

The Happiness Code
Habits of the Never-Happy
May 10, 2015

PRELUDE – “Great God Who Saves”

Worship Songs – “Great God Who Saves” / “Oh, Happiness”

Parent/Child Dedication – Shannon

Mother’s Day Recognition – Rick

If you’re somebody’s momma, would you please stand?

Let me say for everyone here “thanks for being mom and for the role you play all through life. We truly wouldn’t be here without you!”

Let me pray for you. <PRAYER>

Today we’re beginning a brand new series called “The Happiness Code.” Our band has a song to

share to introduce the first topic – “Habits of the Never-Happy” – and while they’re doing that, our ushers will be collecting our offering. Guests, don’t feel obligation to contribute (though we appreciate if you do). Members and regular attenders, remember this is our way of investing in what God is doing through all of us collectively as NHCC. And we appreciate your contributions.

So, here we go.

Feature – “Only Happy When It Rains” - Offering

What a depressing song! Such a negative way to begin a series on happiness!

But there is “a method to our madness” (as they say) because when it comes to being happy some of us are our own worst enemies. Some of us, when it comes to being happy, regularly and systematically find ways to sabotage ourselves.

We have unknowingly, unintentionally (and unfortunately) cultivated patterns of belief and behavior that ensure we will never be truly happy.

And that's what I want to talk to you about in the time I have this morning. I want to lay out for you what I am calling "the habits of the never-happy" ... in hopes that:

- You and I will be aware of them
- You and I will take pains to avoid them
- And that we'll make whatever effort is necessary to break them if they are already established in our lives.

And I want to do this because it doesn't make much sense to talk about the things that we can do to increase our happiness (which is the purpose of this series) without first talking about the things we do that work against it.

One of my favorite passages in the entire Bible is when Jesus begins his earthly ministry. The Gospel of Mark chapter 1 verses 14-15 tells us that ...

*Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming
the good news of God.*

And this is what He was proclaiming:

*“The time has come,” he said. “The
kingdom of God has come near.
Repent and believe the good news!”
Mark 1:14-15 (NIV)*

I’ve always been fascinated by the fact that Jesus didn’t say just “believe the good news that the presence and power of God is near and now.” In addition to believing *that*, He said, you also have to identify your *wrong beliefs* about the presence and power of God and *change your mind* about those wrong beliefs ... which is what the word “repent” means.

Literally, Jesus was saying, “stop believing that God is limited to the dimension of Heaven and the afterlife and start living as if He is as present and active here and now as He is there and will be then. Repent ... and believe.”

And that’s how God almost always works to bring about change in our lives. It’s a two-part process: repent and believe, repent and believe, repent and believe. On the one hand, identify, admit, and renounce your messed up thinking and, on the other, accept, trust and incorporate the truth that God has revealed.

And this message today is the first part of that process. We’re going to look at some of the faulty thinking and behaviors and patterns that produce unhappiness so that we can repent – so that we can identify, admit and renounce those things. And then, in the weeks to come, we’ll get on the solution side – the things that we need to incorporate that lead to happiness.

Series Introduction

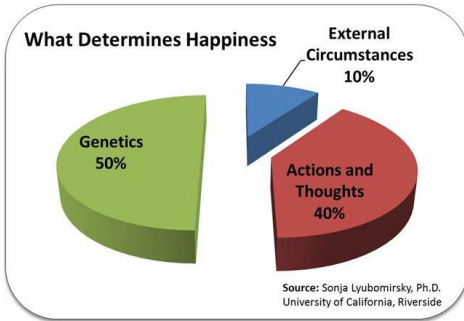
But before we get into today's topic (those habits that produce unhappiness), I need to make a few introductory comments about the series in general.

First of all, I should probably say that the *title*, "The Happiness Code," is somewhat misleading. I do not mean to imply that there is a secret formula hidden in the pages of the Bible that unlocks the mystery of "how to be happy" that we are going to discover over the next six weeks. Truth is there are many factors that go into whether or not a person is genuinely happy and they are not always the same from person to person. One size does not fit all.

In fact, researchers on the subject of happiness (and there is an incredible amount of work going

into that research these days) ...

... researchers have determined that about 50% of our happiness is genetically pre-determined.ⁱ



How happy we are compared to how happy other people are is partly determined by our DNA and our earliest childhood experiences. That's called the "happiness set point" and there's not a whole lot you can do about it. That's the base from which you work so, if you were born with a happy-go-lucky personality, count your blessings.

That said ... as the chart reveals, genetics

accounts for only half of our sense of happiness ... which means that there's a lot we can do to impact how happy we are regardless of our set point. And there's a lot of research on the kinds of activities that clearly have a positive impact – even simple things like eating right, getting enough sleep and exercise. And I encourage you to do a little bit of reading about those things and incorporate them into your life if you haven't already.

But what I want to focus on in this series are the high-impact principles and practices that often seem counterintuitive. In other words, you wouldn't expect them to produce happiness but they do. And because they're counterintuitive, they could be described as something of a formula or a code.

The second thing I want to say by way of introduction is that there are two assumptions at work behind the scenes in what we're going to

talk about in this series.

First is that God wants us to be happy.

It's pretty sad that I would need to say that but there is an unfortunate perception these days that anything associated with God, Christianity, religion and church will actually make you less happy ... which is pretty ignorant since surveys consistently show that people who are "religious" and, more specifically, people who regularly participate in church are happier than those who do not.

In fact, a recent Gallup survey showed that people who *don't* go to church actually have a decline in happiness on Sunday ... which is yet another reason why we say that "there's no better way to spend an hour on Sunday" than being here at North Heartland.ⁱⁱ

In any case, Jesus said He came so that we could

have life and have it in abundance – fullness, completeness, satisfaction.

The writer of Psalm 16, in his worship of the Lord, wrote:

*You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Psalm 16:11 (ESV)*

God is not a killjoy. God wants you to be happy. Your happiness is a good thing to Him. That's my first assumption.

My second assumption is also revealed by that scripture (and many others) and by what Jesus said about the abundant and fulfilled life ... and it's this:

Our best chance for a happy life is rooted in the knowledge and experience of

God Himself as He is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.

In other words, happiness is a function of our connection with God. How happy we are is directly tied to our relationship with God.

That's not to say you can't be happy without God – many people are. But there are certain precursors to happiness that are automatically enhanced by knowing and experiencing God in your life.

And I think probably one of the best illustrations of this principle is found in a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a group of Christ-followers in the first-century city of Philippi. We call it the *Epistle to the Philippians*. It's a fairly brief letter. You can read it in about 15-20 minutes max.

And, if you do – and I encourage you to (remember you can access the Bible in the

“Discover” tab of our North Heartland app) – if you read Philippians, it becomes immediately obvious that Paul is a pretty happy guy ... in spite of the fact that *he’s in prison when he writes this letter*: hardly the place one would choose to search for happiness! Yet Paul repeatedly speaks of the joy he has and encourages his readers to pursue that same joy in their own lives – a joy that is rooted in a relationship with Christ. 14 times he uses the words joy or rejoice or rejoicing – far more than in any of his other letters.

And because this letter provides such a great example, we’re going to use it as the basis for our series.

How to Be Chronically Unhappyⁱⁱⁱ

And we’re going to begin today by looking at what we can learn from Paul about how to be a

chronically unhappy person – a lofty goal if there ever was one. 😊

I'm kidding, of course, but again, so often we fall into these patterns without even being aware that it's happening and then we wind up stuck in a downward spiral of misery and sadness.

Now, just to be clear, Paul doesn't talk about how to be unhappy – at least, not directly. Instead, in the first part of his letter as he describes his situation and his reason for writing, he provides a remarkable contrast between the way a happy person approaches life and the way an unhappy person approaches life.

I'm just going to read this passage to you (it's in Chapter 1 beginning in verse 12) and then we'll compare what might be called “habits of the never-happy” (there are five of them) with what Paul does in his life with God.

So, in Chapter 1 verse 12 Paul writes:

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me 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. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is

preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me.

Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your

progress and joy [there's that little word again] in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

What an amazing statement! And what an amazing way for Paul to look at his life!

I mean, think about it:

- He's in chains with little hope of a quick release.
- In spite of that, some rival preachers on the outside are jealous of him. They see themselves as being in competition with him.
- Some of them are preaching the gospel as a way to make his life harder, knowing that the more noise they make, the harsher the authorities will treat Paul since he was the main instigator.
- And he's aware that there is a distinct

possibility he might be executed at any moment.

If ever a man ought to be unhappy at any given point in time, it was Paul. Yet he was not.

So, let's contrast what he thinks and does with what the "never happy" person thinks and does. Here's the first difference.

1. People who are chronically unhappy believe happiness is dependent on favorable circumstances.

Paul obviously did not.

People who are chronically unhappy believe "I'll be happy if" ... "I'll be happy when" ...

Pastor John Ortberg calls this "the happiness illusion." The happiness illusion says "I believe I will be happy if I get whatever the circumstance

is I desire. If the things that happen to me are the things I *want* to have happen to me, then I'll be happy.”

However, one of the most consistent findings in all of the happiness research is that people are terrible at predicting the things they think will make them happy: “If I just had this job, this salary, this house, this marriage, this car, this body, this lifestyle, then I would be happy forever.”

One point of that chart we saw earlier from Sonja Lyubomirsky, experimental psychologist and author of the book *The How of Happiness* ... <chart>

... is that life circumstances actually have very little bearing on our sense of well-being—only 10 percent—because human beings very quickly go back to their usual level of happiness, or their set point. This phenomenon (known as “hedonic adaptation”) helps to explain why someone who

feels elated after upgrading to a big house is likely to soon start yearning for more—an extra bedroom, a pool, whatever it may be.^{iv}

A couple of months ago, we added a new deck on to the back of our house. We used to have steps down from our sliding glass door onto a concrete patio that was cracked and uneven and held up by railroad ties that were rotting away. It was just ugly and not very functional. So, having this new deck which is 14-foot wide and covers all the yuck and makes everything so much more usable is just wonderful. But the other day, as I was standing out there and looking at it, I found myself thinking – “for \$1,000 more than what we paid, we could have had a 20-foot wide deck. We could have afforded that. Why didn’t we do that? That would have been even better.”

“I’ll finally be happy if and when” is an illusion.

Now, contrast this with what Paul thinks about

his circumstances, which few of us would think of as “favorable.”

In verse 12 he says,

I want you to know that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. Philippians 1:12 (NIV)

And he uses the same phrase again in verse 19 “...I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, *what has happened to me* will turn out for my deliverance.”

Now, “what has happened” to Paul – the circumstances of his life – is that he has been thrown in prison for preaching a new religion (which, as we have talked about on many occasions, was against Roman law).

But listen to what he says: “I want you to know how I feel about what has happened to me and

how I view my circumstances. You might think I'd be discouraged. Actually, I'm not because it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard... that I am [actually] in chains for Christ.”

What's fascinating about that is that, in ancient times, prisoners were often physically chained to their guards. So, Paul is chained to soldiers in the palace guard (which is kind of like the Caesar's secret service) ... which means he can tell them about Jesus all day long, and they can't get away because they're chained to him!

Paul is saying, “I've been trying to figure out how to get the gospel to Rome, to the palace, to the Caesar, (usually you have to bribe somebody to do that), but now, through what has happened to me – my circumstances – *Caesar is actually chaining his guys to me.* They can't get away. I just say, ‘Hey, do you want to hear about Jesus?’ and they can't go anywhere.”

Paul doesn't think he's *their* prisoner; he thinks they're *his* prisoner.

Furthermore Paul says, "Because of what has happened to me, not only is the news about Jesus getting to Caesar's people, other believers are seeing what's going on and it's giving them courage. They're saying, 'If Paul can live that way under so much pressure, maybe I can live that way too.'"

Do you see this? Paul, in chains, in prison, has a pervasive sense of well-being. He's happy in spite of his circumstances.

Why?

Because 40% of our happiness (beyond our genetics) is a function of how we think and behave. <chart>

Specifically, I think, if you're a Christian, it's

looking for where God is at work in your circumstances. If you want to live in joy, don't ask, "God, why am I not in *those* circumstances?" but "God, where are you in *these* circumstances? *These* circumstances right here.

- Who could I help today in *these* circumstances?
- Who can I serve today in *these* circumstances?
- Who could I inspire today in *these* circumstances?
- God, how are you with me in *these* circumstances?"

That's a huge difference between Paul and those who are never-happy. He focused on the 40% that he could control – his own thoughts and actions. They focus on the 10% of life that can't make them (or anyone) happy for very long – their circumstances.

OK, let's look at another habit of unhappy people.

2. People who are persistently sad and depressed compare themselves to others.

After Paul gives his positive take on his situation and rejoices that others are being emboldened to preach the gospel, he makes a very interesting statement. He says, "I know that some of the people who are preaching the Gospel are doing so out of goodwill and love for me. But I also realize that some are doing so out of envy and rivalry and selfish ambition."

Some people watched Paul's ministry and said, "Thank God," and other people watched the same thing and said, "Why God? Why him and not me? Why can't *I* be Paul instead of Paul being Paul? I don't want to be *me*. I want to be *him*. He's

more successful than I am. His ministry is reaching more people than my ministry is. If I could just do a little better than Paul, then I would feel better about myself. Actually, if it could just happen that Paul would do a little worse than me then I would feel better about myself.”

But again, the research shows that’s not how it works. In one study on folks comparing themselves to other people, the hypothesis going in was “unhappy people compare up.” That is, they look at people who have more money, more success, more possessions, and that makes them unhappy. They’re jealous.

Correspondingly, they thought, *happy people must compare down*. They look at people who have less money, less success, less education, and that makes them happy. They’re proud.

What they discovered was fascinating: *happy*

people don't compare at all. They don't compare up and they don't compare down. They actually use deeply held internal values as the yardstick for how *they're* doing, which means they do not see themselves as rivals to anyone ... which means they are able to take pleasure in other people's successes.

Unhappy people do just the opposite. They compare their marriage – their wife, their husband to somebody else's. They compare their salary, their house, their career, their kids, their body, their looks, their IQ, their education, their level of success. And when they see that, in some way, someone else is doing better than them, they will envy them and that envy will make them miserable.

Let's look at another habit of the never-happy.

3. People who are chronically unhappy hold grudges.

When someone does them wrong, they hang on to it. They let their mistreatment at the hands of another fester in their heart and mind until, hopefully, they can get even in some way.

Paul didn't do that. After he makes the comment that some are preaching the Gospel out of envy and rivalry he goes on to say that they are "supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. There are people out there," Paul is saying, "who are preaching about Jesus because they think it will make it harder on me. They think it will add to my suffering."

Wow, what a mean-spirited thing for someone to do!

Now, I don't know about you, but I have had people in my life whose main goal was to stir up trouble for me. For whatever reason – either they were jealous and thought that I needed to

be “taken down a notch” or they thought that I had somehow done them wrong and I needed to pay for that – they had dedicated themselves to making it hard for me and felt justified in doing so.

And the thing about dealing with people like that is that there is usually nothing you can say to change their minds. Have you ever been in that situation? It is hard to not hold a grudge towards people like that but that’s just a prescription for our own unhappiness. As one sage has put it “Holding a grudge makes as much sense as drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. You only harm yourself in the process.”

But look at how Paul responded to the people who were trying to make his life hard.

He said:

But what does it matter? The

important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Philippians 1:18 (NIV)

Now, what's interesting about this statement is Paul's first few words. It's translated as "what does it matter" but in the original Greek, it's actually only two small words: *tis gar ...* meaning "So what? Big deal. Who cares? Whatever."

"So what that they don't like me," Paul is saying. "Big deal. I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing and God is doing what He's supposed to be doing and for that I rejoice. Who cares what they think or do?"

"God uses all things," he later wrote to the Roman Christians, "to work together for the good of those who love Him."

So, where are we? If you want to be chronically unhappy, focus on circumstances, compare yourself to others, hold a grudge ... and here's the fourth habit:

4. If you want to ensure your continued unhappiness ... go it alone.

Do life all by yourself.

The very first thing Paul says to the people he's writing (and we did not read this earlier), "I thank my God every time I remember you." He says to them ...

- "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy..."
- "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart..."
- "God can testify how I long for all of you

with the affection of Christ Jesus.”

- He says in verse 25, “I’d love to go be with Him, but I think if I keep on living it will bring joy to your faith, so I’m going to do that.”

Clearly there is a personal and relational connection that was a great source of joy for Paul.

Now, not everyone needs the same level of relational connection. But everyone does need some relational connection or misery will follow. And we’ll look at this more next week but let’s get to the final habit.

**5. If you want to be consistently unhappy
... approach life with a sense of
pessimism (a pessimistic outlook).**

Concentrate on what’s wrong instead of what’s

right with the world. Let your focus constantly be on all the things that could blow up. And there are things that could blow up. There are things that are very wrong with the world.

But Paul didn't focus on those things. Paul was an optimist. And fortunately, there is a lot being written about the power of optimism in our day.

One writer actually distinguishes between what he calls little optimism and big optimism.^v Little optimism, he says, focuses on little hopes. "I hope I'll find a convenient parking space when I go to church this weekend. I hope I'll see somebody at church who I like. I hope this message is almost over."

Big optimism focuses on the ultimate picture. "We are on the verge of something great. This is a magnificent time to be a human being alive on this planet."

Do you believe that? I'm shocked at how many people do not. I'm shocked at how many people – conservative and liberals alike – think things are getting worse. But did you know that ...

- The average American born in 1950 could expect to live to age 68. The average American born in 2010 can expect to live to almost 79. Think about that: In two generations, the average American gained a decade of life expectancy.
- The average American now retires at age 62. One hundred years ago, the average American *died* at age 51.
- The average work week has declined from 61 hours in 1870, to 48 hours in 1930, to 40 hours in 1950, to 39 hours today.
- We're using that extra time to have fun. The average American household now

spends three times as much of its income on recreation as it did in the 1950.

- In 1950, the average household spent 30% of its budget on food. Today, less than 13% of an average budget has to be devoted to food.
- High school graduation rates are at the highest level in 40 years.
- Traffic deaths per 100,000 people have fallen by half since the 1960s.
- The median new home today is 34% larger today than it was 25 years ago.
- 49% of new homes had air conditioning in 1973. Today, 89% do.

“Today,” Matt Ridley writes in his book *The*

Rational Optimist, “of Americans officially designated as ‘poor,’ 99 per cent have electricity, running water, flush toilets, and a refrigerator; 95 per cent have a television, 88 per cent a telephone, 71 per cent a car and 70 percent air conditioning. Cornelius Vanderbilt – the richest man in the US in the 19th century – had none of these things.”^{vi}

But people who are pessimists just can’t see it. And they are unhappy.

Now, let’s take a look at Paul.

Sitting in prison not knowing if he’s going to live or die, Paul writes ...

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Philippians 1:20-21

(NIV)

“I wake up in the morning. I eagerly expect and hope. I look at my chains. I eagerly expect and hope. I wait for the word to come that could mean my life is going to end on this earth and I eagerly expect and hope that God will give me the strength I need. For whether I live or whether I die, it’s all about Jesus and what He will do in me and through me.”

As John Ortberg says, “What are you going to do with a guy like that? How are you going to stop a guy like that? What prison can hold a guy like that? That is not little optimism. That is not groundless, mindless optimism.”

That is big optimism that comes from the power of Christ in his life. For Paul, life is summed up in Christ. He is inspired by Christ, guided by Christ, loved by Christ, held by Christ, sustained by Christ, intoxicated by Christ. He serves Christ. He

loves Christ. He follows Christ. He trusts Christ. He lives for Christ.

Christ is his magnificent obsession and orientation to all of reality, and therefore...therefore...when he faces problems in chains in a prison, he can say “tis gar” ... “So what? Big deal. Who cares? Whatever. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. The important thing is, in every way, this magnificent Christ has acted, was crucified, and resurrected, and therefore, the kingdom of God up there in Heaven and out there in the future has come down into the here and now and I get to be a part of that.

“And because of this,” Paul says, “I rejoice. I am happy. Because of this, I can tell you today, no matter what happens to me tomorrow, I will continue to rejoice because joy is not a feeling based on what happens or doesn’t happen circumstantially. It is not dependent winning

any comparison game with others. It is not extinguished by the mistreatment I receive. It is a condition of my soul. It is the only rational response to the resurrection of my Redeemer and His promise to me.”

Conclusion

Well, there you have it – a few of the habits of the folks who are never happy contrasted with those of a man who had every reason to be unhappy yet was not.

How many of those negative habits characterize your life? It might be worth asking people who know you well if you're not sure.

But, more importantly, are you willing to repent of those habits? Are you willing to change your mind and say, “I do some of those things all of the time. I've adopted that pattern of thinking

and behavior and it's getting me nowhere. I am sabotaging my own happiness.”

This morning as we close, I want to offer you a chance to repent of those patterns. I'm going to say a prayer that admits our faulty thinking and behavior.

So, let's pray ...

- I focus on my circumstances.
- I compare myself to others
- I hold grudges
- I do life alone
- I am a pessimist

I am thankful God, that in Jesus, these sins are forgiven. They are removed as far as the east is from the west. But I want to be more than just forgiven. I want to be transformed. I don't want to live a chronically unhappy life. I want a life

that is filled with joy.

Feature – “So Much for My Sad Song”

CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick

1. Next week ... we’ll be talking about “The Elusiveness of Happiness.” Great service, great message, hope you’ll be here and invite someone to come with you.
2. Business owner (small, medium, large) ... sure would love to hang out with you at lunch this Wednesday.

Endnotes

ⁱ See <http://health.usnews.com/health-news/family-health/living-well/articles/2008/01/18/want-to-be-happier-heres-how>

ⁱⁱ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/25/going-to-church-mood-positive-emotions-well-being_n_1375707.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Parts of this section are based on a sermon by John Ortberg. See <http://mppc.org/sermons/search-happy-four-ways-make-your-life-miserable>

^{iv} See <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-science-of-lasting-happiness/> and <http://health.usnews.com/health-news/family-health/living-well/articles/2008/01/18/want-to-be-happier-heres-how>

^v <http://www.amazon.com/Optimism-Biology-Hope-Kodansha-Globe/dp/156836072X>

vi <http://www.fool.com/investing/general/2013/11/29/everything-is-great-and-nobody-is-happy.aspx>