

Happy Are the Hungry

Derwin Gray, founding and lead pastor of Transformation Church in Indian Land, South Carolina, says the coronavirus pandemic represents a critical moment for Jesus' church.

"COVID-19 has exposed a lot of our false gods," Gray says. "The American economy has been brought to its knees by a virus that's undetectable to the human eye. The world has been brought to its knees. Our love for power, money, certainty and security is like a sandcastle that has just been wiped away by this wave called COVID."

But there is hope, he says: "Now we can build our lives on the rock."

Gray's new book, *The Good Life: What Jesus Taught About Finding True Happiness*, releases in stores nationwide June 2. The book focuses on the Beatitudes, with each chapter titled after one of Jesus' statements in Matthew 5:3-12. Notably, however, Gray replaces the word "blessed" with the word "happy"—a move that he says more clearly articulates the meaning of the original verses.

"Jesus desires for us to be happy, but the happiness that He desires for us is greater than happy feelings," Gray says. "It's about God conforming us to His image. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says 'Blessed are those who are poor in spirit; blessed are the peacemakers.' That word 'blessed,' [originally] *mercurios*, literally means 'happy.' So the type of happiness that Jesus invites us into is a life of holiness. As John Wesley said, holiness is simply a life of love. So Jesus is inviting us to experience the happiness of His kingdom."

In a time of uncertainty, when so many habits and distractions have been ripped away, Gray hopes many will heed Christ's call to holiness and true happiness.

"All of our sandcastles are just being wiped away," Gray says. "People are saying, 'My 401(k) has just been destroyed. My investments have been destroyed. I've lost my job. I'm concerned about my health. ... How can I find the good life? What is the good life?' And Jesus is sitting with the Sermon on the Mount, looking over the Sea of Galilee, saying, 'I want you to come, sit down, and let Me invite you into the good life. Let Me share My happiness with you so that My holiness can be expressed through you.'"

Seek First the Kingdom

Gray says he preached on the subject of "The Good Life" in 2015, and his congregation responded greatly to it. In 2018, he was approached about writing a book on the subject, but he resisted for a while. Finally, during a family vacation, his daughter told him all of his excuses did not matter if he was writing this book for God, as a response to His love. That convinced him.

"There were times where I was writing, and I could just sense that God was doing something sacred and beautiful that is going to change thousands upon thousands of lives because we're going to look at Jesus afresh," Gray says. "We're going to see Jesus anew."

Gray says that, as a former NFL player, he chased the good life as the world defines it—and found it lacking. He has since learned that true happiness can only be found in Christ.

"The reality is ... God's good life is Him literally sharing His life with us and making us a people that reflect His kingdom," Gray says. "His kingdom is filled with people who are humble in spirit. They are peacemakers. They're merciful. They hunger and thirst for righteousness. They lament because things are sad. They are persecuted for His name's sake. In other words, they are people who day by day through the Holy Spirit begin to reflect Jesus more and more. So now we're set free.

Typically, our happiness comes from, 'I got a raise' or 'I got what I want.' Now it comes from, 'I'm happy because of who I'm becoming, because of what Christ has done.'"

Gray believes the teachings of Jesus are more relevant than ever, particularly for those who have experienced loss of income, vocation or purpose as a result of shelter-in-place or quarantine orders.

"If you have lost a job and you follow Jesus, Matthew 6:33 is still true: 'But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you,'" Gray says. "In Matthew 6:25-32, Jesus says, 'Hey, don't worry about what you're going to eat. Don't worry about what you're going to wear. Don't worry about what you're going to drink, because life is more than eating and drinking and clothes.' Now, obviously, we need to eat. We need to drink, and we need clothes. But what is Jesus saying? His saying of preeminence is 'Seek first My kingdom.' We have a good Father who's going to provide for our needs.

"... And here's the beauty of Jesus' logic of grace. When He says, 'Don't worry about what you eat,' He also says in John 6:35, 'I am the bread of life.' When He says, 'Don't worry about what you're going to drink,' He says in John 4:10, 'I am the living water.' And when He says, 'Don't worry about what you're going to wear,' the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:27 says, 'We are clothed with Christ.' In other words, as we seek God because His grace first sought us, Jesus is our bread. Jesus is our living water. Jesus is the clothes. In other words, Jesus transforms us to be a Jesus Christ lookalike through His life. That's where our hope is ultimately found."

Witness in the Pandemic

Gray says one particular chapter in his book has turned out to be prophetic. The fifth chapter, "Happy are the Hungry," addresses how the early church responded to plagues and

pandemics in the Greco-Roman world. In October 2019, when he submitted his manuscript for *The Good Life* to his publisher, he could not have known his book would release in the midst of a global pandemic.

“We’re not the first generation that has experienced something traumatic,” Gray says. “We mourn, but we also recognize that, for such a time as this, Christ has left us here to be the body of Christ. The greatest thing we can do now is to pray, love and serve, continuing to be financially generous to our churches and organizations that feed the hungry and clothe the naked. We need to pray for our president. We need to pray for doctors, nurses, pharmacists and the medical community. It’ll be our prayers that God uses to get us through this. But what’s most important is not God getting us through COVID-19, but what is God doing in us during COVID-19? ... It was rather prophetic and timely that I put that in the book, not knowing we would be in the midst of a world pandemic when it would be released.”

Because of the chapter’s timeliness, Gray asked his publisher to make “Happy are the Hungry” available free at . He says it’s a useful reminder that we are not the first generation to face a crisis like this; in fact, pandemics helped spur the early church’s growth.

“When there were plagues or pandemics in the Greco-Roman world, something beautiful and courageous took place,” Gray says. “Many of the Jewish people and many of the Gentile, pagan Romans and Greeks would flee their cities because pandemics and plagues would wipe out everybody. But instead of fleeing areas that were overtaken, the people of the Resurrection—the church, Jesus’ community—were actually ministering to dying people. They were staying to pray, staying to comfort. Sometimes God would supernaturally heal people through the Christians—and sometimes God would heal the Christians through the resurrection as they died with the people they were ministering to. But what would happen after

the pandemic is the Gentile pagans would say, 'Well, the gods we follow didn't give us strength and courage like the God you follow. I want to know more about Jesus of Nazareth who rose from the dead.' And the same thing would take place from the Jews as well."

Gray says that while all believers can pray and intercede over the COVID-19 crisis, he encourages those in the medical field to see this as an opportunity to live out their faith like those early believers did.

"If you're not in the medical community—say, a doctor, nurse, pharmacist or administrator—then you are shut in place," he says. "But to the believers who are in the medical world, who are first responders, you are literally being the hands and feet of Christ. So I want to encourage you to continue to do the things to take care of your safety. But my goodness, in a world that is being turned upside down in fear and anxiety, you are the peace of Christ. You are the grace of Christ."

Gray says this season should move us as a church to both mourning and action.

"In the midst of this COVID-19 pandemic, I think the first thing we need to do is take a step back, and we need to mourn," Gray says. "Jesus says, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.' ... There's something about lamenting and mourning that the world is not the way it should be. That is a result of the fall. The world is broken. Even as Christians, we don't escape the effects of a broken world—but we never escape the effects of a God who says 'I will never leave you. I will never forsake You. You're more than a conqueror in Him who loved you.' Therefore, as we mourn, we actually tap deeper into God's heart, and we grow in faith in Christ. We grow in hope—hope looks like an empty tomb—and we grow in love for people.

"As we're mourning, we're actually moved to action to be the

hands and feet of Christ in a desperately broken world. At our church, we have made a commitment from Day One that if our community doesn't change because we exist, we should pack up and leave. For 10 years, we have fed children through our backpack ministry, and our mobile food pantry is feeding about 325 families per week. We are financially supporting our church plant in Madrid, Spain called Icono. And our online viewership in [the last] three weeks has grown five times. ... This adversity is an incredible opportunity for the church to mourn with Jesus, but also be moved to action with Jesus.”
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