

Luke 6:20-23

20 Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. **21** Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. **22** Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. **23** "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

Leaving a frustrating meeting in downtown Minneapolis, I had 30 minutes to get to my next appointment on the sloppy sidewalks. I needed to look good, so watching my shoes get muddier aggravated my foul mood. I headed for a shoeshine stand, where an elderly man slowly rose to greet me. He glanced at my shoes and said, "Man, you came to the right place. Hop up and let Jake take care of you."

As he wiped away all traces of mud, I fumed over my disastrous meeting with ten surgeons. With slow, circular motions Jake rubbed polish deep into my shoes. "Life sure is good, ain't it?" he said.

"That depends on your perspective," I countered.

Jake looked up. "I don't know about you, but the good Lord has blessed me with a great 90 years."

"What's the key to your success?" I asked.

"Appreciation. I appreciate everything the Lord has given me." Then for seven minutes Jake described a life of poverty and struggles, but blessed with a job he loved and a loving family. I thought about the surgeons who financially had everything they needed, yet were stressed and complaining. For the first time, I understood what it means to be joyful always and to give thanks in all circumstances.

Acts 16:22-34

22 The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. **23** After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. **24** Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. **26** Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. **27** The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. **28** But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" **29** The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. **30** He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" **31** They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." **32** Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. **33** At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. **34** The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.

Cuban minister Humberto Alexander's eyes sparkle like he's just been let in on a wonderful secret. But he spent two decades in a Castro prison for the politically incorrect. There he led clandestine worship services. His joyful faith proved contagious, and many fellow inmates committed their lives to the Christ. He baptized 200 right under the noses of the guards!

I couldn't imagine how, since Humberto barely managed to keep a small Bible concealed as he passed it from one inmate to another. Baptisms were usually pulled off, he told me, at the noon meal. One cellblock would file in past a long trough of water where they washed up, while another filed out on the other side. On the appointed day, he'd slip into the exiting group as the man to be baptized entered. As the two came opposite, the men bunched together as Humberto immersed the candidate in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then the lines moved on. "But didn't the authorities find out?" I asked.

"Sure, usually," Humberto replied, grinning; "But he'd already been baptized!"

Would he be beaten? Yes, probably. Would he be thrown into solitary? Most likely. But he rejoiced to see another spiritual journey begun.