

Pursuing Happiness, part 1
April 7, 2013

We begin a new sermon series this morning called Pursuing Happiness. We're going to explore some things that will contribute to our happiness.

I don't know anyone who doesn't want to be happy. I believe it is a yearning God created in us.

Everyone wants to be happy. Even those who are perpetually miserable seem to get some kind of satisfaction, or happiness, out of being miserable --and the attention it gets them. Everyone wants to be happy.

I want to read something that will be familiar to you as Americans.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."
(from the Declaration of Independence)

Mankind has always pursued happiness. Ancient philosophers wrote about the pursuit of happiness. The pursuit of happiness has shaped history. Countries have gone to war with other countries believing that taking the other's land would make the conqueror happier.

The pursuit of happiness is a part of every man, woman, teenager, and child. We see this pursuit in the youngest of children. We see it in the oldest of adults. We see it in the transformation of teens into adults. We see it in the job you choose, in your desire to choose your own mate, in how you spend your money, in where you live, in what you wear. Every facet of your life is determined by your pursuit of happiness.

People use the word happiness in two different ways. Some speak of happiness as an emotion. We say things like, "I feel happy. I am filled with joy. I am ecstatic."

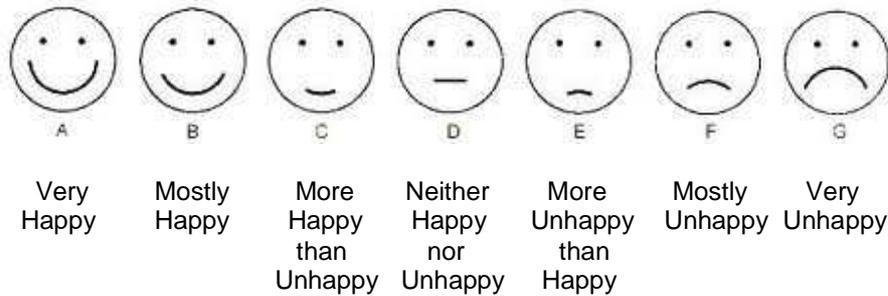
The other use of the word happiness concerns the condition of your life. We say things like, "My life is happy. It is going well." We have the perception that all the parts of our life are working in harmony and moving forward. This is a value judgment we make about our life.

I think this is the way Jefferson was using the word happiness when he referred to "the pursuit of happiness". He believed that we should all be free to decide what we want out of life and to pursue that life. Having that kind of freedom requires a civilized and just society, something many of the American colonists did not believe they had under the king of England. So they rebelled and won the freedom to pursue their own definitions of happiness. Today, you can pursue what you think will make you happy.

Everyone has their own idea of what will bring happiness to them. No one person can define what will make another person happy. I don't intend to line out exactly what all will bring

happiness to your life. I only want to contribute to your happiness. I want to share with you things from the Bible that will help you to achieve the happiness you are pursuing.

Worldwide, most people surveyed rate their lives as being on the happy side of the middle on such scales as that one below. This is true even when their life circumstances are less than best.



Poor people can be happy. Handicapped people can be happy. Chronically ill people too can be happy. Even rich people can be happy, but they aren't as happy as you think they are.

In the 1950's surveys among Americans asked how happy they considered themselves to be, and only 30% labeled themselves as "very happy". In the 60 years since then continuing surveys show this still to be the case. Even though incomes have tripled in that time frame, adjusted for inflation, only 30% of Americans say they are very happy. We have a lot more money than we used to have, but it hasn't brought a greater sense of happiness.

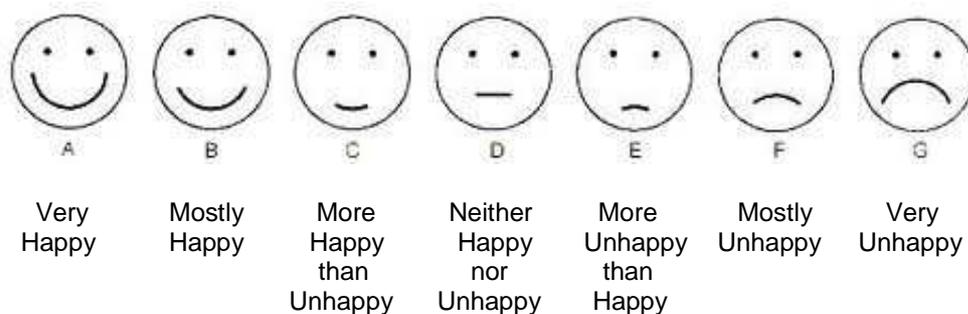
In the coming weeks we'll explore some of the things that help or hinder our valuation of being happy. And I will point out some wisdom from the Bible that will point you to happiness. But let's stop a moment and rate our happiness levels. Let's do both definitions. A University of Georgia study that green is perceived to be the happiest color. We speak of being blue, but blue was midrange, while gray was the saddest feeling color. Using the three point scale, rate how happy you are feel now.

I FEEL HAPPY NOW.

I'M NOT FEELING HAPPY OR SAD NOW.

I FEEL SAD NOW.

Now, using the seven point scale, rate how happy your life circumstances are. Remember, this is not a feeling, but a valuation on how well life is going for you.



This is a very individual, subjective rating. There is no standard kind of measure for happiness. Just as you get to decide what will make you happy, you get to decide when that happiness is achieved and to what degree.

Everyone wants to be happy. In the last decade there have been numerous best selling books on happiness. Magazines like Time and the Readers Digest, books, and websites are full of lists of what will make you happy, or happier. I find it interesting that some of the things on those lists match up with what we will see in the Bible.

Today I want to talk about the basis for your pursuit of happiness. You might think that the basis for anyone's pursuit of happiness is to have the most basic needs met. While money can't buy happiness, it can buy food, clothes, and shelter. Those who don't have enough of food, clothes, or shelter, consistently rate themselves as unhappy. People without enough food to eat are generally on the negative side of the happiness scale. The same is true for those who don't have enough clothes or don't have adequate shelter. It is only once the basic necessities of life are fulfilled that people generally rate themselves on the positive side of the happiness scale.

So it would appear self-evident that the basis for pursuing happiness is the consistent meeting of these basic needs. But these needs only pertain to our earth life. Our earth life is such a short part of the time we were created to live. To pursue eternal happiness we need to fulfill an entirely different basic need. Jesus consistently points people to the filling of that need first.

Matthew 6:31-33 (NIV) *... do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

God is concerned about your physical needs. While you need food to live on earth, you need a right relationship with God to live forever. Forever is a lot longer than you will live on earth. And God is the source of both. So get your relationship with God right first. The basis for all of our happiness is a right relationship with God.

Some of you might be thinking, "We aren't supposed to be focusing on ourselves and thinking about our happiness. That is selfish and sinful."

I agree that you can pursue happiness in a sinful way or with sinful things. But God created us to have a concern for happiness.

Jesus says He came to give us abundant life. I believe that is not just abundant length, but abundant quality. Either way, pursuing that abundant life is something you do for yourself.

In addition, when we urge people to accept Jesus to avoid the penalty of their sins, that is a self-focused motive. And Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount that we should pursue treasures in heaven. That is treasure for you, not someone else. That sounds a little self-centered too. But it is not sinful to pursue the happiness God wants for you.

You can pursue sinful things, or the right things in sinful ways. This doesn't negate that there is a self-serving motive in life. But we are to pursue that self-serving motive only to the extent God shows us in His word. God wants us to be happy, but happy in the right things and in the right ways.

This starts with pursuing a right relationship with Him. This is why He created us.

Acts 17:24-28 (NIV) *The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.*

You were created for God. **Pursue a relationship with God.**

God created us for a relationship with Himself. Deep and lasting happiness lies in a right relationship with God. All else that you pursue in order to be happy is to be built on this relationship. So seek to know God. Seek to be right with God. This is the basis for your pursuit of happiness.

(Invitation)

If you are familiar with the story of Jesus, you may remember that when He was arrested all His followers ran for their lives. They did not want to be arrested with Him. One of them, a man named Peter, followed the group that took Jesus to the authorities. Peter made his way into the courtyard outside of the building that Jesus was taken into. It was at night, and there was a fire going. Peter joined the circle of those warming themselves around the fire. Someone noticed that He was from Galilee and proposed that he must be a follower of Jesus. Peter denied it, lying to save himself. Two more times someone accused him of being a follower of Jesus and both times he denied it. Then he remembered that Jesus predicted Peter would deny Him three times this night. Peter went out and wept with shame and guilt and cowardice.

But less than two months later we see Peter arrested for telling people about Jesus. Now, in broad daylight, he boldly states to those same authorities...

Acts 4:12 (NIV) *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*

How do we account for the difference between the cowardly Peter and the brave Peter. The difference is this: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Peter had been a witness to Jesus after He was raised from the dead. This changed everything, for Peter and all of Jesus' other followers.

The resurrection of Jesus will change things for you too. It is only by faith in Jesus that you can have the right relationship with God that forms the basis for the happiness you seek. Today, put your faith in Jesus. Believe in Jesus. Receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord, and you will be on the right road to the happiness God created you for.