

The Happiness Code
A Contrarians' Guide
May 24, 2015

PRELUDE – Our God's Alive
Worship – Our God's Alive / The Love of God

Video – Memorial Day
Silence
Video – Announcements

Feature – “Welcome to My Life” / Offering

Good morning everyone.

As Shannon said, we're continuing in our series, *The Happiness Code*. The reason we're doing this series (as I mentioned in the first message two weeks ago) is that in spite of the fact that you and I, in terms of things like health and wealth, educational and vocational options, mobility and freedom, have it better than 99.995% of everyone

who has ever lived in all of human history ... a lot of us are just not that happy. There's a lot of angst these days (as the song we just heard illustrates so well).

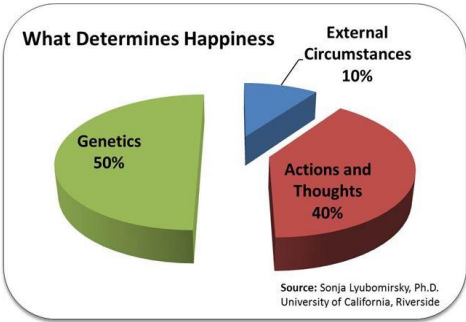
So what I wanted to do in this series was to take a look at the kinds of attitudes and actions that lead to a happy life. And, in the first week we started out by looking at the kinds of things that actually steal our joy instead of producing it and we discovered five habits of a person who is never happy. And if you weren't here that week and you are a generally unhappy person, I encourage you to check out that message which you can find via our website or the cool app Shannon showed us in the announcements.

“Happiness Factors” Revisited

Now, something else we talked about that week

was the tremendous amount of “happiness research” that psychologists and social scientists are doing these days. There’s a lot going on. And one of the most important discoveries they’ve made (and we don’t have time to go into how they discovered this but if you’ll google this you can read all about it) ...

<chart> One of the most important discoveries is that our level of happiness at any given moment is dependent on three factors:



The first factor is genetics ... which accounts for about 50% of our happiness. Some of us are born with sanguine personalities and some are born

with melancholic personalities. Some of us are the firstborn and some of us are the middle child and some of us are the baby. All of that's predetermined in our lives and it affects what we bring to the table in terms of our disposition.

The second factor - external circumstances such as health and wealth, education, vocation, mobility and freedom as well as the people we are around every day (family, friends, co-workers) - accounts for only about 10% of our happiness ... which I think explains why there is still so much emptiness of soul in spite of the fact that we have it better than 99.995% of everyone who has ever lived.

It also explains why pursuing those kinds of things: a better body, a better income, a better job, a better car, more "fun" - in the end really doesn't make all that much difference concerning happiness. I mean, even if you max

out everything on your “ultimate circumstances wish list” it’s only going to account for 10% of your happiness. Furthermore, (and we talked about this in the first week) human beings have an amazing ability to adapt to circumstances – good or bad ... which means that, eventually, your new body, your new boat, your new house, your new spouse will become just another piece of the fabric of your life. Eventually, as they say, the shine will wear off.

Now please don’t hear what I’m not saying on this point. If you have the opportunity to improve your circumstances in life, then *go for it* (as long as it isn’t immoral, illegal, unethical, unwise or unbiblical). But don’t be fooled into thinking those improvements are the key to your happiness.

The key to happiness – the highest leverage you and I have – is *what we do* and *what we think* in

whatever circumstances we find ourselves. According to the research and the pie chart we just saw, it's 40% of the equation!

And that's really good news because while you *can't* do anything about your genetics and you *may or may not* be able to do anything about your circumstances, you *can* do something about your attitude and actions. In fact, you are the *only* person who can do anything about your attitude. And you are the *only* person who can do anything about how you will act and respond to your circumstances.

<chart> By the way, this means that ...

- Even if you lost the genetics lottery and you only score 20 out of 50 in that category and
- If you have the worst possible circumstances (they rate a zero out of ten)

then

- You can still get 60 out of 100 on the happiness scale by maxing out that third factor ...

<chart> ... which also means ...

.. that you can be just as happy as the person who has the perfect genetic makeup for happiness and the perfect situation but whose attitude and actions are a zero.

That's how important the third factor is. That's how big of a difference it can make ...

... which is why we've been talking about the Apostle Paul in this series and, in particular, the letter he wrote to the Christians at the ancient Roman colony of Philippi. I don't know for sure how Paul scored as far as the genetics factor – I would assume, based on what we know about his

background it was probably better than 20 out of 50 – but I *am* pretty sure his circumstances at the time he wrote that letter rated pretty close to zero.

As we learned in the first week:

- He was a prisoner in the city of Rome.
- He was literally chained at all times to one of Emperor Nero's guards.
- He was aware that, at any moment, he could be executed for proclaiming his faith in Christ and leading others to that same faith.
- And yet, in spite of those circumstances, he was happy. He was filled with joy and encouraging the Philippians that they, too, should be filled with joy.

... all of which means that he was doing

something very right with respect to that third factor of attitude and actions.

So, what can we learn from him? What did he know about God and what was he *experiencing* with God that had such an amazing effect on him? That's the question we've been considering in this series.

Fortunately, it's not too difficult to answer that question because we can figure it out from some of the things he told the Philippian Christians.

And last week we learned a great principle – called *the elusiveness principle* – which says that “happiness pursued 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. Happiness is the byproduct of a meaningful life ... and we talked about what that looked like for Paul and how we can

experience the same thing in our lives.

And, again, if you missed that message and you're struggling to be happy, I encourage you to check it via our app or our website.

The “Cursus Honorum”

Today, we're going to turn our attention to another principle that's illustrated in Paul's letter to the Philippians. I'm calling it *A Contrarian's Guide to Happiness* because it runs so dramatically against the grain of how human beings think, especially when it comes to what it takes to experience happiness and joy in life.

And to set this up, I want to go a little more deeply into the mindset of the people who were living in Philippi. We talked about this a bit last week but in order to really understand the

contrarian principle, it's helpful to know more. And what I'm about to tell you actually comes from a fascinating book by a guy named Joseph Hellerman, who is a Professor of New Testament Language and Literature and an expert on the subject.ⁱ

To know the mindset of the people living in Philippi, he says, you must know about *honor*, which he defines as “the public recognition of one’s social standing” – with a great emphasis on public recognition. Your worth is mainly the status you have in other people’s eyes. One historian says for the Romans “*being was being seen.*”

To know the mindset of the people living in Philippi, you must also know that “honor – not money (and certainly not love) – was the most prized social commodity in the Roman world.”

**In the words of the Roman statesman,
Cicero:**

“By nature we yearn and hunger for honor, and once we have glimpsed, as it were, some part of its radiance, there is nothing we are not prepared to bear and suffer in order to secure it.” - Cicero

“Beyond the basic necessities of life,” Hellerman says, “persons in antiquity did everything possible to defend and augment their honor in the public sphere. Conversely, they did everything in their power to avoid the shame of public dishonor.”

Turns out the Romans actually had a term to describe this social phenomenon – it was called the “cursus honorum” or the “race for honor.” (“Cursus” means “course” or “race”.)

OK, one more thing to know about the Philippian mindset is that Roman society was divided into clearly delineated classes and ranks. The basic division was between those known as the elites and those known as the non-elites. Hellerman says only about 2 percent of the whole population of the Roman Empire was in the elite category while 98 percent of the population was in “the masses.”

Turns out that within the elites and non-elites there were *additional* classes and rankings.

- At the bottom of the non-elites were folks who were *slaves*. These were people with no status, with no honor, with no control over their lives. Their masters could punish them, kill them, do whatever – they had no rights.
- Above them were *freed men*. These were

people who through one means or another had gained their freedom. They might have purchased it or married into it. But they were just a level above slaves, so they didn't have many rights.

- Above them at the top of the non-elites were the “*common citizens*” of the Roman Empire.
- Then, at the bottom of the elites were the *decurions* who were the wealthy leaders and magistrates in the cities of the Roman Provinces.
- Above them was a very small group of people called *equestrians* – a term owing to the fact that they were wealthy enough to buy horses and take them into battle.
- Finally, at the top of the class was an even

smaller group of people who were members of the Roman senate, senators. They were not elected like our senators are. They had power and position because of their lineage and their wealth.

Now, what's important about this is that almost everything in Roman society from clothing to justice to where you got to sit at public events was designed to identify where you were in the class system.

For example, if you were a freedman, you had the right to wear a special hat called the "freedman's cap." You would wear that with some pride because it would tell everybody, "I'm not a slave. I'm a rung up on the ladder."

If you were a citizen, you could wear a toga. If you were *not* a citizen – if you were just a freedman or a slave, it was forbidden for you to

wear a toga. So, if you were able to wear a toga, it was a way of saying, “I’m a citizen. I’m not one of them. I’m not down there, I’m up here.”

If you were an equestrian, in addition to the toga you were also allowed to wear a gold ring. And if you were a senator, not only could you wear a gold ring and a toga, you could wear a toga with a purple stripe on it ... which, I’m sure, was really cool.

When it came to justice, the legal system was designed so that rights and punishments would vary according to status. For instance, non-citizens could be flogged but citizens could not (which is why when the Apostle Paul – a Roman citizen – was flogged by mistake, the Decurion in charge of that area was fearing for his position). But the most dishonoring punishment of all in the legal system – being hung on a cross – was generally reserved for slaves because its purpose

was not just to kill but to humiliate. It was actually called “the slave’s punishment.”

Finally, if you went to a public event like an athletic contest or a theater, seating was arranged not by ticket price, but by your social status. The senators sat the closest to the stage in the theater, then the equestrians, and so on. It was illegal for a common citizen to try to sneak up and sit in their section. You’d be arrested for that.

Now, the thing about these classes is that you couldn’t generally go from one to another. For instance, you couldn’t buy your way into the elite class. You were either in it or not in it. Obviously, in that kind of a structure there’s not much of a race for honor, so what people did was to create sub-rankings within their own class –

ways to move up within your class.

For example, among senators there was a series of offices that had titles attached to them, and if you were a senator, the race for you, your *cursus honorum*, was to try to get from this office to that office so you could have that title attached to your name (in addition to all the other titles you had previously earned). Titles and offices and positions and the record of how you moved up from one to another was a big deal which is why there are so many monuments with inscriptions of Roman citizens that describe even the most trivial stages of their race (and more of them have been found in Philippi than in any other ancient Roman city).

And every class was like that. They all had their own subclasses and the race for honor was to move up to the next subclass within the class.

So, obviously, the secret to happiness in Philippi (as it was in all of Roman culture) was to do well in the *cursus honorum*. Advance yourself, promote yourself, serve yourself. It's all about "you" and what you can make of "you" especially in the eyes of everyone else.

Of course, it didn't always work out that way. Sometimes people would lose their status for one reason or another. Maybe it was their behavior or maybe a loss of wealth. Even though you couldn't buy your way into the elite class, you could fall out of it.

And if that happened – there was a technical term for it which basically means being humiliatedⁱⁱ - it was considered to be a fate worse than death ... which is why the Roman historian Pliny wrote, "It is more uglifying to lose praise, to go down, than never to have been praised at all" ... and why nobody in that day ever said,

“Gee, I’d like to be humbled and humiliated.”
Nobody ever volunteered for it, but it happened
to people. And it was bad.

Subverting the Culture

Now ... with all that said ... with all that as
backdrop ... let’s read just a snippet of what Paul
wrote to this group of believers-in-Jesus living in
this mindset of “it’s all about me and my status
and the honor it brings me as I move upwards in
my class.”

This is from the second chapter of Philippians,
beginning in the third verse.

Paul writes:

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or
vain conceit. Rather, in humility
value others above yourselves, not*

looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Philippians 2:3-4 (NIV)

Now, if you're a person living in Philippi reading that, what are you going to think? What are you going to think if you're an elite who has been taught to be generous with your wealth not as a way of truly serving the needs of others and the community but, instead, to leverage your own status in the public eye?

You're going to think "that's crazy. That's social suicide. Paul, you must be mistaken. Joy can't come from that strategy. Happiness can't come from that approach. Happiness and joy comes from doing well in the *cursus honorum* – the race for honor. We've got to make a name for ourselves – even if it's only within our own class structure – or we're nothing."

And, as if Paul was anticipating the objections of his readers (which is something a good preacher always does), in his very next sentence he gives the rationale behind his contrarian advice.

And if you've been a Christian or part of a church for a while, or you've read the Bible at any depth, you've probably heard this passage that we're about to read more times than you can count. And it's so familiar to you that you probably think of it as a very lovely and poetic description of the sacrifice of Jesus. But I guarantee you ... that's not how the Philippian believers read this!

When they read it, it was mind-blowing. It was a cup of cold water in the face. It was a slap into a new level of awareness that threatened to shake their long-held paradigm to the core.

Paul wrote:

In your relationships with one another ...

“To be able to do what I’m suggesting ... to give up the *cursus honorum* and put others ahead of yourself ...

“... you must have ...”

... have the same mindset as Christ
Jesus: Philippians 2:5 (NIV)

What was the mindset of Jesus – at least, as it related to honor?

Remember what he told his disciples (and Paul would have known this but the Philippians at this point probably would not have)? After washing their feet – a task normally relegated to the servants of the house, not the master – Jesus said to them:

*“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’
and you are right, because that’s
what I am.*

*“And since I, your Lord and
Teacher, have washed your feet, you
ought to wash each other’s feet. I
have given you an example to
follow. Do as I have done to you.”*

John 13:13-15 (NIV)

That’s the mindset of Jesus.

But it was more than just his mindset for a brief moment. It was a mindset – it is a mindset – that runs from beginning to end throughout all of eternity. It’s a characteristic of God who was, is, and forevermore will be.

So, Paul writes:

In your relationships with one

another have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Philipians 2:6
(NIV)*

His eternal divine nature – his lineage and wealth – wasn't leverage he used to advance himself in the race for honor.

*Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
Philipians 2:7 (NIV)*

Instead of clothing himself in divine splendor, Jesus gave up his purple stripe, his gold ring, his citizen's toga, his freedman's cap to become not just a servant but a slave (as we saw last week,

the word *servant* could also be translated “slave”).

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross! Philippians 2:8 (NIV)

And there’s such loaded language in that statement and it would be very clear to those reading this letter.

The concept of humiliation. They would understand that because Jesus voluntarily chose to fall out of the elite class, He had rejected the *cursus honorum* and turned it upside down in favor of a *cursus pudorum* or “the course – or race – of shame.”

And death on a cross. That’s as low as it’s possible to go. That is the ultimate humiliation for the

lowest status person on the planet. The Lord of all has become a crucified slave.

By the way, this is why Paul elsewhere wrote that, to many people of his time, his preaching about the cross of Jesus was received as pure foolishness. They would hear the story of Jesus and would shake their heads and say, “Are you kidding me? He went down, and he did it on purpose? That’s what losers do.”

But they were wrong, Paul said. Because Jesus gave it all up ... because he was willing to say “it’s not all about me and my name and my honor and my recognition” ...

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name ...

In other words, what Jesus didn’t try to do for

Himself (that he had every right to do) – to win the race of honor – God the Father did for him. What He did not grasp for himself (that He had every right to grasp for) – the name and position that’s higher than the highest name and position that all of them knew of – the name of Caesar, the Lord of the Roman Empire – God the Father gave him.

But Paul doesn’t stop there because, remember, for the Romans honor wasn’t really honor if it wasn’t public. So Paul adds that God the Father did all this for his Son – he exalted him and gave him this special name – not just as a private reward and “well-done.”

He did it so that one day ...

... at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus

*Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the
Father.* *Philippians*
2:9-11 (NIV)

And friends, as crazy as all of this sounded to those Philippians, I'm sure it sounds just as crazy to a lot of us because what we hear over and over from our culture – while it's not exactly the same in terms of application – is pretty similar. I mean, how many commencement speakers in recent days have told young people (and old people) to “follow your dreams and be true to yourself because that's the road to happiness?”

While there's something to be said for being aware of how God wired you up and what you're passionate about, if that's all there is – a vision of life that begins with self and ends with selfⁱⁱⁱ – ultimately, you're just going to keep going in circles. That road will lead nowhere.

The better road is the one Jesus took. It's the one Paul himself took. It's the road of life lived according to the contrarian wisdom of the Kingdom of God where the first will end up being last and where the servants will be recognized as the great ones – wisdom that advises us that the road to happiness and joy is found not through the *advancement and promotion and preservation of self* but *death to self*.

As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews put it:

*Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.
Hebrews 12:2 (NLT)*

... which sounds very similar to how Paul described it to the Philippians.

Practical Applications

Now, at this point, I'm sure some of you are thinking, "wow, Rick, this is very interesting. It's a really good story. It's really good to know the history behind all of this and how shocking it must have sounded. But what does it all mean for me when I walk out those doors in 10 minutes?"

Great question.

For some of us, I think the answer might be pretty dramatic and even traumatic. Earlier in this service we took a few minutes to remember the men and women throughout our history who made the choice to literally die to self. They sacrificed their rights to personal comfort and advancement and even life itself. They gave themselves for what they knew to be a higher cause - the freedom we and countless others

around the world enjoy this day.

And some of us might one day be called to do that same thing, if not in military service then in some other role that requires us to make the ultimate sacrifice.

But as wonderful as that is, and as honorable as it is ... for most of us the kind of “death to self” we are called to isn’t nearly as dramatic because it’s not literal. For most of us, it’s what Jesus was talking about when he said (on many occasions), “Do you want to really live? Then take up your cross and follow me daily. Die to your sin. Humble yourself and lift others up. Value them, serve them, seek their advancement above your own. Deny yourself – your sinful, distracted, fearful, petty, small-minded, all-about-me, ladder-climbing self. Die to that so that the “you” God planned – a nobler, better, truer, and, yes, *happier* you – might live.

What does that look like, practically speaking? Three things, very quickly, and you probably already know them – but now you also know why they work to increase joy and happiness.

1. Give some of your time away.

All that research on happiness again and again finds that if you want to be happy, you have to invest some of your time in serving others. In fact, one of the recurrent pieces of advice for people who are suffering from depression is to go serve other people in some way with no strings attached, and no public proclamations of how great you are for doing it.

Sometimes, the best attitude adjustment concerning our circumstances comes when we get into someone else's world who has it a lot worse than we do.

Second way to die to self is to ...

2. Give some of your money away.

Have you ever thought about the word miserable? Or the word misery? I know you probably haven't but I did as I prepared for this message. You know what the root of the word miserable is? It's *miser*.

Someone who is a miser – someone who spends all of their money on their own little world and their own self-preservation – is destined to be miserable. On the other hand, someone who develops a habit of systematic and proportional-to-income generosity is headed down the road of happiness because the act of giving actually prevents you from being a miser!

And again, the research repeatedly confirms that

money spent on ourselves does not impact happiness while money spent on others and given to charities does.

Not too long ago, researchers handed out \$5 and \$20 bills at a college campus and then randomly assigned the students to spend the money on themselves or on others by the end of the day. When participants were contacted that evening, those who had been assigned to spend on others were happier than those who had been assigned to spend the money on themselves.

Last fall when we did the Excellence Challenge – raising money to make our facility and ministry more excellent (after all, God is excellent so we should be too), I heard from several sources that there were some who were saying, “I’m not giving to this project because I don’t want my money going to some stupid parking lot.”

Of course, as you know from your journey here this morning, that stupid parking lot turned out pretty nice. And I have no idea what those folks are thinking about it right now. I hope they like it. I hope they enjoy parking on it.

But what I hope most (and imagine this to be true), is that everyone who did give to the EXCH so we could get that parking lot done ... I hope that all those people drive up and look at that parking lot and just do a little bit of a happy dance inside. I hope they think “this is freaking awesome! I gave some money and look what we did! This is so much better for everyone, especially the new people who are just showing up for the first time to learn more about Jesus!”

Maybe I’m just dreaming but I suspect that’s how they feel because giving makes us happy.

One more way to die to self and experience joy is

to ...

3. Give some of your heart away.

Love someone who doesn't deserve it. Forgive someone who can't earn it. Invest in someone who might not make it. Trust in someone who might fail you. Walk with someone who might slow you down.

Be open to the possibility that if you give some of your money and time away, it might be wasted. It might not be appreciated. And that might be painful.

But that's OK because it's not about you because, after all, you're dying to self. And you're just doing what Jesus has already done for you.

Let's pray.

Feature – Rise

CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick

1. Summer class sign up table if you missed last week's rally
2. Next Sunday ... special musical guest.

Endnotes

ⁱ Hellerman's book is *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church*. Some of the wording I use here is from John Ortberg's message The Shocking Secret Happy People Learn which refers to it.

ⁱⁱ See Hellerman's Philippians Commentary

ⁱⁱⁱ David Brooks, the Moral Bucket list

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>