

Happiness – an inside job
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Text: Isaiah 56 & Psalm 67

A famous 19th century preacher, Charles Spurgeon was lecturing a class of theology students on the art of preaching.

He said you have to use your facial expressions to maximum effect.

- So when you speak of Heaven let your face light up and your eyes sparkle with a heavenly radiance.
- And when you speak of Hell – well just your everyday face should do it.

If you asked a group of people - any group of people – Is there anyone who doesn't want to be happy? – you would get no takers!

Everyone wants to be happy. It's a universal wish.

But as we all know, happiness is fairly elusive.

Now you see it - now you don't. You may be happy for a while but then something happens that completely derails that happiness and knocks it right out of the window.

I remember watching an interview with Harrison Ford. Here is a man who is an extremely accomplished and successful actor. Handsome, successful, wealthy.

He's much admired by both women and men; and by all accounts would appear to be someone who's really made it.

The interviewer, Barbara Walters, asked him "Is there anything in this life that you want, that you don't have?"

Harrison Ford replied. "Yes. Peace of mind"

Barbara Walters asked him if he ever thought that he would get that peace of mind, and he replied, in all seriousness,

"Probably not until I'm dead - if at all."

Everyone wants peace of mind.

Everyone wants to be happy.

There is an enormous industry of the endless publication of thousands upon thousands of self-help books, supposed to teach us how to find happiness through being more successful, or thinner, or more in touch with our true self, or a thousand other saleable concepts.

Thirty years ago I was living in London. I got a phone call one night from a friend of mine who was calling me from France. He was clearly distressed. He asked me to go to his apartment and get his stuff and put it into storage for him.

I had to push the front door hard against a stack of mail to get in. There were disconnection notices from the gas and electrical companies and a demand from British Telecom for payment on a 2,000 pound telephone bill.

As I was sorting and packing his things, I was struck with the irony that while his life was in a tail spin, his shelves were stacked with hundreds of self-help books on how to get your life together, how to be successful and how to be happy.

We all tend to fall into the trap of thinking –

I'll be happy when...

I'll be happy when I'm thirty pounds thinner.

I'll be happy when I'm earning twice my present salary.

I'd be happy if I could just find the right person and get married.

Or perhaps, I'd be happy if I could just get rid of the person I'm married to and be single again.

How did we ever manage without our computers and cell phones?

Luxuries that were supposed to increase our happiness quickly become necessities that we can't do without.

Our basic self serving way of thinking causes us to look for happiness in all the wrong places – that is we look for happiness in things and in situations; and we want other people to make us happy.

So what are God's recommendations for being happy?

According to this morning's lesson from the prophet Isaiah, God says:

“Happy is the one who maintains justice and does what is right.

Happy is the one who refrains from doing evil.”

That certainly sounds like a good start.

He also says:

“Happy is the mortal who keeps the Sabbath day holy.”

Really?

But when you think about it, it shouldn't surprise us that God makes a link between our happiness and keeping the Sabbath Day, since He thought it sufficiently important to make it one of His Top Ten Commandments.

You might think –

“Wait a minute. Are you saying that keeping the Sabbath Day, going to church in Sunday and worshipping God has a direct effect on my happiness?”

Yes, Absolutely. And I didn't make it up.

That's straight out of God's Word.

What's more three Universities - Duke University and the Universities of Texas and Colorado have done research studies that show that people who attend church regularly have a longer life expectancy and better levels of health than those who do not.

One of the Psalms says:

“Happy are they who dwell in your house.”

Why come to church every Sunday?

We need to renew our minds every week in the presence of God. We need to more fully understand the vital significance of our connection with God.

In a former parish of mine there was a man I knew by the name of Roger.

Roger was a very pragmatic down to earth sort of fellow.

I remember him saying:

“I like to go to church every Sunday and I never like to miss it. It’s always good to sing some hymns, listen to the sermon and receive Holy Communion.

But one or two Sundays a year I have a profound spiritual experience where I sense a connection with God in a wonderful and powerful way.

I don’t want to miss church in case I miss the Sunday that God chooses to especially bless me.”

Our transformation into being more Christ-like is a process that takes faith and time. As we worship – as we lift our hearts up to the Lord, there is a shift in our attitude, and if only for a brief moment, we experience God.

We live in a time where a “consumer attitude” to church has displaced the “devoted servant attitude” to church. It’s little wonder that the nation that brought us fast food and instant coffee should also offer us instant church – Just add water.

Drop into church occasionally.

Drop a dollar in the plate.

Drop a wafer in your mouth and you're good to go till the next time you need a quick lift.

But this 'just drop in - instant church attitude' overlooks the necessity for disciplined spiritual formation.

Keeping the Sabbath – coming to church is not a matter of getting dressed and going somewhere.

It's the urgent matter of celebrating and developing our most important relationship – our relationship with God.

It's about bringing all of our life under His guidance.

Whatever keeps you away from the presence of God, however harmless it might seem at the time, is an obstacle to your happiness and well-being.

Unfortunately the media often portrays Christians as solemn and joyless, and we've all met people who would appear to have been baptized in vinegar.

But being a believer and observing the commandments of God is the source of happiness.

The more we seek God's presence the more we will know His presence.

It is a time to focus on what is eternal and not on what is temporary. It is a time to renew our minds.

Ultimately, Happiness is a choice.

A 92 year old woman made the decision to move to a nursing home. Her husband of 70 years had recently passed on. Even though she was legally blind, she arrived at the home with her hair coifed and her nails perfect.

She had to wait a few hours in the lobby.

Even so, when the receptionist came to tell her that her room was ready she beamed a big smile.

Then she asked the receptionist to describe her room.

So she gave her a full description of her room, a tiny room at that, including details of the curtains.

She said, “Oh I love it!” with all the enthusiasm of an eight year old with a new puppy.

The receptionist said,

“But Ma’am you haven’t seen the room yet.”

She replied: “Oh, That doesn’t have anything to do with it.

Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time.

Whether I like my room or not doesn’t depend on how the furniture is arranged. It’s how I arrange my mind that counts and I’ve already decided to love my room.

I have a choice. I can spend the day in bed, recounting the difficulties I have with the parts of my body that no longer work - or, I can get out of bed and be thankful for the ones that do.”

She added: “Every day is a gift and as long as I’m around I’ll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I’ve stored away ... just for this time in my life.”

Happiness is a choice.

It's a decision that works from the Inside Out.

That choice comes from being in touch with God and letting the Holy Spirit work within us.

And if we so choose,
that happiness can win each day for us,
and radiate out to be a blessing to other people.