

The Happiness Code  
*The One-Way Journey*  
June 7, 2015

**PRELUDE – Come Ye Sinners**  
**Congregational Songs**  
**Build Your Kingdom Here**  
**Called Me Higher**  
**Come Ye Sinners**

**Feature – Because of You**

Good morning, everyone.

In spite of that well-done but gloomy song (which we'll get to in just a bit) I want to start out by saying that I am so happy to be here with you today ... almost as happy as I was to *not* be here last Sunday. Some of you know that very early last Sunday morning, Jetta and I got to experience the joy of becoming grandparents for a third time as our youngest daughter Janelle and her husband Ben blessed us ...

**... with our first grandson, Elijah Andrew Strother. (pics)**

Those were taken right after he was born, at about 3am.

**These were taken the next day when we were all still a bit tired. (pics)**

Although not as tired as Janelle was.

**And these were taken a couple days later after they cleaned him up and we all had a little bit of sleep! (pics)**

Ok, enough of my show-and-tell pictures ... but it was a very exciting day for us!

I heard that it was also an exciting day here at North Heartland as Ladell and our guest musicians, State Line Drive, did such a great job on both the music and the message in the previous installment of our *Happiness Code* series. If you missed it (like me) you can check it out on

line using our North Heartland App or our website (which is what I did).

Anyway ... as Shannon said, today we're continuing this series and I'm going to be talking to you about the journey to happiness. And it is a journey. It's a process. It takes time to embrace and develop the kinds of principles and practices we've talked about to this point.

And the key thing I want to tell you about this journey comes from something the Apostle Paul wrote to the first-century Christians at the Roman colony of Philippi. As you know (if you've been here the past several weeks), we've been getting our insights on happiness from this letter (called the Epistle to the Philippians) because, in it, we read again and again of the joy that Paul experienced in spite of his difficult circumstances.

When he wrote this letter, among other things ...

- He was in prison.
- He was in chained to one of Emperor Nero's guards.
- He knew he could be summoned for a beating or execution at any moment because of his faith in Christ.

But those circumstances seemed to have little effect on his cheerful disposition.

## **Paul's Radical Advice**

So let's take a look at something he wrote in chapter three of his letter.(And by the way, just a note for those of you who may not be familiar with the Bible, when Paul wrote this letter he didn't divide it into chapter and verse. That was added later by translators so that we could easily locate a passage as we are about to do).

At the beginning of Chapter 3, Paul is reminding the Philippian Christians of how it is that they

are justified and made right before God in spite of the fact that they are all sinners; that they all fall short of the perfect and glorious life God has intended for every human being to live – a perfect and glorious life that reflects the fact that they – we – are created to reflect His perfect and glorious nature.

In verse two Paul tells them to beware of spiritual-sounding people who were trying to convince them that they needed to observe certain parts of the Jewish Law in addition to believing in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

In verse three he writes:

*We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort, though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!*

- *I was circumcised when I was eight days old.*
- *I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one!*
- *I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law.*
- *I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church.*
- *And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.*

*I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the*

*law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.                      Philippians 3:3-9 (NLT)*

And if you ever wondered what it takes for a sinner (big sinner or little sinner) to be made right with God, that's it. It's faith in what Jesus did on the cross and in His resurrection and nothing else.

But Paul doesn't stop there because, as we say all the time around here, it's true that we're saved by grace alone in though faith alone in Christ alone but *we want to be more than just saved*; more than just rescued from sin. We want to be *redeemed* and *remade* so that we reflect more and more of the perfect and glorious nature of God in everyday life.

**Paul puts it like this:**

*I want to know Christ and*

*experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.*

“That kind of power I want working in my life,” Paul says.

*I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!*

*Philippians 3:10-11 (NLT)*

“I’m not afraid to suffer and die, either,” Paul says, “for my physical death is what will allow me to one day experience the same physical resurrection from the dead which Jesus experienced” (an event that will occur when Jesus returns for all who believe in Him).

I don’t know about you, but this strikes me as a very strong statement for Paul to make. “I had all this going for me – all of these experiences, but none of it matters because knowing Jesus is what matters. And I am locked in on what He’s doing



in my life in the here and now, and what He will do in my life in eternity.”

But, because Paul is a humble guy, he adds a disclaimer in the next sentence.

**He writes:**

*I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.*  
Philippians 3:12 (NLT)

“I'm not content with just being saved. I want all of what God has for me.”

*No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it ...*

**... Paul continues ...**

*But I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking*

*forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*                      *Philippians*                      *3:13-14*  
(NLT/NIV)

Paul's journey – the journey that has led him to such joy and happiness in his life – is a one-way journey (literally, a race, he calls it). It's forward and upward.

But in order for him to make that journey – to run that race – successfully, he says there's one thing he has to do: *forget the past – forget what lies behind – and look forward to what lies ahead.* After all, no one wins a race who constantly looks back over their shoulder!

This is such an interesting metaphor to me, especially in light of the fact that the people of Philippi – as model citizens of the Roman Empire – would have been engaged in something we talked about two weeks ago called the “cursus

honorum” – where honorum means “honor” and “cursus” doesn’t mean “curses” as in being cursed. It means “course” – specifically, the course that was laid out when athletes ran a race. So, the “cursus honorum” was the “race for honor.”

See, personal honor was *the* most important possession in Roman culture. And the way you gained it was to stack up all of your past accomplishments (no matter how trivial) on top of your family heritage and say to everyone, “look at this: this is what defines me; this is why I matter; this is what makes me valuable; this is why I deserve to be honored.”

So, there was a never-ending race to add more and more to your list of accomplishments so that you could *look back at them* and say “see, there’s even *more* reason that I deserve honor.” The orientation of the entire culture was *backward* not forward; looking to the *past* not the present or the future. The present and future held value

only as opportunities to build a better past and gain more honor.

And in the middle of that mindset, Paul drops a bombshell: *forget about your past!* In fact, the word translated “forget” literally means to neglect or ignore.

“Ignore your past. Forget about it,” Paul says to the Christ-followers at Philippi, “because whatever honor you have before the highest judge of all - God - is not tied to *your* past; it’s tied to *Jesus’* past - to what He did for you. Instead, look forward and upward. Focus on finishing. Press on from wherever you are in the race no matter how you got to that point, whether it was good or not-so-good, honorable or not-so-honorable.

This was a radical idea to those who first heard it. Don’t look at the past? Focus on moving forward and upward? That’s crazy!

Of course, to you and I, that probably doesn't seem quite as crazy or radical ... for you and I know that psychologists have determined that *what we do with our past - how we think about it or don't think about it* (whether it's good or not-so-good, honorable or not-so-honorable) *has a great deal of influence on how happy we are.*

Paul was just 2,000 years ahead of his time.

## **Ignoring Your Past**

So let's talk about dealing with the past: your personal past (and mine, too).

And I should probably say at this point that one of the things I think we've done fairly well around here over the years is to help people look at their past and understand their past so that it doesn't negatively impact their present and their future. And that's important because, for so many people in this culture, their past (good and not-so-good, honorable and not-so-honorable) is

negatively impacting their present and future. The song we heard before the message was a great example: *because of not-so-good things in the past, I'm afraid of the present and the future.*

I should also say that when we talk about forgetting or ignoring the past, we are not talking about forgetting or ignoring *the lessons* of the past. Some of you may remember that, back in January we did a series called “Starting Over” where we talked extensively about the need to learn from the not-so-good and not-so-honorable parts of our past so that we don’t repeat them. If “next time” is going to be better than “last time,” that’s essential.

Instead, what we’re talking about is intentionally ignoring anything in our past (long ago past or recent past) that hinders us from pressing on from wherever we are in the race no matter how we got to this point, whether it was good or not-so-good, honorable or not-so-honorable. The imagery is that “you are here and it doesn’t

matter how you got here or where you are in relation to anyone else. What matters is that you keep moving.”

So ... what kind of “past things” can hinder us from pressing on if we don’t handle them correctly?

And just to be clear, if you are a Christian – one who has believed in and received Messiah Jesus as your savior - to *not* press on toward the goal, to not run the race is a prescription for misery because God’s intention is for you to “possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed you” (as Paul put it). And just like Paul, you probably won’t obtain that in this life but, as a Christian, it’s part of your spiritual DNA. You’re wired for that and you will not be happy if you are not at least focused in the direction of forward and upward.

All that said ... I think there are five types of “past things” that can hinder us. And I’ll just give

you the list very quickly then we'll talk about them. The first two fall into the category of the "good past"; the last three fall into the category of the "bad past."

### **Here's how I would break it down.**

1. "I was good" – referring to good things I did (repent)
2. "It was good" – referring to what we typically think of as "the good old days"
3. "It was bad" – referring to evil that somehow "just happened" to me
4. "They were bad" – referring to evil that someone did to me
5. "I was bad" – referring to evil that I did

So ... *I was good ... It was good ... It was bad ... They were bad ... I was bad.*

Anything in your past that fits somewhere on that list – if it is not appropriately addressed and ignored – can hinder you from pressing on. And



it can steal your joy.

Conversely, by forgetting those kinds of things – by releasing them in an appropriate manner, we increase the likelihood of being, as Paul was, a joyful and happy person.

So, let's dive into it.

### I Was Good

Now, the first thing on the list – “I was good” – is exactly what Paul was talking about at the beginning of the passage we read. Remember how he said if anybody had a reason to be confident because of their spiritual heritage and accomplishments, it was him? He wasn't exaggerating. What he did with his life was incredible. Paul was good. *Really* good.

So, how does this hinder us in the journey to happiness?

When you're always looking back at what you've accomplished (especially if it's a lot), if you're always patting yourself on the back, you get complacent. You rest on your reputation instead of pursuing further transformation. And eventually that begins to feel very hollow because *you know*, even if no one else does, that you're not what you could and should be.

I'll be a little vulnerable with you and tell you that I sometimes struggle with this one. I'm not the Apostle Paul by any stretch, but I've had some pretty amazing things happen to me since I became a Christian at age 15 – more so than the average person. And because of that it's very easy to coast. It's very easy when the going gets tough (especially in the ministry) to look back and say, “well, you know, I really have accomplished a lot already. Actually, I mean *God has accomplished a lot through me* (gotta make it sound spiritual). So, maybe I don't really need to deal with that. Maybe I don't really need to go through that.”

And when I follow that path of least resistance – when I don't press on – I might escape a little bit of pain for a bit, but eventually, I'm disappointed in myself because I know that I'm made for more ... just like you are made for more.

See how that works?

So, a couple of questions ... and I'm going to call a little time out for you to think about this ... are you looking back on your accomplishments (whether it be in your spiritual life or your professional life or your relationships or whatever) are you looking back on your accomplishments with pride and resting on your reputation instead of pursuing further transformation and effectiveness in some area? Is there some area of life in which you *know* you need to be pressing on that you are not because you have already accomplished so much?

I'll just be quiet for a minute while you think

about that.

<pause>

## **Here's God's word to you – and to me.**

“Ignore your past. No matter how wonderful all of your accomplishments, it's time to forget about them. You're not dead yet. You still have time to run. So, press on.”

### It Was Good

Second thing on the list ... “It was good” ... as I said, refers to those glorious days gone by “where God was in his Heaven and all was right with the world.”

Besides the fact that those glorious days were most likely *not* as glorious as we remember them, focusing on those days (especially if they really *were* glorious) can hinder us in the journey to happiness.

Several years ago, we went through a six-month period where some of the key people who had helped launch this church and keep it going – long-time friends and co-workers in the ministry – moved on to other jobs and other cities. When it hit me how many people had left, I remember lamenting to God: “How in the world do you expect me to do what you’ve asked me to do without Francine & Brad and Terry & Jan and Michael & Jodie and ... and ... and? Without those people, it’s just not going to be the same.”

Translation: “when all those folks were here, those were the good old days.”

So, how does this hinder our happiness?

Well, if those were the good old days then what are these? *Not* the good old days. When you’re always looking back and idolizing the past, you can’t see what’s good about the present. Even worse, you overlook the fact that God is not a

god of the past but of the present and future. Even worse, when you keep looking back, you resist what He is trying to do now and when you resist God, you're heading for a cold and hard existence.

One of the most interesting stories in the Hebrew Bible is the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. As the destruction begins, an angel leads Lot and his family out of the city to safety (but also away from everything they've known) he tells them to not look back. But Lot's wife does – she's already missing the good old days – and somehow or another, the Bible says, she turns into a pillar of salt – a literal cold and hard existence.

So, a couple more questions ... and I'm going to call a time out again for you to think about this ... are you looking back and longing for the good old days (whether it be in your spiritual life or your professional life or your relationships or whatever)? I'm not talking about *being thankful*

for the good old days – that’s a good thing. I’m talking about *pinning* for those days. Is there some area of life in which you *know* you need to be pressing on but you are resisting because it’s just not the same?

I’ll just be quiet for a minute while you think about that.

<pause>

## **Here’s God’s word to you – and to me.**

“Ignore your past. No matter how wonderful it was, it’s time to move on. Don’t resist. Now is where I am. So, press on.”

Ok, let’s move to the “bad” category ... the next three items on the list. If you think about the bad things that have happened in your past, generally, they will fit into one of these three areas, sometimes a combination of them.

## It Was Bad

Number three ... “*It was bad*” ... referring to bad things that somehow “just happened” to me. They weren’t the result of my sin or another person’s sin (at least not directly) but just the fact that we live in a sin-cursed world where bad things happen for no apparent reason.

Someone you loved got sick and maybe even died. The market crashed and you lost half of your retirement. Your company went out of business and you lost your job. Your kids got messed up somehow. You were diagnosed with a serious illness or you developed a disability of some kind. You or someone you loved got transferred and had to move away. A storm hit and wiped out your home.

Whatever it was, it was painful. And it left a scar emotionally if not physically. And sometimes, what happens to us is that that event becomes the defining event of our life. There’s sort of like



a B.C. period in our lives – the time Before Calamity – and an A.D period – the time After Disaster. And no matter how far away we get from that event, we keep looking back at it.

So, how does this hinder our happiness? In more ways than can be counted but the greatest effect is that *we begin to see ourselves as victims*. Every time something bad happens, even if it's not a big thing, we say to ourselves “here we go again. Why does this always happen to me?”

Now, we would never *label* ourselves victims because we know that's really not a good thing. *Other people* are victims; we're just unfortunate. But because we keep looking back, that's how we live – as victims. We're devoid of energy; dead in the water seemingly at the mercy of whatever storm is going to hit us next. Like the song said, we're afraid. We're afraid to even try.

So, a couple more questions ... are you looking back with constant sadness (and maybe even

anger) at something bad that happened? I'm not talking about appropriately *grieving and lamenting* your losses – that's a good thing. I'm talking about defining your life in terms of B.C. and A.D. More importantly, is there some area in which you *know* you need to be pressing on but you're hesitating because you're afraid something bad might happen again?

I'll be quiet for a minute while you think about that.

<pause>

In his letter to the Christian churches in Rome, Paul writes, “And we know...” – not *hope*, not think – “and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Paul says, “In *all* things.” He doesn't say, “In some things, in some circumstances, in some problems, in some difficulties, in some places.”

He says, “In all things, whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever has happened to you, God is at work to bring good out of it.”

**So, here's God's word to you – and to me.**

“Forget what lies behind. It was terrible but don't dwell on it. And fear not, for I am with you and I promise to redeem every bad thing that happens to you. Press on.”

Press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling you. That's your life. That's your future. If you know Jesus, if he is your savior, you are not a victim.

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The next two items on the list we've talked about a whole lot over the years because they happen so often. And we simply cannot be happy if we don't handle these situations correctly.

## They Were Bad

Number four ... “*they were bad.*”

Somebody cheated you. Somebody bullied you. Somebody deliberately insulted you or disrespected you. Or there is a boss who was unfair to you. Or somebody violated you. They did evil to you. And it hurt. And it made you angry. Still does whenever you think about it.

And if you don't deal with it correctly, if you keep looking back and replaying the offense in your mind and re-feeling the emotion, it will create bitterness in you. And bitter people are not happy people.

This is why there is so much written in the scripture about handling the badness of other people when it spills over into our lives. I say “so much” but, actually, it's the same idea – the same word – repeated over and over again. And I think you know what it is. It's “forgive.”

“Forgive” doesn’t mean pretend it’s OK when it’s really not. Forgive means to acknowledge that the offender has done something evil but they are released from the demand that they atone for it.

Forgive does not mean that you have to restore the relationship to what it was before. That might not be possible or even wise. Forgive means wishing that God would bless them in the same way you want Him to bless you.

And “forgive” doesn’t necessarily mean one and done. Some offenses are so great that’s not even possible. Sometimes “forgive” means reminding yourself that you have previously chosen to release and bless and then doing again: seventy times seventy if necessary.

So, here are a couple of questions ... do you keep looking back at some terrible wrong that was done to you? Do you keep thinking about that

terrible person who deserves to be punished in some way? Do you *know* you need to be pressing on in some area of your life but you are not able to because you so much emotional energy goes into your bitterness and resentment that there's not much left for anything else?

I'll just be quiet for a minute while you think about that.

<pause>

Paul writes elsewhere “if any of you have a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

This is real important. You don't forgive someone because they deserve it. You forgive because you have been forgiven (assuming you have, assuming you're a believer in Jesus and have received Him). You forgive because that's what forgiven people do.

## **So, here's God's word to you – and to me.**

“Stop remembering how terrible they were. Let it go. Forgive them as I have forgiven you and press on.”

### I Was Bad

Ok, one more. And this one is real personal. Number five ... “I was bad.”

And I suppose that for as many people as there are who look back at some terrible event (“it was bad”) or some terrible person (“they were bad”) in their life, there are just as many, if not more, who look back at themselves and say, “I was such a fool. I made such an unwise decision. I was so incredibly selfish. I was such a bully. I sinned in the worst way. It's my fault and no one else's. I was bad.”

And people who feel the guilt and shame of their sin and failure beat but do not know how to deal

with it beat themselves up over and over. They tear themselves down. They condemn themselves.

Some of you know what I'm talking about because this is what you do all the time. You do it about the sin and failure from a long time ago whenever your Hall of Shame moments replay in your mind. And you do it about the sin and failure from yesterday. And you think "why do I even try? I am never going to beat this habit or addiction. I'm never going to escape what I did."

And if you're a Christian, I want to tell you right now, that's no way to live. It's not how God wants you to live.

Does He want you to sin? Of course not. But until Jesus comes back and all sin and all rebellion is removed from this earth and even from our flesh (in that resurrection Paul was talking about), we are going to fall short of his glorious intention for our lives. It's just reality.



## **And God's word to you – and to me – is ...**

“Forget what lies behind. No matter how bad you have been, remember God's grace and mercy has been freely given to you in Christ. Press on.”

And this is not simply a pious platitude because Paul himself had this kind of a past. Before he became a Christian, he used to beat up Christians and have them put in prison. He was an accessory to the murder of one of the church's earliest leaders. The man knew guilt and shame from his sin and failure.

But he also knew joy and happiness because grace and mercy and forgiveness were his; not because of who *he* was or what he did but because of who Jesus was and did.

And this morning as we close this service, I think some of us may need to be reminded of that.

Some of us are unhappy because we have lost the joy of our salvation. We're walking around like condemned men and women. But we are not. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Roman Christians "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

So the band is going to do a song to remind us of that. And while they do, our ushers are going to distribute the portable communion containers. And I invite you, if you are in Christ – if you have received him as your savior – to take one and hold on to it until the end of the song. And then we're all going to take it together as a group.

OK? So here we go.

**Feature – Redeemed / Distribute communion**

**Communion**

Stand for closing prayer.

**CLOSING COMMENTS**

Endnotes