

“Why Do We Give Bibles To Our First Graders?”

Psalm 119:1-8

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
October 20, 2002

Normally, when we think of the Beatitudes, our thoughts turn to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. There we find Jesus' advice on many things, including how to find happiness. I recently finished a study of them in Sunday School and developed a greater appreciation for them.

Do you know that the Beatitudes are not limited to Matthew 5 and can even be found in the Old Testament? One place where you discover more Beatitudes is Psalm 119:1-8. Let me draw your attention to this passage today.

This passage begins the same way Jesus taught his disciples on that Gallilean hillside some years later, with the word, “blessed.” While there is no English equivalent for this Biblical word, many have used the word “happy” to describe it. Scholars refer to “blessed” as the highest state of joy that a human can experience. One of my seminary professors, Dr. Harold Songer, described blessed as a “jump for joy and click your heels kind of feeling.” That’s as good a description as any, I suppose.

This word “blessed” tells me two things that I need to understand at the outset of this sermon. First of all, it is possible to be happy in this world and secondly, God wants me to be happy. I believe both, so this leads to a question. How and where do you find happiness in this world?

A study of all the Beatitudes in the Bible will tell you the same thing. You will not find it if you search for it. Instead, it must find you. For you see, happiness is the result of doing certain things. So, what are these things? The Psalmist mentions two. Happiness is the result of knowing God and following Him. Let me explain.

First of all, happiness is the result of knowing God. The Psalmist wrote, “Blessed are they who keep God’s statutes and **seek Him with all their heart**” 119:2.

There is a big difference between knowing God and knowing about God. Knowing about God can lead to an appreciation for Him and His abilities but knowing Him personally can lead to an immeasurable love for God and devotion to Him. It is the person who seeks Him, an ongoing, dynamic, personal relationship with Him that finds happiness. Why? Because this person connects with the very Source of life that can meet man’s deepest needs.

A few years ago, the Christian world was introduced to Henry Blackabys’ work, “Experiencing God.” More recently, Anne Graham Lotz has published a study called, “God’s Story: Finding Meaning for Your Life Through Knowing God.” These studies along with many others have helped multitudes of Christians to understand the value of encountering and experiencing God. They have helped move people beyond an objective analysis of God to a personal relationship with Him that is based upon communication, honesty, grace and power. As a result, untold numbers of believers have discovered a level of joy they had never known and could never have known outside of a close relationship with God.

This is why the Psalmist said, “Happy are those who seek Him with all their heart.” Happiness is the result of knowing God, not merely knowing about Him.

Secondly, happiness is the result of following God and becoming His disciple.

How can I follow Him, though? How do I know where He is going and where He wants me to go? Listen to the Psalmist. Study His word and trust it.

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible, containing one hundred seventy-six verses. There are several things that make this chapter unique in addition to its length and one of those is the strong emphasis the Psalmist places upon the Word of God. Ten different terms are used for God's instructions to man about how to live and five of them are found in the first eight verses, law, statutes, ways, decrees and commands. As a matter of fact, only one verse in the whole Psalm does not contain a reference to God's Word.

What does this tell us? It tells us how important God's Word is. So important is it that the Psalmist even links our happiness to knowing and living God's Word. "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord. Blessed are they who keep His statutes and seek Him with all their heart. They do nothing wrong because they walk in His ways" 119:1-3.

I especially like the word "walk" in this passage. The Psalmist mentioned it twice. It referred to a marked trail that a person would travel one step at a time.

Perhaps you are a hiker. In October, I think we are all hikers. At times, all of us have hiked on unfamiliar trails. On those trails, we have had to rely upon the path cut out by the experts and carefully follow the signs that were strategically placed along the way. If we failed to do so, we got lost and found ourselves in danger. The signs were there for a reason and the wise hiker knew that.

The Psalmist knew that he and his people were traveling down an unfamiliar path and they needed guidance and direction. A lot was at stake and risks were plentiful. How would they know where to go? Which trail would lead to safety, security, fulfillment and happiness? Which would lead to chaos, confusion and misery? He had no doubt. God's Word was reliable and trustworthy. It would lead the right way for him and others. This was why he encouraged his readers to learn God's Word and faithfully obey it. He knew their happiness and very survival depended upon it.

On the day that President Carter received news of winning the Nobel Peace prize, several reporters interviewed him. A local reporter asked Mr. Carter what his plans were for the weekend. I think his answer startled her and caused others to grin when he replied, "I am going to study my Sunday School lesson."

No doubt you have seen athletes who were interviewed minutes after winning a championship and when asked what they planned to do, they responded, "I am going to Disney World!" I got the impression that was what this reporter was expecting from Mr. Carter, an answer outlining his celebration plans. Instead, he told her he was going to do what came naturally to him, study the Bible so he would be prepared to teach his lesson.

His response spoke volumes about the secret not only to Mr. Carter's happiness but also his ability to spread happiness to thousands of others through the pursuit of justice and human rights. Both are rooted in a love for God and a desire to follow Him through the serious study of His Word.

A few moments ago, we gave our first graders a Bible. Why did we do that and why do we do it every year? Because our world needs more Nobel Peace prize candidates.