

Be happy: Be righteous

Message for Sunday, October 27, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 5:6

Children's Message:

A woman wrote about how her family experienced a wonderful lesson in following what the Bible teaches. The parents were new Christians, and they had family devotions together. The verse they read one day was:

Romans 12:20 Revised Standard Version:
If your enemy is hungry, feed him.

She wrote:

Ours sons, 7 and 10 at the time, were especially puzzled. "Why should you feed your enemy?" they wondered. My husband and I wondered too, but the only answer my husband John could think of to give the boys was, "We're supposed to because God says so." It never occurred to us that we would soon learn why.

Day after day our son John Jr. came home from school complaining about a classmate who sat behind him in 5th grade. "Bob keeps jabbing me when Miss Smith isn't looking. One of these days, when we're out on the play ground, I'm going to jab him back."

I was ready to go down to the school and jab Bob myself. Obviously the boy was a brat. Besides, why wasn't Miss Smith doing a better job with her kids? I'd better give her an oral jab, too, at the same time!

I was till fuming over this injustice to John Jr. when his 7 year old brother spoke up: "Maybe he should feed his enemy." The three of us were startled.

None of us was sure about this "enemy" business. It didn't seem that an enemy would be in the 5th grade. An enemy was someone who was way off... well, somewhere.

We all looked at my husband John. Since he was the head of the family, he should come up with the solution. But the only answer he could offer was the same one he had give before: "I guess we should because God said so."

"Well," I asked John Jr., "do you know what Bob likes to eat? If you're going to feed him, you may as well get something he likes." "Jelly

beans," he almost shouted, "Bob just loves jelly beans."

So we bought a bag of jelly beans for him to take to school the next day, and decided that the next time Bob jabbed John Jr., John was simply to turn around and deposit the bag on his "enemy's" desk. We would see whether or not this enemy feeding worked.

The next afternoon, the boys rushed home from the school bus. John Jr. shouted, "It worked, Mom! It worked."

I wanted the details: "What did Bob do? What did he say?"

"He was so surprised he didn't say anything—he just took the jelly beans. But he didn't jab me the rest of the day!"

In time, John Jr. and Bob became the best of friends—all because of a little bag of Jelly Beans.

Wonderful things happen when we obey what God tells us to do!

Message: "Be happy: be righteous"

Mark Twain once described someone: "He was a good man in the worst sense of the word." I get a picture in my mind of someone who followed all the expectations of society, and made sure everyone noticed him. It's a picture of someone who is smug, proud, and perhaps a bit anxious to please others. It's a picture of self-righteousness.

We're going to see in today's Bible reading that Jesus calls us to something quite different from self-righteousness: true righteousness.

Matthew 5:6, New International Version:
"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

As we saw back in the beginning of this series, the biblical word "blessed" is much the same as "happy." So we could say today's verse is:

Matthew 5:6:
"Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

But what is this word "righteousness"? It's not a word commonly used in everyday conversation. Righteousness describes people who are ethical,

just, faithful, trustworthy, and honest. It's about fulfilling commitments and having integrity.

To put it simply, "righteousness" is a "right relationship."

Righteousness can refer to a person's own individual behaviour, or to a relationship between people, or to a relationship between people and God. Let's look at examples of all three.

1) Right actions by an individual

To be righteous is more than obeying the "Do not" commandments: don't murder, don't steal, don't lie, and so on. That's a good start, but there's more. It also means following a positive, generous, faithful lifestyle. What you see in public is the same as what the person is like in private.

John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist Church. He had a passion to bring the gospel to people who were not part of regular churches. He did not have an easy time of it, for many of the established churches despised his methods. Here's a single page from his journal:

May 5, Sunday A.M.—Preached in St. Ann's; was asked not to come back anymore.

May 5, Sunday P.M.—Preached at St. John's; deacons said, "Get out and stay out."

May 12, Sunday A.M.—Preached at St. Jude's; can't go back there either.

May 12, Sunday P.M.—Preached at St. George's; kicked out again.

May 19, Sunday A.M.—Preached at St. Somebody Else's; deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return.

May 19, Sunday P.M.—Preached on the street; kicked off the street.

May 26, Sunday A.M.—Preached out in a meadow; chased out of meadow when a bull was turned loose during the service.

June 2, Sunday A.M.—Preached out at the edge of town; kicked off the highway.

June 2, Sunday P.M.—Afternoon service, preached in the pasture; 10,000 people came.

John Wesley was faithful to fulfill his mission, to take the gospel to the world. Whether he was accepted or rejected made no difference; he kept on, no matter what the response. The source of his enthusiasm was his daily reading of the Bible and time spent with his heavenly Father in prayer. (By the way, "enthusiasm" comes from *en theos*, which is Greek for "in God." It was in God that Wesley found his energy and desire to keep going, no matter what.)

2) Right relationships with others

In many of Paul's letters in the New Testament, the beginning chapters are about God and theology, and the concluding chapters apply that theology to how we live. We see that in his letter to the Ephesians. He takes the doctrine of righteousness and shows it affects our relationships with the people around us.

Ephesians 4:24 - 5:2, New Living Translation:

You must display a new nature because you are a new person, created in God's likeness—righteous, holy, and true.

So put away all falsehood and tell your neighbor the truth because we belong to each other. And don't let sin by letting anger gain control over you. Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a mighty foothold to the Devil.

If you are a thief, stop stealing. Begin using your hands for honest work, and then give generously to others in need. Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them...

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of malicious behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

Follow God's example in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love for others, following the example of Christ, who loved you and gave himself as a sacrifice to take away your sins.

Imagine you run a large business, and you're making a multi-million dollar agreement with someone. If both you and the other person are righteous and therefore trust one another, you don't need a bunch of lawyers and a contract 100 pages long. You would just shake hands on it. The reason

contracts are so long is they have to cover every possible thing that can happen. With righteousness, you don't need to worry about surprises. When the unexpected happens, you'll both do the right thing.

3) Right relationship with God

One of the themes of the Bible is that God is holy and righteous, but we humans are not. Oh, we may strive to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. We may desire it with all our heart... but when it comes down to actual behaviour, we fail time and again. Instead of being holy and doing what is right, we do what is wrong; we sin. And that sins breaks our relationship with a holy God.

Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way:

The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.

The Times newspaper of London once ran a series where they asked people to answer the question, "What's wrong with the world?" As you can imagine, people found fault with the government, education, the police, the grocery store down the street and much more. G. K. Chesterton's letter was the shortest, and perhaps the most accurate and honest:

**Re: What is wrong with the world?
Dear Sirs:
I am.
Sincerely yours,
G. K. Chesterton**

We all sin. No one is 100% righteous.

Thankfully, God has provided an answer to our problem of sin. Jesus came to tell us the good news of forgiveness and the new life we can have with God. Ultimately he gave his life on the cross as the payment for our sins.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes about his pedigree and about his ambition to be righteous before God. He has a long list of all his accomplishments, and he was quite proud of himself. But then he discovered something even better.

Philippians 3:7-9, Good News Bible:

I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him. I no longer have a righteousness of my own, the kind that is gained by obeying the Law. I now have the righteousness that is given through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith.

I underlined the last sentence, for it is the key. Our own righteousness, measured by how good we are, is sadly lacking. When we put our faith in Jesus, and trust in his forgiveness for our sins, then we have his perfect righteousness. Through Jesus, we have a relationship with God.

I read about a priest who visited a woman in hospital. She was dying and he attempted to comfort her, but to no avail. "I am lost," she wailed. "I've ruined my life and every life around me. There is no hope for me. I'm going to hell."

The priest noticed a framed picture of a lovely girl on the dresser. "Who is this?" he asked.

The woman brightened. "She is my daughter, the one beautiful thing in my life."

"And would you help her if she were in trouble or had made a mistake? Would you forgive her? Would you still love her?"

"Of course I would!" cried the woman. "I would do anything for her. Why do you ask such a question?"

"Because I want you to know," said the priest, "that God has a picture of you on his dresser."

I've painted—no, not me—the Bible paints a picture of what God expects of us: to be righteous. But as much as that is admirable and desirable, it's not doable. We may live that way for a while, but then temptation grabs hold, or a difficult situation happens, and we fail. We kick ourselves and feel like failures.

Good news! There's one who *did* live that way: Jesus. And when you put your faith in him, and he lives in you, by his power you can begin to be like him. And for the times—there will be many—when

we fail, Jesus is there to lift us up and help us continue.

You see, worship isn't just what we do here on a Sunday. Worship is how we live day to day; our lives are an offering to God.

Next Steps:

- Pray: Commit yourself to being a person of righteousness. *Not* smug and proud self-righteousness. But righteousness in which you do your best, with the help of Holy Spirit in your life.
- And when—not if, but when—you fail, take hold of Jesus who is reaching out to lift you back on your feet. Give thanks for his love and forgiveness.