I recently viewed a NETFLIX documentary that looks at the growing body of research trying to answer a simple question, “what makes people happy?” The conclusions were not surprising. First, many of the factors modern society tells us will make us happy – money, status, or image – don’t. Sometimes they even work to make those who become obsessed with them less happy. Instead, researchers found that our happiness depends a lot on how we relate to other people. They found the happiest people 1) have many close, supportive relationships, 2) have a deep sense of belonging to a community that loves them, and 3) have compassion and want to help other people. So, there you have it, science seems to confirm that Jesus’ beatitudes are the right formula to make us happy.

We are now in week three of a 5-week period of ordinary time in which our Sunday Gospel readings are devoted to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. We started with Jesus’ teaching about what genuine happiness looks like called the beatitudes. “Blessed,” as used in the beatitudes 9 times, means a blissful, self-contained happiness. And it all starts with complete dependence on God (being poor in spirit). Last week we heard that by living the beatitudes we become salt of the earth and light for the world, shining examples that the Kingdom of God is in fact already among us. And today we learn that as we take on the very identity of Christ, this necessarily changes how we live and relate to others.

In today’s first two readings, we hear that those called by God have free will, the ability to choose to become salt and light by following the wisdom of God, or not. But, we are warned, to choose anything less than God’s wisdom as the foundation of our lives is foolishness. It only brings death, and misery.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus proposes a new, higher moral standard for those who choose to follow the wisdom of God. Jesus does this by insisting that his disciples’ righteousness (proper relationships with God and other people) must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees might have scrupulously followed all 613 detailed precepts of the law, but they had no spiritual depth. While following the external requirements of the law, Jesus must have observed the way they treated people, especially those who were not like them, and known that the love of God and the love of others that flows from it never touched their hearts. But for us, we are told, our attitudes and lifestyles must be different. As Christians, we use our free will to choose a way of life that springs from a radical love of God and neighbor, a love that has been breathed into our hearts by God Himself.
Living this way requires an extraordinary conversion which leads us to see that ALL human life is sacred. Because Jesus died on the cross for ALL human beings, and we are ALL created in the image of God we must respect the inherent dignity of All people. **Christians must live like Jesus Christ, with a single-minded commitment to the dignity and worth of ALL HUMANITY.** And by living this moral vision, we are told, we achieve authentic happiness – we become blessed people.

Simple, right? Maybe not. In the teaching that follows Jesus gives us six examples, and we only hear the first four today, of how this extraordinary conversion of heart must change how we live and how we relate to others. And we see that maybe it’s not so easy after all. What we hear is the Old Testament Law, *(You have heard it said that …)* juxtaposed with Jesus’ raising the bar to a much higher standard based love, not rules (*but I say to you …*). Let’s look at just the first two to see how this plays out.

**You have heard it said you shall not kill,** but Jesus says we must choose peace over violence. Respect the dignity of other people, especially the difficult ones, to the point that you don’t hold on to anger, envy or jealousy, or take any vengeful action against a brother or sister, not name calling, not online bullying, not gossip. When we act out of vengeance it not only hurts other, but it also shrinks our heart, makes us less human, and makes our world a less happy place. But if we allow our hearts to be filled with the love of God, we can work with even the difficult people in our lives to move them towards forgiveness and reconciliation. Angry people are not happy people. Remember what Pope Francis said in his six new beatitudes he proposed: “blessed are those who remain faithful when enduring evil inflicted on them by others, and forgive them from their heart.”

**You have heard it said you shall not commit adultery.** But Jesus says every person is beautifully created in the image of God and our relationships should be characterized by mutual respect and self-giving. Adultery, lust, and so many other social evils, have their roots in the sin of seeing people as objects or “human resources” to be consumed and used in a selfish way, for our benefit, and then discarded like so much garbage. When we fail to recognize the worth and dignity of others, we often act in ways that hurt them and shrinks our heart, makes us less human, and our world a less happy place. Abusive, self-absorbed people are not happy people. Remember again Pope Francis: “blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others.”

Now some might say, this is an impossible standard. But we can live up to it. Just look at the lives of the Saints. And hear again from our first reading, “If you choose you can keep the commandments … **If you trust in God,** you too shall live.”
So, want to know what you can do to live a happy and blessed life? Become a living beatitude. Choose actions in the concrete situation of your everyday life which live up to the much higher standard of the law of love given us by Jesus. It all starts with complete dependence on God (being poor in spirit). God knows the answer to the question, “what makes people happy” better than any research scientist. After all, he created us in his image and likeness, He created ALL HUMANITY, to live life to its fullest, to be happy.