

“Happy is Overrated”

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In the Beatitudes, it says, “Blessed are...” but in the original Greek, that the New Testament was originally written in, the word “Blessed” can also mean, “Happy.” If you also go to certain translations of the New Testament, it doesn’t say “Blessed are those;” it says “Happy are those.” I never really liked the idea of “happy” in this conversation because, happy seems kind of trite; it seems almost silly in comparison to what Jesus is trying to say.

In another way, it just doesn’t seem real accurate because (and I will give you an example): When I have sat with people who are dying and their family is gathered around, we hold their loved-one’s hand and share passages of Scripture. We pray together and we wait together. Then, when that person has passed from this world to God’s Heavenly Kingdom, we gather together again and we pray. Never would I call that a “*happy*” experience - but I would certainly call it a “*blessed*” experience. So, I have always struggled with the idea of “happy” when “blessed” seems so much better used when we talk about God.

Then, all of a sudden, this week - along with another spiritual moment - on Wednesdays the kids are always asked by Bill Ekhardt, when we are having our worship and the adults are gathered around them, for their God-sightings. Well, this Wednesday, I’m going to say my God-sighting was “happy.” It’s written right across your dress. [Pastor Scott addressed a little girl who had come forward for the children’s sermon, who had a dress on with the word “happy” on the front of it.] That was really a meaningful moment for me, because just like when I was flipping through Netflix earlier this week, I was looking around and I came across a documentary. It was simply called “Happy.” And I went, “Great! Because I really need something interesting to talk about on Sunday. [Laughter.] This better pay off.”

So I sat down and went through the documentary. It was so interesting. It was about happiness, and it spoke to the difference between “blessed” and “happy,” and I had to respect the word “happy” a little bit more.

The first quote, before you saw anything in the documentary, was that the Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to *pursue* happiness; you have to catch it yourself. I thought that was interesting. Then it came up and told who said it. It wasn’t some self-help guru. It wasn’t somebody who came up with it, who wrote this documentary. The person who actually said that was Benjamin Franklin. Now, sometimes people in the past are still relevant today. How about that?

They get into talking about the pursuit of happiness, and how it is an elusive thing that has to be worked at every day. You don’t just have it, or you don’t have it. It has to be striven for. So they start out by having [speaking to] this Professor, Dr. Ed Diener, a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois. Now, I have been to Champagne, Illinois. It’s amazing anything happy can be there, in that town. [Laughter.] He said activities help the mind produce happiness; you can’t have it just sitting in the lazy boy. It has to be something you find in your activities because, he said, dopamine is the chemical in the brain that is called a neuro-transmitter and it produces happiness. Happiness is a *chemical* reaction. It is

necessary for feelings of pleasure and happiness. He said as you age from your teenage years onward, you lose dopamine at a very small pace. In fact, that is why we have crabby old men [laughter]: we have lost our dopamine. It is not our fault. Quit calling me that! I've lost my dopamine!

Then he said, it cannot regenerate - so you have to take care to nurture it because, like just about any other thing that happens in your body and in your world, if you don't use it you lose it. So you have got to continue to nurture dopamine - to keep it moving - because once you have lost it, it's gone. So, if you are crabby, you have got to really work even harder to get what's left within you, with this dopamine. In fact, people who lose dopamine at an abnormally fast rate end up with Parkinson's disease. I never knew that. I was very surprised. It has an effect that can be positive, or very negative without it.

The importance, he said, of seeking out the release dopamine cannot be emphasized nearly enough, and the greatest way to keep dopamine in you is exercise. (I went "oh.") [Laughter.] Aerobic exercise is the best. (So, I want everybody to stand up [Laughter.] ... I'm just kidding.) I thought, "Oh, man, I don't want to do anymore jumping jacks; but I want dopamine. Do I have to work that hard for it?"

So I waited for the next authority to come in and give me a *better* response than that. [Laughter.] Thankfully, Dr. Tim Kasser came on [the documentary]. This is a professor of neuroscience at Baylor College of Medicine. He came on and talked about the fact we are told in our society that happiness is in the acquiring of money. That is what we are taught. The more money you have the happier you will be: Financial rewards are the way to happiness. He said the way to be a good and competent person, we're told, is to have a lot of money.

But, he said, I have a problem with that. Because, he said, we are almost twice as wealthy as a country now then we were 50 years ago. But, he said, I don't believe we are one bit happier. So what happened? He said, the issue is that money is still valuable and in our studies of happiness, there is a huge difference between someone making \$5,000 a year and someone making \$50,000 a year. Money is important, and the person who is making \$5,000 is a lot less happy than someone making \$50,000 a year. Money matters in that range.

However, in their study they found that in people making between \$50,000 a year and \$500 million there was not a very dramatic difference in the level of happiness. Now I would like to find out for myself [laughter], but according to research that is actually true. And, they went on to talk about why that is true. How can that be possible? He went on to say that we humans make a distinction between two sets of goals: intrinsic goals and extrinsic goals. He said, "Let me explain: Extrinsic goals focus on things external - outside of you - those are things like rewards, praise, getting stuff. Extrinsic goals mean things like money, or image, or status. People who strive after those things want those extrinsic goals."

Intrinsic goals are satisfying in and of themselves. Examples of these are personal growth, close relationships, a community feeling or a desire to be helpful. Those things are intrinsic.

The extrinsic goals are in opposition to the intrinsic goals. They cannot live together very well. Research shows that those people who are more concerned about money, image and status, also reported that they were less happy. Surprisingly they found out that the people

whose goals are more extrinsic were more depressed, more anxious, had less energy and were less vital in their day-to-day lives.

On the other hand intrinsic people were happier, less depressed and had more vitality. So, that doesn't sound like money makes that big of a difference. It does if you are homeless, but if you can stay within the middle class, the difference between the middle class and the filthy rich isn't that much. In fact it could be even more difficult, when the focus continues to be constantly on keeping what you have or making more.

He went on to say that the values that we have determine our level of happiness. "Let's look at it not just as an individual, but as a society." Their research led them to Japan. Japan is the least happy of the countries in the industrialized world. Why? They said, "Because business in their culture trumps (and I didn't mean that in any way what so ever) trumps family and friendships. After World War 11, Japan was almost entirely, and in some places literally, wiped out. They were not allowed to rebuild an army and a military, so the only thing they could do was to focus on business and technology, and striving to rebuild their status and their dignity as a nation. They did it beautifully. They focused on that business and productivity. They focused on achievement - but at an awful price. They are literally working themselves to death. They work 12-14-16, sometimes 18 hours a day, sometimes 7 days a week, to keep up. They don't have the same laws that we do here regarding that and people are dropping dead in their 30s, 40s and 50s, according to the documentary. They have a term for it: Korochi. They have Jerry Lewis-type telethons for the benefit of victims and the families of loved ones who have dropped dead from the overwork that they are describing.

So, switching from "what you don't have to what you do have," apparently makes a huge difference in one's level of happiness. Seems to make sense. What I can share, rather than what I don't have, makes a huge difference towards our happiness. When you share you grow and expand your level of happiness. When you hoard and keep your happiness, your happiness diminishes. That is why stewardship campaigns in churches shouldn't focus as much on what the actual dollars are, but the reasons why we Christian people do it. Because when we share, we find happiness. When we offer to others, we live our faith in our intrinsic lives - our intrinsic values increase and we become better, more faithful, more loving, happy people. Happiness isn't just about contentment. Happy people tend to function better, they tend to be more active, therefore they are healthier. They also tend to live longer.

Now Kathyryn Stout passed away not long ago in the life of our church. [She was] well into her 100s. I don't know if all of you knew her, but if you didn't, boy, you missed out, because into her 100s, and not being able to see worth a lick, and not being able to hear at the end, that woman never had a bad day in her life. There is a reason why she lived to be over 100.

According to the documentary and the PhDs who were describing this, when they went to find a very unhappy place in Japan, they found an amazingly happy place in Denmark.

Then they found another one. Not the happiest people, but very close - in the top three. What made this place very unique was that they [the people] lived the longest, and the irony is almost as amazing. It is that it is the Japanese island of Okinawa. They have more 100-

year-old people than anywhere else percentage-wise in the world. They are that close to Japan and are worlds apart in their happiness. On Okinawa, they are extremely happy people because they relate inter-generationally. The young and the old are together all of the time. They share together, they laugh together, they have gardens. It is a cultural tradition that they share vegetables gardens and vegetables with each other. They are building those relationships. There are traditions of bringing bands and music and dancing together. The old and the young are dancing and playing and singing all together. When there are tragedies and deaths and natural disasters, everyone comes together as one people. They believe that is why they live so long, because of the relationships and the love and care everyone provides the other. One elderly 100-something-year-old said, "That doesn't mean we always get along [laughter], but we always love each other." That is a distinction to remember.

I want to close the way they closed in the video. They showed this comedian/educator named Michael Prichard. Boy, I would love to bring him here sometime - and then send him around to the Des Moines Schools. He was talking to a group of middle school kids and I thought, "Oh boy, this is dangerous."

He was amazing. He said, "When you put people together (and this is to junior high kids) in social settings, cooperating or competing with one another produces high levels of dopamine. You can be happy, kids, when you cooperate and compete, but your competing has to be fun - not trying to put the other person down. When you do that, you can be happy. But instead we often go to the dark side in our competition, which is about beating the other person rather than having fun."

Then he said, "An example is reality TV. You all watch it?" They all nodded. "When you watch reality TV, you are disconnected because they are. They are not in real relationships. They are in fake relationships. They are in relationships where they are either fighting each other, like, who is going to get off the island last, or who is going to get the Bachelor." [Laughter.] They are not real. They are disconnected from real life.

He quoted, "Someone once said to Helen Keller, 'it must be hard to be blind,' and she responded, 'It would, if I didn't have so much vision.'"

Then he turned to the kids again and said, "How many of you play Grand Theft Auto?" (It's a video game for those of you who are my age and older.) [Laughter.] Almost every one of the kids raised their hands. (Now, if you are my age or older, pay attention.) He said, "Then you have run over homeless people in your car and watched them die as you drove by - and they nodded. And you have run over cops, and they all died in the street - and you kept on going?" They all nodded. "You can even beat prostitutes to death with a tire iron in this video game." And, they nodded. "That makes us disconnected," he said. "And, that makes you unhappy. How can you do that and not be affected, and not become so disconnected that you can't relate to anyone anymore?" There was a hush. He said, "We can't treat each other like that and be happy. Even if you don't want to treat people well - do it for selfish reasons. It makes you happier."

And, he said, "I want to tell you a story of one of the people who touched me the most in my life. I was working as a coach for the Special Olympics. There was a girl who was running." He had worked with her and taught her how to run in the circle, so she wouldn't

just wander off in the wrong way, she would know how to go around trying and winning. He worked with others who were on the track, so they would go in the right direction - go all of the way around - and one of them could be the *winner*. He taught them that was important.

So the day came for the Special Olympics. He was so proud because he knew that every one of those kids was able to go all the way around the track, and one of them was going to win it. All of them have participated. The gun sounded and this one girl yelled out, "Woo-Hoo," and she started to run. She was running with all of her might. She was going to town. He was cheering her on. Some of the others were looking around, but they were trying; but she was on it. She got within feet of the finish line and she stopped.

He yelled, "No, you're almost there. You have almost won. Come on!" And she said, "No." She looked back and said, "I'm waiting." She waited until all of the other girls came around, and she said, "Hands." They all took hands and said, "We all win," and they walked over together.

Why can't the rest of us know as much as that precious young lady? He looked at those kids and said, "It's not about winning. Winning gets us nothing. It's about relating. When we are together, loving, and caring, and supporting, and not picking on each other. That is how we win."

I wish you could watch the rest of it to see all of the amazing things that he did with those kids, he taught them a lesson that the rest of us need to learn.

That is what the Beatitudes and what Jesus did 2000 years ago. Isn't it amazing how the Bible as old as it is - as worn out as it is - and overly preached on it is, and there is still something true in it that defies years, defies reason, science and everything else, and it still stays relevant. "Blessed are those," "Happy are those," who do what is stated in the Beatitudes. It is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago. We just have to go out and live it; to live its values; to live its faith; its tenderness; and, its love. Go, each one of us, and do likewise.