, Psalm 1, for example, described those who avoid evil and who obey the law of God as ‘happy’ – though some versions prefer the word ‘Blessed’. Happiness here seems to be a reward. If all is well, it is because I have observed the Law of God.

This happiness is based on a very different set of priorities from those underlying the modern cult of happiness. The happy person, says the psalmist, is the one who obeys the Law of God. That law is summed up by Jesus as the command to love God and to love one’s neighbour as oneself. So instead of ‘am I content with my lot, and am I enjoying life?’ we have ‘am I loving God, and am I loving my neighbours?’ I am no longer the centre of the universe: it is a major shift.

Our New Testament reading, like the psalm, also preferred the term ‘blessed’ to ‘happy’; it’s a better translation of the Greek, and reminds us that what we’re talking about is dependent on something outside ourselves. We heard two very different versions of the Beatitudes, a well-known set of Jesus’ sayings.

You were probably struck by how very different they were. In Matthew, the sayings are part of the famous ‘Sermon on the Mount’, while Luke places the sermon on the plain – but the setting is the least of the differences. Luke’s version is shorter – and so are all the sayings. The ‘blessed’ among you are those who are in need; why? because the Kingdom of God belongs to you; you are blessed if you are hungry, since you will be satisfied; you are blessed if you weep now – because you will laugh – and you are blessed if you are ostracized and persecuted for being followers of Jesus, because you will be rewarded in heaven.

The blessings are followed by a matching set of curses – on the rich, the well-fed, those who laugh, and those who are well spoken of. Luke’s version reads like a speech for a protest procession. It addresses present inequalities and injustices. It contrasts the world as it is with the world as God intends it to be – in other words, with the Kingdom of God. And it turns the contemporary pursuit of happiness on its head. True blessedness is not to indulge ourselves, but to love God and our neighbours – and in the sayings that follow, Luke spells out more of Jesus’ teaching on that theme.

Matthew's account is very different. Comparing the two versions, we see how, from the very beginning, Christians struggled to understand just how the teaching of Jesus applied to them and to their situation. Matthew was a realist. He knew that the hungry had *not* yet been fed, and the poor had *not* yet been made rich. For him, Jesus' words have more of a 'spiritual' meaning. He interprets the 'poor' as 'poor in spirit', and the hungry as those who hunger for right to prevail, while he includes among the 'blessed' those who have positive virtues – the gentle, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace-makers. His version of the Beatitudes is intended not to stir up a riot, but to encourage those who suffer to endure, and to hope for future vindication.

We may be puzzled, even disturbed, by these differences. We expect Jesus' words to be more comprehensible. But Luke and Matthew are agreed in understanding being truly blessed as a very different experience from the happiness offered in the happiness industry. What both of them grasp is that what is really important is not the material possessions we enjoy, but our relationships with God and with other people. We saw earlier that in the world's parlance, happiness means being content with one's situation. Our evangelists suggest that what is really important is not being content, but being concerned.

The word ‘happiness’, we have discovered, is derived from the mediaeval root ‘hap’, and so is linked with what happens to us. Perhaps it’s not so surprising, then, that happiness is in many ways temporary and superficial. It’s what happens. It’s not the best term to describe something truly meaningful. In contrast, our New Testament authors tend to talk about joy – an emotion which refers to our experience of God’s love, and so something that endures.

St Paul, for example, frequently urges his readers to rejoice. When we respond to the command to ‘rejoice in the Lord’, the focus shifts – from our own welfare and happiness to what God has done and is. We are urged to concentrate on God – to seek *his* Kingdom of God and righteousness – and that involves not simply loving God, but our neighbours as well. This is why the search for justice lies at the heart of the Christian Gospel. If we pursue that, we’ll discover, not transient happiness, but lasting joy.