



“The Good Life: Happiness”

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Psalm 119:37; Matthew 5:3-12
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What do you want?

That is the question director Roko Belic asked people on the sidewalks of New York to open his 2011 documentary project. The most common response? To be happy.

Happiness may be the most essential quality of The Good Life. Deep down, we all want to be happy. And most of our decisions are made with that goal in mind. In fact, the founding document of our nation, the Declaration of Independence, includes in its list of unalienable rights “the pursuit of happiness.”

Belic’s documentary is titled, simply, *Happy*. His friend and fellow director Tom Shadyac urged Belic to create the film to explore the sources of happiness. He noted that, while the United States is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, it doesn’t rank high on indicators of happiness, despite the aspirations of our founding document. For Belic, it turned out to be a life-changing project.

He quickly realized that, while negative emotional conditions like sadness and depression have been studied for generations, very little scientific attention had been given to happiness. The field of study we now know as positive psychology is a relatively recent phenomenon, one that was viewed with considerable skepticism when it first emerged in the latter part of the 20th century. That research has produced some fascinating challenges to the way we think about happiness and mental/emotional health.

The film begins with Manoj Singh, a rickshaw driver in Kolkata, India. By our standards, Singh lives in abject poverty. He and his family live in a home consisting of a bamboo frame overlaid with tattered vinyl tarps on three sides. He works every day carrying passengers in a hand-drawn cart around the city, enduring blistering sun and hot pavement in some seasons, sucking mud and rain in others. And yet, according to a survey at the time of filming, Singh was as happy as the average American.

I’ve traveled to some of the poorest places in the world – the mountains of Guatemala, shanties in a Guatemala City landfill, and remote villages of Haiti. And I’ve seen more unfettered joy in those places than in some of the most affluent neighborhoods in the United States. Many of you have had similar experiences in your travels. How is it that people who have so little can be so happy? If happiness is a such a common goal and we’re surrounded with such abundant resources, why aren’t people happier?

A major reason is a common misconception about what brings us happiness. Researchers in the field of positive psychology have discovered that 50% of the difference in happiness levels is the result of genetics. Some of us are simply predisposed to be happier. That still leaves 50%, though. Now, most people think our circumstances dictate whether we’ll be happy or not, things like income or social status or where we live. But surprisingly, our circumstances account for only about 10% of the difference. The remaining 40% comes from intentional actions, things we can choose to do that make us happier.

This discrepancy between what we *think* brings happiness and what actually *does* can be partially explained by understanding our sources of motivation. We can classify motivation into *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* goals. Extrinsic goals have to do with things that are external – rewards and attention and accumulation of goods. Extrinsic goals are things like money, image, and status. Professor of psychology Tim Kasser found that people who are oriented toward extrinsic goals generally reported being less satisfied with their lives, more anxious and depressed, and felt that their lives were less vital and energized. Contrast that with intrinsic motivations, like personal growth, relationships, and desire to help others. People who are oriented toward intrinsic goals report being happier, more satisfied, and experiencing more vitality.

In the last 50 years, we have experienced significant economic growth. Overall, we’re about twice as wealthy as we were 50 years ago. But national studies show that we’re stagnant when it comes to happiness. People aren’t any

happier today even though they live in bigger houses, own more cars, and have more income. Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert reports,

When money buys you out of the burdens of homelessness, of not knowing where your next meal will come from, it changes your happiness dramatically. But once you have basic needs met, more money doesn't seem to buy more happiness. The difference in happiness between a person who earns \$5,000 a year and a person who earns \$50,000 a year is dramatic. The difference in happiness between a person who earns \$50,000 and \$500,000 is *not* dramatic.

I'm glad this research is available and I hope that people pay attention to it. But none of it should be surprising for those who follow Christ. Jesus told us to "stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth" (Matthew 6:19), reminding us that "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15) But the Bible doesn't just tell us to stop pursuing material gain and focus on God and neighbor out of a sense of duty or obligation. It actually tells us that following God's way is a path to happiness. In Psalm 1, the very first verse in the songbook of God's people, says "Happy are those (whose) delight is in the law of the LORD." And in the Beatitudes, the passage that is our focus for today, Jesus says some pretty unexpected things about how to be happy.

The Beatitudes are a series of countercultural declarations Jesus made to his followers. Other translations render the first word of each sentence as *blessed*. The Greek word is *makarios*, which is a way of indicating a good to come, bringing a sense of joy. There is no direct equivalent in English. We're using the Common English Bible today because it translates the word as *happy*, which is equally close as *blessed*, though neither word completely captures the meaning. In these pronouncements, Jesus frames the harsh realities of life in the light of eschatological promises. "What you're experiencing now can bring you joy because of what God will ultimately do." They are assurances that even when life brings pain, God can transform that pain into joy. The Beatitudes are oriented toward the reign of God to come, but they are also a declaration from Jesus about happiness to be experienced here and now.

I'm less thrilled with the CEB's translation of the first Beatitude as hopeless. Most translations render this as "*poor in spirit*," which is more faithful to Greek manuscripts. Poverty of spirit indicates inadequacy to find inner peace and meaning oneself. Through the eyes of faith in Christ, spiritual longing can be a source of happiness because it teaches us to rely on God's provision. That won't happen as long as we believe we are self-sufficient or we waste our time feeling sorry for ourselves. We need to experience the true source of hope in God.

Happy are those who grieve. How can we be happy when we're grieving? No one is happy when losing a loved one, especially when death comes too early. But people of faith know that death is not the end, only a transition to what comes next. Death is a part of life. It comes to all of us. Too often, we act as though dying is optional, something to be put off as long as possible and set aside quickly when it comes. We use words like *closure* and *move on* after loved ones die. But death can also bring peace and gratitude and even joy, knowing those who have gone before us are with God and that we will meet them again. That's not to minimize the pain of separation and loss – grief is real and it is a difficult journey. But our grief can be transformed into something beautiful in the hands of God, the author of time and the Great Healer. That is a future promise, but also one to be experienced here and now – in the promises of our faith, in the care and support of friends and family, and the sustaining presence of God.

Happy are people who are humble. If only there were a few more of them in the world! Humility is not simply the absence of pride, but more importantly an orientation away from self-absorption. Here again the Greek word is helpful, implying gentleness but with an inner strength that comes from God. My relationships with others are not dependent on satisfying my own self-interest, but bring joy through setting aside self and following Christ's example.

Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Those who seek the way of life God intends will find it – not through their own wisdom and earnestness, but by God's grace in Jesus Christ. It is in the seeking that we find.

Happy are people who show mercy. When Jesus taught us to pray for God to forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, he wasn't indicating a *quid pro quo*, but pointing to our responsibility to take part in the work of reconciliation. God's grace is not dependent upon our action, but we cannot truly experience forgiveness and grace if our hearts are hardened. It is difficult if not impossible to *know* mercy if we don't also *practice* it.

Happy are people who have pure hearts. That is to say, whose outward actions of good toward others match their inward thoughts and desires. Sometimes you have to "fake it till you make it," but when love for God and neighbor comes from the inside out, we truly see God.

Happy are those who make peace. Note the verb – not simply to *have* peace or to *be at* peace, but to *make* peace. Peace requires effort; it must be created. Going off by ourselves and shutting out the world may make us *feel* peaceful, but it won't do a thing to *make* peace. The prophet Jeremiah warned those who sought a shallow peace: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace." (Jeremiah 6:14) Those who make peace will be called children of God – that is, those whose lives are grounded in God and act in accordance with God's ways.

The final two statements are closely related: *Happy are people who are harassed and insulted for being righteous or because of Jesus.* If you've ever been the subject of malicious gossip or slander, you know how painful that can be. It's hard to be happy when hurtful words come your way or are said behind your back. But Jesus reminded us that the same thing happened to the prophets, heroes of the faith. Jesus himself was the object of scorn and conspiracy, doubted and abandoned by religious leaders, friends, even family. If we continue to walk in his ways in the face of resistance and derision, great is our reward in heaven.

What do all the Beatitudes have in common? They each tell us that the way to happiness is *not* through extrinsic rewards or pursuit of self-interest. Spiritual poverty, grief, humility, seeking God's ways, mercy, pureness of heart, peacemaking, sacrifice – these are not the paths we expect to lead to happiness. They're certainly not the way we're conditioned to interact with the world around us. Yes, these are eschatological promises, future blessings on those who keep the faith. But they are also promises to be experienced here and now.

Could it be that Jesus was signaling an inherent truth about human nature? In the *Happy* documentary, we are told that researchers found something very revealing when they studied people whose happiness quotient was high. While not everyone who had friends and family experienced happiness, every single person they studied with high marks for happiness had a strong network of relationships. It took science and psychology until the end of the 20th Century to recognize what Jesus told us two millennia ago – we were made to care for one another, not to look out only for ourselves. Our inner wiring directs us toward the needs of others, a part of the image of God in which we're made.

I said this last week, but it bears repeating: Following Jesus is a paradox – we find our life by giving it up. As long as we're focused on ourselves and our own interest, we'll never find our way to The Good Life. That's because we're made for more. The Bible tells us how it works: *We love because God first loved us.* (1 John 4:19) Jesus didn't simply tell us to obey God to reach heaven. He came so we could have life to the fullest. Of course he would point the way.

Seek first the kingdom of God and righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33) Life may sometimes turn us upside-down, but Jesus turns our *expectations* upside down by pointing the way to true and lasting joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.