

The Happiness Code  
*The Elusiveness of Happiness*  
May 17, 2015

**PRELUDE – Praise Adonai / Greeting**

**Worship Songs – “Who Is Like Our God /  
Alleluia**

**Feature – Satisfaction / Offering**

Good morning everyone.

I have to say that I’ve never been much of a Stones fan but what a great way to start off the message for today:

“I try and I try ... and I try and I try ... but I can’t get no satisfaction.”

In spite of the cringe-worthy grammar, as a philosophical declaration it’s pretty much without fault because it sums up a very disturbing discovery of many, many people ...

including “The Preacher” of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, a wealthy and powerful king

...

... **who once wrote:**

*Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.*

*Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 (NLT)*

Translation: he tried and he tried ... and he tried and he tried ... but even *he* (with all of his wealth and privilege and position) couldn't get no satisfaction.

We'll come back to that shortly but, as Shannon said, we are continuing in our series *The Happiness Code* which we began last Sunday by

looking at five destructive habits of people who are not happy and probably never will be. We started with that particular topic because it doesn't make much sense to talk about the things that *increase* our level of happiness without first addressing the things that work against it. So, if you were not here I encourage you to check out the message on our app or our website.

Last week I also introduced the basic text for this series which is the New Testament letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians at the Roman colony of Philippi. We call it the *Epistle to the Philippians*. It's a fairly brief letter which you can read in about 15-20 minutes. And the reason we're using this particular letter is its unusual emphasis on being joyful, content and satisfied ... *and* the unique situation in which it was written.

Paul wrote it from Rome where he was being held as prisoner of the state. He was literally

chained to one of the guards in Caesar’s “secret service,” aware that, at any moment, he could be executed for his role in spreading the Gospel of Jesus (which was in direct opposition to the Gospel of Rome as it spread and conquered the world).

Yet, in spite of his situation, Paul repeatedly speaks of the joy he has. As I said last week, 14 times he uses the words joy or rejoice or rejoicing – far more than in any of his other letters – to describe the condition of his heart and to encourage that same condition in his readers.

Now, last week we skipped over the beginning of this letter so that we could analyze some of what Paul was saying about how he both perceived and handled his situation (which was exactly the opposite of those who are never happy perceive and handle theirs) but today we’re going to start with the very first verse because it has

something to say to us about the elusiveness of happiness.

By the way, just to be clear, when something is elusive it means that it's hard to capture or grasp onto. It's the idea of reaching for something and finding it just out of your reach. It's the idea of pursuing someone only to find when you get to where you thought they were, they are no longer there. It's the idea of trying "this" and trying "that" in hopes of making ourselves happy only to find that the Rolling Stones were right. We can't get no satisfaction.

Ok, let's begin. Chapter one, verse one of *The Epistle to the Philippians* says:

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.*

*Grace and peace to you from God*

*our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this: that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

*It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:1-8 (NIV)*

## **A Unique Introduction**

Now, this is a very tenderhearted beginning to what Paul is going to eventually say in this letter,

but it's also very unique ... and here's why:<sup>i</sup>

Generally, in the ancient world, letters began with a simple formula. People would start out by writing "Greetings from <name of the person writing> to <name of the person or persons receiving the letter." It's sort of like the way we write a recipient's name and address as well as our name and return address on the outside of an envelope, except that they put it in the letter itself.

Now, whenever Paul wrote a letter (and we have quite a few of them in the New Testament) ... whenever Paul wrote, he almost always included a little title that belonged to him in his opening greeting.

- To the church in the city of Ephesus he wrote, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God..."
- To the Christ-followers at Corinth, he

began in a similar manner, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God ...”

- To Timothy, he wrote, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus...”

In most of his letters, Paul would begin by introducing himself as an *apostle* – as one who has been appointed by God to a great position of leadership and influence. But in this letter to the Philippian believers, he does something very unique. He uses a very different word to describe himself.

**Let’s read it again. He begins with ...**

*Paul and Timothy, servants of  
Christ Jesus, to all God’s holy people  
in Christ Jesus at Philippi ...*

See the difference? In this letter, he doesn’t start with “Paul and Timothy, apostle and apprentice” (which is what Timothy was) but “Paul and Timothy, *servants*.” Some translations actually



render the word “servants” as “slaves” which reveals that this way of introduction is very intentional. Paul, from the very beginning is trying to communicate something.

So, what is it? Why would Paul in this letter label himself a servant or a slave instead of an apostle?

Pastor John Ortberg explains it like this:

Philippi, as a colony of the Roman Empire, was an elite community. Historians say Rome was the most status-conscious, status-seeking society in the ancient world and Philippi was possibly the most status-conscious, status-seeking community in the Empire. It was built on the pursuit of personal honor, self-advancement and wealth. In Philippi, the way to be happy was to climb the ladder. It was to move *up* in the world.

Yet Paul begins his letter by using a word nobody in the Roman Empire (and especially Philippi)

would *ever* use to describe themselves. He says, “I’m a servant. I’m a slave.” He goes as far down the ladder as you can go. He says, “I’m not the master of a pleasant life. I’m not the ruler of a successful life. And I’m not the owner of a wealthy life” (which are the things the people of Philippi pursued).

“Instead,” he begins, “I’m the servant of a great cause.” And then he goes on to describe repeatedly (and specifically) throughout his letter the happiness and joy he experiences because of that (and, quite frankly, in spite of that).

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By the way – and we’re going to chase a little rabbit here – after last week’s message, a very astute student of the Bible stopped me and said, “now, you know that Paul didn’t use the word ‘happy’ (or happiness) in his letter to the

Philippians. Instead, he used the word joy or some form of it. And I've always heard there's a difference between the two. The word happiness has the same root as the word 'happen' which means that it's dependent on what happens to you. You're happy if what happens is good. But joy is not dependent on what happens."

And some of you may have been wondering the same thing – is there a difference between joy and happiness? I think technically, *yes*, but practically speaking, *not really* ... because both of these words allude to the idea of feeling satisfied and fulfilled; to having a sense of being blessed. And regardless of whether you use the word "joy" or "happiness," that "feeling and sense" can be expressed in ways that are quiet and reserved or in ways that are just bubbling over with elation. You can be quietly happy and exuberantly joyful.

In fact (and we'll look at this next week when we

learn about “The Contrarian’s Guide to Happiness”), in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about many of the same things Paul does in this letter and he uses the word “happy.”

So, in case you were wondering, I am aware that Paul uses the word “joy.” But in the moment by moment experience of it, joy feels the same as happiness ... which is why I’m not splitting hairs over the terminology. Bottom line: most of us don’t really care what we call it. We just want to be satisfied and fulfilled. We want to be happy ... or joyful ... or whatever.

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Now, where were we? Oh yeah ... verse one of chapter one where Paul introduces himself as a servant instead of an apostle. And by doing so to these believers living in this status-driven elite community, by putting himself at the bottom of the ladder instead of the top, he is reinforcing an

astounding truth – one which is echoed again and again in Christian scripture and theology. Some call it the happiness paradox – the elusiveness of happiness.

**Jesus once put it like this:**

*“Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.”*

*Luke 17:33 (ESV)*

In other words (and in keeping with Paul’s example), “if you hold on to your ambitions and your position and your possessions and your titles, thinking that those will bring you satisfaction, you will be disappointed. You will not find happiness by chasing it up the ladder. You will never be happy if being happy is your ultimate goal.”

## **The Happiness Paradox**

And just so you'll know, this is not just some kind of theological mumbo-jumbo. This is a principle that has been observed again and again in human experience by believers and atheists alike.

One of the simplest expressions of it is actually kind of cute. Maybe you've seen it in emails or on the internet:

**(picture) "Happiness is like a butterfly. They more you chase it the more it eludes you. But if you turn your attention to other things, it comes and sits softly on your shoulder."**

By the way if you have seen that quote, you may have seen it attributed to Nathaniel Hawthorne or Henry David Thoreau, but it's actually anonymous. Neither one of them said it.<sup>ii</sup>

Feel free to impress your friends and family with this bit of trivia.

Anyway, for those who don't care much for

pictures and sayings about butterflies, a more philosophical treatment comes from the great thinker, C.S. Lewis. He describes the elusiveness principle like this. He writes:

The woman who makes a dog the center of her life loses, in the end, not only her human usefulness and dignity but even the proper pleasure of dog-keeping.

The man who makes alcohol his chief good loses not only his job but his palate and all power of enjoying the earlier (and only pleasurable) levels of intoxication.

And it is a glorious thing (for a man) to feel for a moment or two that the whole meaning of the universe is summed up in one woman – glorious so long as other duties and pleasures keep tearing you away from her. But clear the decks and so arrange your life so that you will have

nothing to do but *contemplate her*, and what happens?

**Then he concludes:**

You can't get second things (such as happiness and pleasure) by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first.

... from which it would follow that the question, "What things are first?" is of concern not only to philosophers *but to everyone* ... [and] if we do not know, then the first and only truly practical thing is to set about finding out.<sup>iii</sup>

... which is kind of the same idea expressed by one of my favorite authors, John Piper. In a talk he gave called "Getting to the Bottom of Your Joy" he gives a very practical example. He says ...

If you make an A on a test, it makes you



very happy. That's understandable.

And if somebody asks you “*Why* are you happy about making an A on a test?” you might say, “Because, it’ll make my mom and dad happy” or “because I love the praise of my teachers” or you might say “it’s decisive, it’s going to be key to getting into graduate school in psychology.”

That answer is a step down [below the surface].

If someone then asks you “why does getting into graduate school make you happy?” you would say, perhaps, “It’s because I’ve always had the dream of being a clinical psychologist and I can’t be one unless I go to graduate school in psychology. That’s why the A leading to the graduate school makes me happy, because then I can be what I’ve always dreamed about being.”

But then I could ask you to take it down a level: “Why do you want to be a clinical psychologist? Why does that make you happy?”

And you might say, “Because I have had some [personal] experience with [counseling]. Our family got a lot of help [from a counselor] and it makes me happy to think about the possibility of helping people by giving them God’s perspective on how their mind works, and how their emotions work and how their relationships work. That would make me happy.”

So now we’re down about four levels. But I could still ask, “Why does making people happy or helped make you happy?” And now, we’re very close to the bottom. And the bottom is where there aren’t any more answers. You’re just at the bottom.

And where you end up as you penetrate down in your life – when you get to the bottom of what makes you happy – that is who you are.<sup>iv</sup>

.. which brings us back to Paul, the servant, not Paul the Apostle.

So, what's at the bottom for Paul? What are the “first things” for him? And these are very important questions given that, again, he's imprisoned and could be executed at any moment yet is overflowing with happiness and joy.

Well, let's go back and look at what he writes to the Philippians right after he does his little exercise in cultural mind-blowing where he puts himself at the bottom of the ladder instead of the top as a way of reminding them that you don't get happy by directly pursuing happy.

He says ... “I remember you. I pray for you. You have been my partners from the very beginning. I believe the best about you – I’m positive that God is working in you and great things are going to come from that. You guys are close to my heart and I so wish I could be with you all. I love you guys in the same way I love Jesus.”

That’s my paraphrase of verses 3-8 which we read earlier.

But then Paul goes on to say (and we read this last week) ...

*Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me [imprisonment] has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.*



directly is elusive. It is attainable only as a “second thing” where “the first thing” – the thing that we pursue directly – is a meaningful life.

**To say it more directly, happiness is the byproduct of a meaningful life.**

As Ortberg puts it, “if you aim at meaning, you tend to get happiness thrown in. But if you aim at happiness, you will get neither happiness nor meaning.”

**And meaning comes by investing most heavily in what matters most:**

- A purpose that in some way impacts the world for good.
- Relationships with others (including God)

And again, this isn’t just theological speculation. For many years, there’s been a great deal of scientific research into the connection between

meaning and happiness, going all the way back to the 1930s and a psychologist by the name of Victor Frankl. Maybe you've heard of him or read his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

In that book, he recounts the experiences and lessons of his time spent as prisoner in the Nazi death camps, including the story of two suicidal inmates he encountered there. Like many others in the camps, these two men were hopeless. They concluded that there was nothing more to expect from life and nothing to live for.

“In both cases,” Frankl writes, “it was a question of getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them.”

For one man, it was his young child, who was then living in a foreign country. For the other, a scientist, it was a series of books that he needed to finish.

## **Frankl wrote:**

A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the 'why' for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any 'how.'

Then he concludes:

“Being human always points and is directed to something or someone other than oneself -- be it a purpose to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself -- by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love -- the more human he is.”<sup>v</sup>

If you try to preserve your life you will lose it. If you pursue happiness directly you will not find



it.

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Now, that all sounds well and good but the great challenge we face every day is that we are continually invited to do just that – to pursue our happiness directly.

People don't have a job and they think, "I'll be happy when I get a job." Then they get a job, and then there are pressures and stress and challenges. Then they think, "I'll be happy when I retire and I'm done with my job." When people retire, what happens very often is that happiness goes up ... but only temporarily because meaning goes down when there is no purpose beyond mere entertainment.

Or people think, "If I just had more money I would be happier." Then they get it, and they spend it on themselves (more stuff, bigger house,

newer car, nicer trip), and happiness goes up for a moment, but it doesn't last because there is no meaning.

By the way, that's the same thing the Preacher of Ecclesiastes learned. He wrote:

*Whoever loves money never has  
enough; whoever loves wealth is  
never satisfied with their income.  
This too is meaningless.*  
*Ecclesiastes 5:10 (NIV)*

When that's what you pursue, when it's the "first thing" it winds up being empty.

Or people don't have kids and they think, "I would be happier if I just had kids. If we could get kids in the house, I would be happy." Then they get kids in the house, and they think, "I'd be happy when the kids get out of the house" because when we get kids there are dirty diapers and bottles and crying and temper problems and

exhaustion and sleep deprivation. And having children is costly, exhausting, stressful, and draining ... which is why research shows that happiness *in marriage* actually goes down when people have children and doesn't go back up until they leave!

That said, raising kids *does* produce happiness when our attention is focused on loving them and preparing them to be contributors to the world around them ... and not on what they can bring to our lives in terms of our image and our status or anything else. Loving your kids and preparing your kids – that's relationship and purpose – and there is meaning in that. And when you can look back at 20 or 30 years of that with a clear conscience – even if circumstances haven't worked out like you had hoped or planned – there's a deep sense of joy.

When people get to the end of their lives, it turns out that it's meaning that matters. God has

designed us so we will grow in happiness when we pursue meaning in our lives.

## **The Pursuit of Meaning**

So, let's talk for just a bit what it looks like to do that; what it looks like to invest most heavily in what matters most:

- A purpose that in some way impacts the world for good.
- Relationships with others (including God)

And this isn't anything super-complex or super-deep. In fact, I think it's pretty obvious and self-evident what purpose and relationships look like in "real life." So, I just want to boil it down to two personal questions that get to the heart of the issue.

### **1. What are you doing to make this world a better place?**

What is your “fruitful labor while still in the body” (to quote Paul)?

For him, it was being a missionary and spreading the gospel as far as his feet would take him. But for most people, that’s not really feasible or even desirable.

This week, a friend sent me an email talking about a recent “aha.” This is what it said (in part):

For the longest time, I was sure God had “big plans” for my life ... but I’ve had a change of heart on that ideology. I no longer think it is to do “big and mighty things” because I have realized that sometimes it is the smallest things that actually make the biggest difference. God needs humble servants doing all of the small things every moment of every day more than He needs someone to be the

next Billy Graham.

But wait a minute, Rick. Isn't doing what Paul did the highest calling of a Christian?

No, it's not. It's *one* calling of a Christian – that wherever we go we represent Jesus well to the people around us in hopes that they, too, would receive Him as we have received Him. But that's not the primary reason God put you on this earth. The reason God put you on this earth is the same reason he put Adam on this earth.

Remember what God told Adam to do? He put him in the middle of the Garden of Eden and told him to *tend it and take care of it. He told him to be fruitful and multiply.*

Basically, God was saying, “Adam, I want you and all of your descendants – the whole human race – to take what I have given you to work with (which is all of creation including your own

body) and make it better. Invest your talents and abilities in such a way that it maximizes the quality of life for everyone and everything.”

That’s your fundamental purpose for being alive and taking up space on the planet.

In September 1965, author Leo Rosten published an essay titled “The Myths by Which We Live” in “The Rotarian” magazine. At the conclusion of the article he wrote:

Finally, there is the myth which gives me the greatest pain: the myth that the purpose of life is happiness and that you ought to have fun and that your children ought to have fun. Where was it written that life is so cheap? Where was it written that life is, or should be, or can ever be free of conflict and effort and deprivation and sacrifice? If you want idiot happiness take tranquilizers or pray for senility.

...the purpose of life is not at all to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable. It is to be compassionate. It is to matter, to have it make some difference that you have lived.<sup>vi</sup>

So, what does that look like for you where you are in your life right now?

- Maybe for you that means raising kids. Or maybe it doesn't.
- Maybe it lines up with your job. Maybe what you do for a living directly impacts the world for good. If so, lucky you. But maybe it doesn't.
- Maybe it means volunteering here at church in some way or with some other organization that serves this community. Or maybe it doesn't.
- Maybe you can't do a lot physically, so all you can do is to spend time praying for



people.

I'm not sure what it looks like for you but I am sure of this: if you don't have some way in which you are regularly and intentionally investing yourself into making the world a better place, you might be happy right now, but you won't be in the long run. You're destined to be unhappy.

Some of you are already there and this is exactly why. You've got everything a person could want but you're miserable because you have no purpose in life other than pursuing whatever you think will make you happy today or tomorrow. I'm telling you – no, I think God is telling you – you've got to come up with a better plan than that.

Ok here's the second question. If meaning comes from investing in relationships with others ...

**2. What are you doing to increase your love for the people around you (and for God)?**

I realize that's actually two questions so let's talk about people first. What are you doing to increase your love for people?

I mean, all of us could stand to grow in our ability to love one another, right? And, as a result, our relationships would grow stronger and more meaningful.

If we worked on becoming more patient and more gracious, our love would grow. If we worked on becoming a better listener ... at becoming more sensitive ... at becoming an encourager instead of a criticizer – I think our ability to love would grow.

But do you know the biggest way to increase our love for people? It's real simple: *spend time with them.*

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes wrote something

very interesting – and sad – about the issue of time.

### **He said ...**

*There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.*

He was pursuing wealth through work but he could never get enough. So he kept working harder and harder.

### **And then one day it hit him:**

*“For whom am I toiling,” he asked, “and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”*

“Why am I killing myself to make all this money if I don’t have anyone to share it with?”

*This too is meaningless— a miserable business! Ecclesiastes*

4:7-8 (NIV)

And the Preacher is right. Killing yourself to make a bunch of money when you don't have anyone to share it with is dumb.

But do you know what's even dumber? *Spending all of your time "toiling" when you do have someone to share life with.*

And that "toiling" might not even be our job. It might be projects or hobbies or just being too lazy to engage with our spouse or our kids or our parents or our friends or other Christians who could help us grow in our love for God?

Friends, when it comes down to it, life is mostly about relationships. And no one has unhappy relationships and a happy life. Nobody has joy-filled, meaningful relationships and a joyless life. So, what are you doing to grow in your love for people?

And again, I don't know what that should look like for you in everyday life but I do know that if you don't grow in that ability, you might be happy now but eventually you're going to be unhappy. And that's where some of you are right now because you just don't love people and you're not doing anything to grow your ability to love ...

... which, as it turns out, leads to the second half of that question – the part that has to do with loving God. And I know that some of you are about to freak out because you're thinking “oh my gosh, I don't even know how to grow in my love for people – how in the world am I going to grow in my love for God? I have no idea what to do when it comes to that.”

Relax ... because when it comes to God ... it's never ever about what we do but always and only about what He has already done, even when it comes to *us* loving *Him*.

As the Apostle John once wrote:

*We love him (and others) because  
He first loved us. 1 John 4:19 (KJV)*

So, if you want to grow in your ability to love God – if you want to see your relationship with God grow – it’s all about experiencing *His* love for you. Reading the scripture; singing worship songs; spending time in prayer; being connected to His body, the church – that’s how His love becomes real to you and your love for Him grows.

Paul wasn’t able to say “it really doesn’t matter what my circumstances are because for me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” because he had somehow developed a superior moral character compared to the rest of us. Paul was able to say that because his understanding and experience of the love *God* had for *him* had grown to the point where that was the only rational response

he could make.

And that's what God wants for you and me as well. He wants us to experience His love so deeply that we eventually become people who love Him and others so well that our lives have meaning ... because it's meaning that matters to our happiness.

Would you pray with me?

<PRAYER>

**Feature – If I Stand**

## **CLOSING COMMENTS**

1. Class rally
2. Next week

Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> From John Ortberg's sermon "What's Better Than The Happy Life."  
<http://mppc.org/sermons/whats-better-happy-life>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/04/17/butterfly/>

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted at <http://rough.superjunction.com/2011/04/first-and-second-things.html>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.desiringgod.org/conference-messages/getting-to-the-bottom-of-your-joy>

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/theres-more-to-life-than-being-happy/266805/>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://bit.ly/1KWyGIs>