



Rev Chris Taylor - 3-31-19
Extravagant Love

“Happy” or “Blessed” shows up forty five times in the psalms, another seven times in Proverbs. Altogether, we find it some 369 times in Scripture, including the nine times that Jesus uses it in his Beatitudes. Happy or blessed; their very frequency suggests that this is what we are looking for in life. We want to be happy. We long for “shalom” – a sense of peace, of rightness and harmony that suffuses the whole of our being with a pervasive sense of contentment.

Look at some of the passages where “blessed” or “happy” is used, and a message begins to emerge. Our first lesson, “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” The very next psalm, verse 12, “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord.” Or the opening line of the psalter itself, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked... but their delight is in the law of the Lord.” Forgiveness, focus, obedience. Three different qualities, but what they all have in common is a relationship with God. What they all point to is a life in which God stands at the center; stands as the grounding or foundation upon which everything else is built.

It is there in God, in other words, that we find our home. Turn back to Him, and we are turning to that one place that offers warmth and security and love; that one place that feeds the deepest longings of our hearts.

That’s really what Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son is all about. The wayward son was looking for something more than what he had; looking to fill the empty place inside him. Maybe he was jealous of his older brother who, by the rules of that time, was going to get a double share of their father’s estate; the great bulk of the inheritance. Or maybe he saw his friends out having a good time and thought he was missing out on something.

We don’t know what drove him to ask for his inheritance, but we know he left his home thinking the good life must be somewhere out beyond what he already

had. And we know that it turned out badly; so badly that it caused him to realize what a terrible mistake he had made.

There's a saying in recovery circles: you have to bottom out before you can turn around. Some people, a lot of people, never quite get there. They fritter away their lives, pursuing one thing or another which they are sure will make them happy; or turning finally to something which will numb the pain... never quite reaching the bottom, unhappy but not so unhappy as to make a change, living what Henry David Thoreau once called, "lives of quiet desperation."

Helmut Thielicke was one of the great Christian minds of the Twentieth century; a university professor, pastor and prolific author. When he was about six years old, right around the time the First World War began, he lost his beloved grandfather to a liver disorder.

He was distraught. Trying to comfort him, his mother spoke of how happy his grandfather must be among God's angels in heaven. But at the same time, he was also told he wasn't allowed to enter his grandfather's room because his body was still sleeping there and he was not to be disturbed. Well, how could that be? How could his grandfather be with the angels but at the same time continue to lie in his old, familiar bed? Thielicke couldn't understand. It was too much for his young mind to grasp. He realized this was something he was going to have to investigate. He'd have to find out for himself what was going on.

He recruited his three year old sister and together, holding hands, they entered the forbidden room. At first, in the semi-darkness, he could see no evidence of their grandfather. But then he realized the blanket on the bed had been pulled all the way up, and was covering his grandfather's face. Summoning his courage, he went over and pulled the blanket to one side. Immediately, he and his sister began to scream. This was their grandfather, but it wasn't – his complexion was an eerie and frightening yellow. Sobbing, they rushed out of the room and in search of their parents.

Thielicke says he suffered from the trauma of that moment for a long time. The memory would come back at unexpected moments and he would find himself screaming, "The yellow grandpa is coming." Along with the trauma came the awareness of just how fleeting this life is.

Not long after his grandfather's death, Thielicke's grandmother bought him a long-coveted cart. He had dreamed about this cart and riding it down the hill in front of their home. When she first gave it to him he was so happy he could barely contain his joy. He burst into song. But then, as his father carried the cart downstairs, his happiness suddenly evaporated. He burst into tears. His father could make no sense of it. With a trace of indignation he asked, "What are you crying for, Helmut? You've just been given a lovely cart."

Seventy years later, Thielicke could still remember his response, "Yes, but one day it's bound to get broken!" Reflecting on that moment, he would later write, "In the midst of my greatest happiness, the terror of life's transience had come over me. This was a child's first foreboding that the happy moment does not last and that the cold breath of its demise sends a shiver through us at the very instant when our happiness is concentrated into a single and immeasurable point. This sense of the imminent end of all things has always accompanied me, even in sickness and when I was close to death, and it occupied my thoughts and many pages of my diary long before my later publications on the subject."

If we are paying attention as we move through this life, at some point we realize, as Thielicke did, how fleeting the things of this world truly are. "Happy are..." What? Those who get the longed-for promotion? Who find the perfect spouse and live in the most beautiful home? Who write a book or have a grandchild, or finally retire with a generous pension?

All those things are wonderful. They're all great blessings, and they should indeed, make us happy. But where does the sense of transience fit in? If we know these things won't necessarily last, how does that inform our response?

This is where the younger son in the parable made his great mistake. He loved the parties. They made him happy. But he thought he could hang on to them. He thought with his father's money they would last forever. But that's not the way this world works. The day came when the money ran out. The parties ended. His friends disappeared. And there he was living with the pigs wishing he could share their food.

If we base our hope for happiness on the things of this world then we are setting ourselves up for disappointment because they can't bear the weight. They

were never intended to. Like Thieliicke's cart, the day comes when they are going to break or change and if we have based all our hopes there, then in that moment it is hope itself that dies with them.

But if we can somehow look beyond the things of this world for our happiness, then it becomes easier for us to accept how transient they are; easier to hold them loosely – to receive them, and embrace them, and enjoy them while they last, but then be in a place where we can let them go.

Fail to do that, and we hold on too tightly. These things become too important, too central to our being. We become controlling. We live in constant fear lest they disappear. Our lives become filled with rage and disappointment.

What we need is what Thieliicke ultimately found. We need the transcendent – that which lies beyond this world; something to hang onto and build our lives upon that isn't fleeting, and that won't change. We need a home; a foundation that will not disappoint – a home in which we can place our hope and trust knowing that it will always be there; a warm and comfortable place where we will always be welcome; a space filled with love and light and laughter.

In the end, the parable of the Prodigal Son isn't about the son at all. It is about this Father who is looking for us even now, searching the horizon for some evidence of our return. It is about this Father ready and waiting for that moment when we turn back; that moment when we finally realize what it is that we've been missing, make the turn, and begin the long and wonderful journey back to our one, true home. The light is on, and our Father is waiting.

ⁱ Helmut Thieliicke, *Notes From a Wayfarer*, translated by David Law, (Paragon House, New York, 1995), p. 3