

How To Be Happy Ps. 32:1-2; Gal. 5:22; Matt. 16:24-26; Acts 20:35

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Americans seem to be engaged in a never-ending quest to be happy. Thousands of books about happiness are published each year (often giving conflicting advice!). And each generation has its popular songs about happiness. Some of you will remember Judy Garland's "Get Happy." Or, The Partridge Family's "Come On, Get Happy." Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy." And, Pharrell Williams' "Happy." These tunes may produce a smile in us and even a momentary lift of spirit, but they probably won't make us happy in the long-term.

In fact, I'm not sure there is a sure-fire way to make ourselves happy, because happiness is usually dependent on the circumstances around us. And, living as we do in a fallen and fragile world, circumstances are often beyond our control and sometimes circumstances cause sorrow rather than happiness. I think that Eleanor Roosevelt had it right when she said, "Happiness is not a goal, it is a by-product. Paradoxically, the one sure way not to be happy is... to map out a way of life in which one would please oneself completely and exclusively." That accords very well with Jesus' teaching about life in general. <sup>24</sup>*Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those*

*who lose their life for my sake will find it.* <sup>26</sup>*For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?* (Matt. 16:24-26)

The Bible doesn't have much to say about being happy, a feeling that is dependent on our life circumstances. In fact, in this passage Jesus points out that difficult circumstances may well come as a result of following him! However, the Bible does have a lot to say about joy, which is not dependent on circumstances, but is more a sense of deep contentment and satisfaction with our lives. The Apostle Paul wrote about his own joy in several of his letters, including ones that he wrote from a Roman prison shortly before his death! Even though he was imprisoned, he had found a sense of joy and satisfaction by living the life God created him to live. That was the foundation of joyful living for Paul.

In my preparation for this sermon, I looked at several contemporary studies about happiness and the factors that may lead to it. Their recommendations were all over the place, although there was a consistent finding that wealth- beyond having your basic needs met- does not lead to happiness! I was intrigued by the work of Harvard Medical School professor, Dr. Sanjiv Chopra, who identified four things that have been scientifically linked with happiness, or I think more accurately, with joy.

What struck me about his findings was how well they accord with the teaching of the scripture! Here's what he discovered.

First, happy or joyful people have close bonds with family or friends. Conversely, loneliness and social isolation can even be damaging to your physical health. So, if you want to be joyful, work to develop a few close relationships. By the way, that can happen here at church. In fact, a Pew Research study linked participation in congregational life to happiness! The church is God's family, where we are surrounded by our brothers and sisters in Christ. So, having strong personal bonds with our families of origin as well as with our church family is good for us and is connected to joyful living.

Second, Dr. Chopra identifies forgiveness as scientifically linked to happiness. He is referring to the practice of forgiving others when they wrong us. But I think inter-personal forgiveness is rooted in God's forgiveness of us. Consider these words from Ps. 32.

*<sup>1</sup>Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*

*<sup>2</sup>Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Ps. 32:1,2)*

When we confess our sins to the Lord, admitting the wrong we have done, we often feel joyful as we experience God's forgiveness. Sometimes it

feels like a weight is being removed from us and we begin to feel lighter.

And Jesus links being forgiven by God to our forgiveness of others.

Remember these words from the Lord's Prayer, "*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*" (Matt. 6:12)

Jesus taught that when we experience God's forgiveness, it motivates us to be more merciful with others. That's why he links both kinds of forgiveness in his prayer, and in several parables, too. Most of us are aware of the benefits of forgiving others versus the harm caused by holding a grudge. You've probably heard the old saying, "Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die!" It's true! Grudges and festering resentment are corrosive to our souls, and eat away at the possibility of happiness and joy.

But some of us have a great deal of trouble letting go of wrongs done to us. "But you don't understand what they did to me! They were wrong! It's not fair to forgive, especially if they aren't even sorry for what they've done!" You are right. It isn't fair to forgive. But it is merciful and graceful and ultimately for your own benefit. Only God has the right to exact revenge, so let go of that wrong thing done to you, and trust God to make things right in God's own time. Now, that doesn't mean you should rush to continue a close relationship with the other person. That's a matter of trust, and you need to assess whether or not that person is trustworthy of your

love and friendship. But you can let go of the hurt, of the wrong done to you, and that kind of forgiveness is linked to joyful living.

Interestingly, the third thing that Chopra says is linked to happiness is giving! Giving of your time and money to help others is linked to happiness! And that fits well with our stewardship emphasis season, doesn't it? Listen to these words from the book of Acts, <sup>35</sup>*In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*" (Acts 20:35) "More blessed to give..." Many of you have experienced this truth firsthand. Year after year, when people return from our mission trips- children, youth, and adults- they consistently talk about the joy they felt in helping others, and how they received much more than they gave! Maybe this is a year to stretch your giving, in both time and finances, so that others can do well. And then watch for the joy to come!

Finally, Dr. Chopra talks about gratitude. When I preside over a wedding, I usually read these words from Colossians 3 near the end of the service. <sup>15</sup>*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.* <sup>16</sup>*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.*

(Col. 3:15-16) Gratitude. Twice in this passage, Paul calls us to be thankful. And many times, the Psalmist tells us to “give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.” The commandment to be grateful runs throughout the scripture.

I believe that gratitude is the foundational spiritual virtue. It puts us in our proper place, as recipients of God’s good gifts. And gratitude is a habit, just as ingratitude is a habit. It doesn’t just happen automatically. If you want to develop a grateful spirit, you could start by keeping a gratitude journal. At the start of the day, or before you go to bed, list three things for which you are grateful, and thank God for those things. The next day, add three more things, and so on. Such an exercise can help you to be more aware of things you are thankful for during the day. And soon being grateful becomes a habit, which is linked to joyfulness in living!

So, if you want to be a joyful or happy person, know that God wants that for you, too. After all, joy is listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. It is something that God wants to produce in us. We can cooperate with God’s work in our hearts by nurturing relationships with family and friends, by trusting in God’s forgiveness and extending forgiveness to others, by giving of our time and money, and by learning to be grateful for all of God’s good gifts to us. And be sure to teach these things to your children and grandchildren!