

# The Happiness Trap, According to Jesus

The Rev. John Kennedy, February 13, 2022

## I.

In my sermon on January 2nd, I talked about New Year's Resolutions. And I mentioned that, according to a statistic I found, 80% of us give up or forget our resolutions by the second week of February. Well, does anybody know what week it is?

And so, if we are like the general population, then about 80% of us (who have even made resolutions to begin) have either given them up or forgotten about them. And I wouldn't be surprised if that's all the more true of the resolution I recommended in my sermon!

So, if you'll allow it, here's a reminder of that suggested resolution: to cultivate a deeper life of prayer, or spiritual practice. And, without preaching that sermon again, it's basically because being rooted in God is the only stable foundation for a happy life. And that's what we want, right? That's why we make New Year's Resolutions. That's why many of us are here now.

## II.

Now I mention happiness not just because of the calendar but also because it appears in three of the four readings for today. Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah, and Psalm 1 all describe the qualities of those who are "blessed," or happy; favored by God.

Now, in our culture, happiness is, of course, much pursued but seemingly seldom found. So much so that the Declaration of Independence lists our three inalienable rights as "life, liberty,

and the *pursuit* of happiness,” as if in recognition that happiness is a very hard thing to get a hold of, even more so than life and liberty.

This makes me think of *Mad Men*, the great TV series — probably my favorite — about the mostly, and sometimes catastrophically, misguided pursuit of happiness by midcentury advertising professionals. Its protagonist, creative director Don Draper, says that happiness is the foundational principle of advertising. And, advertising is itself, of course, central to our society; it creates and/or amplifies desires for products that we may or may not need at prices that may or may not be justified all in the service of our economy and, thus, our way of life. And so, Draper says:

*“Advertising is based on one thing: happiness. And do you know what happiness is?*

*Happiness is the smell of a new car. It’s freedom from fear. It’s a billboard on the side of*

*a road that screams with reassurance that whatever you’re doing is OK. You are OK.”*

Now, I’m not opposed to advertising and buying things, but if this is the idea of happiness it trades in, then it’s no wonder that America is not a very happy society. And that’s without the toxicity of social media, 24 hours news, and so on, factored in! A 2019 UN World Happiness Report found that Americans are the unhappiest they’ve ever been.

As long as our happiness depends on wealth, comfort, getting the things we want, fleeting experiences, or reputation and status, we simply will not be happy. There are at least two major

reasons for this. One is that no *thing* — no object, experience, or status — can be a stable foundation for happiness because, as George Harrison said, very much in the spirit the Buddha, “all things must pass.” And another reason is that self-centeredness can never bring us joy. In the words of Thomas Merton, *“There is a false and momentary happiness in self-satisfaction, but it always leads to sorrow because it narrows and deadens our spirit.”*

Perhaps this is why the ad man Don Draper says later:

*“Even though success is a reality, its effects are temporary. You get hungry even though you've just eaten.... You're happy because you're successful---for now. But what is happiness? It's a moment before you need more happiness.”*

And perhaps this is also why there is an article in the March issue of *The Atlantic* called “How to Want Less: The secret to satisfaction has nothing to do with achievement, money, or stuff,”  
By Arthur C. Brooks.

### III.

With writing like that, perhaps Jesus might say to Brooks, “you are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Today's Gospel is the beginning of the Sermon on the Plain. It's Luke's equivalent to Matthew's more famous Sermon on the Mount. And, like the Sermon on the Mount, this one starts with Beatitudes, or proclamations of blessedness:

*"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh..."*

Now, "blessed" here means "happy" or "favored by God."

What is it about poverty — whether material poverty, as Luke emphasizes, or spiritual poverty, as Matthew emphasizes — what is it about poverty that can be of spiritual advantage?

Well, it seems that those of us who experience poverty tend to more readily realize that none of us is, or ever can be, truly self-sufficient; rather, that we need God. And therefore those of us who experience poverty tend to more readily hope in God and not in the world, and not in their own strength. So those of us who experience poverty or hunger therefore tend to have more space for God and more readily become dwelling places for God which is really what the Gospel is about, in a way.

And so perhaps it's not mere poverty but also the spiritual conditions it can be conducive to that makes the poor blessed or even happy in Jesus' view. However, while reflecting on the spirituality of poverty, it's important to also note that God's preferential option for the poor,

apart from their spiritual condition, is a central theme throughout scripture and in Luke in particular.

In Jesus' view, the way to happiness—or blessedness—is a complete 180 from what the world tends to think. And this is consistent with the general theme in the gospels of Jesus bringing about a great reversal. We see it in sayings of Jesus such as “the first will be last and the last will be first,” “the greatest among you will be least of all and servant of all,” and “those who humble themselves will be exalted, and those who exalt themselves will be humbled.”

This reversal is made all the more clear with Jesus' following declarations of woe or judgment:

*“Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”*

Now, how should we take this? I am certainly rich by the world's standards. Whenever I'm hungry, I can get something to eat. I laugh a lot. I'm not sure if *all* speak well of me — I kind of doubt that — but it seems like a good number do. And I think the same is true for many of us here. So are we spiritual goners?

Well, as with the beatitudes, perhaps the problem isn't merely a matter of being rich, well fed, or of laughing, or being spoken well of, but the spiritual conditions that these qualities tend to lead to.

That is, attachment to things that only bring us fleeting satisfaction before leaving us hungry for more. Remember Don Draper's words from a few minutes ago, "you get hungry even though you've just eaten." Add to this pride, complacency, self-centeredness, and greed; seeking for ourselves, and not sharing as much as we could or should.

And this is important to take to heart because we all must answer to God, ultimately, but also because, I think, we all *want* to be loving, kind, faithful, humble, and of course happy people, and Jesus is showing us the way to go, even as he inevitably takes many of us out of our comfort zones. Jesus, it seems, cannot be contained by anything or anyone, and so I will not presume the tensions around wealth and poverty he raises here, especially in a sermon that's already probably too long.

But, what I think I *can* say is that, if happiness is what you want, then stay close to Jesus and follow him. He embodies the beatitudes; he lived them perfectly. He knew poverty, hunger, sorrow, and exclusion *and* he is the very radiance of God's own being. He shows us what the divine life looks like in human form. So let us gather before him — before his altar — like the crowd in this story and, like them, receive his healing and transforming power. *Amen.*