

THE TRUTH ABOUT HAPPINESS

A sermon by James R. Blades
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Texts: Psalm 1 & Luke 6:17-26

Let's talk about happiness.

Happiness is something we all seek and want. In fact, it is fair to say that happiness is the chief of human longings, and certainly one that is deeply woven into the values of our American culture: "The pursuit of happiness" is considered one of our God-given inalienable rights.

The subject of happiness, it turns out, also appears prominently in the Bible.

Take for instance Psalm 1 which stands like a preface, an introduction to the whole Book of Psalms. Look at the very first word of the introduction: "Blessed is the person." It is an expression that is used 35 more times in the Book of Psalms alone.

Jesus also used this same expression in his preaching. "Blessed are the poor," he declared in his famous beatitudes, "Blessed are you who hunger. Blessed are you who weep." What connection does *blessedness* have to *happiness*? In old English, "blessed" was not so much of a religious word as it is today; it simply meant happy. Our modern word bliss comes from the same root as bless.

"Happy the person," says Jesus. "Happy the person," declares the psalmist. These two passages deal with the subject of happiness. And I suspect it is a subject we are all interested to know more about.

So then, let us take a few minutes to distill the wisdom of the Bible into some practical pointers for our lives today.

Notice this first: that happiness is a byproduct of certain behaviors. "Blessed is the person ... Happy is the person," they say, "who seeks certain objectives, who adopts certain ideals, who endorses certain values."

Happiness is not something that magically alights on us; it is a result, the consequence of certain thoughts and behaviors; not something we *find* but something we *make*. The person who goes in search of happiness in a better relationship, or in a better paying job, or in a more luxurious house or a nicer locale, is sure to be disappointed because happiness and unhappiness is not inherent in our luxuries and pleasures. It is something we foster and create in ourselves by our states of mind and behaviors.

"If happiness could be found in having material things, and in being able to indulge yourself in things that you considerable pleasurable, then we, in America, would be deliriously happy. We would be telling one another frequently of our unparalleled bliss, rather than trading tranquilizer prescriptions," said political thinker John Gardner.

"Happy is the person," says the psalmist, "Happy is the person," says Jesus "who takes certain paths, listens to certain voices, pursues certain ideals, keeps certain disciplines."

Many things in life are gifts. Life is a gift. The grace of God is a gift. The sun and the moon and the stars are gifts. The fresh-from-God innocence of a child is a gift. But happiness is not a gift. It is the result, the spin-off, the side-effect, the pay off of our own actions and aspirations and attitudes.

Which brings us to another thought about happiness. When we make happiness itself our life's aim, we miss it. But when we make other worthy pursuits our aim, happiness can be the byproduct.

Think of it like this: The dog that chases its tail never catches it. But when the dog goes on about its business, the tail follows right along.

"The search for happiness," said Eric Hoffer, *"is one of the chief sources of unhappiness."*

"Those who are happy," wrote John Stuart Mill, *"are those who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness."*

It's a paradox isn't it? The best way to be happy is let go of happiness as an ideal, and to set your sights on other laudable objectives.

"Happy is the person," says the psalmist, "Happy is the person," says Jesus who pursues what? Who makes the word and counsel of God his delight; who makes the values of God's kingdom her aim, who makes the blessing and enriching of others his goal. Who does what is thoughtful, godlike, just and right and considerate of others. Happy is that person, in the end.

Which brings yet another important thought: This kind of happiness does not come immediately. It does not arrive like a paycheck at the end of the day. It must be cultivated, like a plant of slow growth, over a long space of time. The most enduring happinesses of life are often paid for with a bit of temporary unhappiness. Isn't that true?

Here, for instance, is a parent who engages the long and difficult task of raising a child to adulthood. Being a parent is certainly not all sweetness and light. Each age brings its own challenges and troubles in its train. Being a parent means you lose sleep. Being a parent means you worry about your child's safety, and when they are teenagers, often their whereabouts. Being a parent means you sacrifice many of your own immediate pleasures to provide for the blessing of those you love. Why do we make these sometimes unhappy sacrifices? Because we know that they will produce a happy **result**.

Or here is an athlete. We see the athlete engaged in those memorable and glorious moments of competition. What we don't see is how much temporary unhappiness—the many long and grueling workouts, the misses and falls and bruises, and exhausted muscles—that the athlete willingly endured for years in exchange for the larger happiness of this occasion.

"Therefore," says the writer to the Hebrews, ". . . let us run with perseverance the race set before us, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, who *for the joy set before him* endured the cross . . ."

The Bible reminds us that the happiness of following Jesus Christ, the happiness of standing by the truth, the happiness of genuinely loving is not always an **immediate** happiness.

"Happy are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man." Happy, you say? Is there anything happy about exclusion and rejection and insult? No sane person finds happiness in these things. The happiness, the bliss that Jesus speaks of here is the longer-term satisfaction of having done what was just and right, even though it was not the immediately happy thing.

Which leads us to yet another point: Have you ever noticed that while it's true that life's most enduring happinesses have to be paid for in advance, the things that bring the most immediate happiness have to be paid for later?

Here are two college students. One spends the weekend at the library studying for his finals—not exactly a fun weekend! The other spends the weekend partying. The one who spent the weekend partying had his happiness, but pays *later* with the long term disappointment of a lousy test grade. The student, on the other hand, who endured the *upfront* pain of studying rather than partying, gets the later happiness of a good grade, yes, but also of the long-term benefits of his learning.

It's nearly always true. Life's most enduring happinesses have to be paid for in advance, while life's most immediate happinesses have to be paid for later.

This is a message that we who have been steeped in American culture need to hear.

We live in an “enjoy-now-pay-later” culture. We mortgage tomorrow in exchange for the pleasures of today. We pay with our children's and grandchildren's futures for our own temporary comforts. We live for present satisfactions and forget about the future consequences. Like that popular song, “We've got tonight. Who needs tomorrow?” But tomorrow inevitably becomes today, and the recompense for yesterday's indulgence always comes due.

Is this not the core of Jesus' teaching? “Woe to you who are full **now**, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh **now**, for you shall weep. Woe to you who are rich **now**, for you shall suffer poverty.”

Not that there's something wrong with wealth and comfort and laughter in themselves! No, it is when the energy of our lives are wedded to the pursuit of these things, that we one day find ourselves fallen into the ultimate unhappiness. That's the point! Because when we tie our life's happiness and energy and joy and satisfaction in these short term pleasures, we set ourselves up for loss. Not only the loss of the things themselves, but the loss of our happiness to which we have wedded to them.

Look at Psalm 1. Here is a tree, it says, planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither. It is the picture of the person whose life is rooted in God and God's counsel. Whatever the climate, whichever way the fickle winds of circumstance blow, whether to plenty or want, to strength or to weakness, to sickness or to health, the changing seasons and circumstances of life cannot overthrow the soul of the one whose deepest satisfaction is rooted in God and whose hope is rooted in the promise of God's word.

Here, on the other hand is a picture of chaff being blown away by the wind. This is the person who orders his life by this present world's fleeting values, who sinks his hope into the security of transient riches and temporary pleasures. Brief and transient are these happinesses, and brief and transient also the well-being that is rooted in them.

Do you want to be happy?

Then forget about happiness as an end in itself and set your sights on other things out of which happiness may result. The fulfilling of your best potential whatever the cost. The training of your talents, whatever the pains. The following of God's call, whatever the hardship. The blessing of God's children, whatever the sacrifice. There is bliss. There is happiness.

“I am a happy person,” wrote E. Stanley Jones. “because my happiness is not dependent on happenings, but upon the joy of obeying God, whatever happens.” That’s the key!

Lord God, help us to root our lives in you. Help us to tune our ears to your counsel. Help us to live for the values of your kingdom, for the blessing of people and the improvement of the world you have entrusted to us.

Help us, O God, to value giving more than receiving, truth more than acclaim, honor more than wealth, charity more than personal comfort.

We are weak, Lord. Help us in our weakness. Amen.

A lot of people become disillusioned with their faith and fling away their religion because they have been fed the idea that if you pull certain strings, if you do certain things, that happiness, that blessing, that well-being should be the *imminent* result.

A lot of the preaching you hear on the radio and television these days fosters exactly this kind of false expectation: That if you have faith, blessing will be the immediate result. That if you give to such and such ministry, or follow such and such spiritual principles, you will magically no longer be in hurt or trouble.

No. The Bible does not promise that when we follow God and stand for what’s right that happiness will follow right on. It promises, in fact, that unhappiness may be the first result. The Biblical view of happiness is that we are willing to endure a certain amount of present unhappiness because we know that the outcome will be a larger, deeper, more lasting happiness in the end.

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time,” said Paul, “are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed to us.”

Are there not many instances in our own lives when we forgo certain present happinesses in order to attain to greater, deeper, happiness later on?