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Questions Every Christian Asks

5. How Can I Be Happy?

Psalm 1:1-3 and Psalm 119:1-3, 17-19 NRSV Psalm 1:1-3 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

Psalm 119:1-3, 17-19 Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.... Deal bountifully with your servant, so that I may live and observe your word. Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. I live as an alien in the land; do not hide your commandments from me.

Matthew 7:12 CEB "Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets."

We've looked at our two Psalms for the morning recently, but they bear looking at again as we explore the latest topic in our Lenten sermon series, "Questions Every Christian Asks" – "How can I find happiness?" It's a perennial question in our culture, one that advertisers spend billions of dollars trying to answer for you, one that becomes more urgent when life and society so often seem scary. How *can* you find happiness? Well, you might try Amazon.com and if you search for a book with the keyword "happiness" you will get 94,000 results. If you search all of Amazon, you'll find that Amazon will sell you 232,000 items designed to increase your happiness, including happiness playing cards, t-shirts, jewelry, essential oils, license plate brackets, bumper stickers, hammocks, cupcakes, bottled water, and ever so much more. If those 232,000 items don't make you happy, you can try a Google search for the phrase "how can I be happy" and you'll be met with a little over forty-five million results, from articles to books to online quizzes to strategies for increasing your happiness by being a better Pokemon player.

It is indeed a perennial human question, but this is what I want to say this morning: for the Christian, it's the wrong question. What do I mean? Well, let me offer you an analogy: if you are piloting a small plane at night, looking for the green-and-white flashing beacon that will guide you to the airport that's your destination, the worst way to look for that beacon is to look for it directly. Budding private pilots learn that the best way to find that elusive airport beacon amidst the luminous clutter of all the other lights is to see it out of the corner of your eye. In fact, the more you seek to find that beacon at night by looking directly for it, staring hard at this part of the sky then that, the more anxious you will become and your anxiety will make it even less likely that you'll find that beacon. You have to take a different approach: you find the beacon while you are not explicitly looking for the beacon. It's a by-product, if you will, of looking in a different direction. It's something you achieve when you weren't intending to. It takes trust in the way God designed your eyes to work at night and the willingness to not try to over-control things.

It turns out that in the last twenty-five years, scientific studies of happiness have exploded. Academic papers on happiness are published in prestigious science journals, one such author received the Nobel Prize, and governments all over the world, in the words of a Harvard Business Review article on the topic, "are rushing to figure out how to measure and increase the happiness of their citizens."¹ As I have looked at some of the literature on happiness this week, as I have prayed about how to best approach this topic this morning, as I have studied our scriptures, there are several things that jump out at me about what happiness can and should mean for a Christian. Let me highlight six of my conclusions:

First, one's happiness is inextricably linked to having what the sociologists call a

¹<https://hbr.org/2012/01/the-science-behind-the-smile> "The Science Behind the Smile," Harvard Business Review, January-February 2012.

good “social network,” and what Christians ought to call the church! The author of the Harvard Business Review article puts it this way:

If I had to summarize all the scientific literature on the causes of human happiness in one word, that word would be “social.” ...If I wanted to predict your happiness, and I could know only one thing about you, I wouldn’t want to know your gender, religion, health, or income. I’d want to know about your social network – about your friends and family and the strength of your bonds with them.²

However, for Christians the simple fact of having a social network is not enough; white supremacists and anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim folks very often have strong social networks that do great evil, even if they help make their members “happy.”

Second, one is more likely to be happy **if your social networks are ones engaged in some sort of purposive work.** How many of you have ever found yourselves in some sort of group or club but eventually left it because the purpose of the group or club became unclear and it seemed to have meetings just for the sake of having meetings? But again, simply having just **any** sort of purposive work is not by itself enough for a Christian to be happy. Why? Well, some purposes are wrong, even evil. Timothy McVeigh and the cohorts in his network had a purpose and it led to the heinous murder of 168 men, women, and children at the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City. Those whose group, whose purpose, is dedicated to harming the poor and the vulnerable and the needy may find themselves “happy” in their work, but they surely are not “blessed” in the Biblical sense, they surely are not Christian in the way our Lord talked about when He reminded us that our work is not just about feeling close to Him but showing care for the needy, the hungry, the homeless, and those imperiled by sexism and racism and homophobia.

²<https://hbr.org/2012/01/the-science-behind-the-smile>

Third, if you think your happiness is tied to the things you can buy or achieve or consume, you are wrong. The great 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr powerfully showed that, as eloquently summarized by my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, “If your happiness is based on getting more things, you will never be happy because you will always want more than you have.”³ *You will always want more than you have.* That’s not a recipe for happiness, but a road map to anxiety.

Fourth, it’s worth noting that **there is a difference between happiness in a deep sense and contentment.** More than one study has shown that parents of young children are simply not as “content” as they were before they had children and would not be that content again until their children were grown and successfully launched into adult life.⁴ But those studies also show that in a deeper sense, those parents are indeed “happy” because they are doing Godly, blessed, purposive work in raising children. What’s more, if you are going to be happy as a Christian there will and should be times when you are not, in fact, content at all. You see, if you are content with social arrangements that may favor you but don’t much care about the social arrangements that are hurting people, if you are blasé about the systemic racism that pervades even the best of intentions, if you don’t much care about those Christian children in parts of Africa who are made into sex slaves by agents of Al Qaida, if as you drink your safe and clean water and are complacent about the one billion-plus people in this world who lack clean water or those damaged-for-life children in Flint, Michigan – then I shall hope and pray that God will in fact disturb you with discontent in order that you might know the deeper happiness that comes from caring ever-more deeply for God’s children.

Fifth, study after study after study show that **it is those people who are both**

³Conversation, March 29, 2017

⁴Although the author is coming at this from a somewhat different perspective, it’s worth noting what the **Harvard Business Review** article says: “Research shows that people with children are typically less happy on a moment-to-moment basis than people without children. But people who have kids may feel fulfilled in a way that people without kids do not.”

truly grateful and truly generous who are the happiest. The great preacher Gardner Taylor once said "I have never known anyone who was truly grateful who was at the same time small or petty or bitter or mean greedy or selfish or who could take any pleasure in anyone else's pain." Scientific research concurs with Dr. Taylor:

Researchers in one 2003 study randomly assigned one group of study participants to keep a short weekly list of the things they were grateful for, while other groups listed hassles.... Ten weeks later, the first group enjoyed significantly greater life satisfaction than the others. Other studies have shown the same pattern.... In a nutshell, acting grateful can actually make you grateful”⁵

And gratitude goes hand-in-hand with generosity: It is telling that those with the lowest incomes give a higher proportion of their incomes to charity than those who are more well-off. You would think it would be the other way around, but too often the well-off get trapped by their possessions and their things begin to own them rather than vice-versa. The more they have, the more anxious they are, the more tight-fisted and less generous they become – neither happy nor content.

All of which leads us, sixth and finally, to begin to truly understand what should make for true Christian happiness. **True Christian happiness comes**, just as with the pilot looking out of the corner of her or his eye, **when we are not seeking it for ourselves**, when we are enmeshed in life-giving relationships, when we giving ourselves over to work that matters, when we are generous and practice gratitude, and when we have a purpose other than ourselves. But here’s the thing: that purpose needs to be a **worthy** one. That is what the language of our two Psalms this morning are expressing; hear those words again: *“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their*

⁵<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/opinion/sunday/choose-to-be-grateful-it-will-make-you-happier.html>

delight is in the teachings of the Lord.... Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who... walk in his ways." What are those decrees, those teachings? What are those things that make for delight? A pastor by the name of Gil Bowen says this: "If you ask [the Bible] about the purpose of your existence here in this world, what gives [your life] meaning, one answer always comes back. You are here to love: love your God, love your neighbor."⁶ No one says this better or more succinctly than my wife Barbara when she remarks that the goal and reason for a Christian life is to achieve the **purpose** that God has for you, and to enjoy the **promise** that God has made to you. Promise and purpose. The **promise** of God is that our lives are ultimately meaningful and that God cares for us now and eternally. But what is that purpose of our lives?

Well, our purpose is not to simply seek to meet our own needs, as the world would so often tell us, but to meet the needs of the world around us, in the place we have been put, with the talents we have been given. That's where our eyes should be focused when we are in the cockpit of our lives. You see, what we shall discover is that when we stop focusing so much on trying to be happy and instead focus on that promise of God and fulfilling that purpose from God, we will indeed find that we are, in the sense the Psalmist is speaking of, happy. And then, indeed, we too can be "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield [our] fruit in its season, and [our] leaves do not wither. In all that [we] do, [we shall] prosper." The great English poet William Blake is said to have put it this way: *"I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see. I sought my God, but my God eluded me. I sought my neighbor, and found all three."*⁷

How, then, will you seek YOUR happiness?

⁶<http://www.30goodminutes.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/225-gil-bowen-program-4426>

⁷My thanks to Dr. Robert L. Hill for pointing out this poem, attributed to Blake.