

“God Wants You to Be Happy”

Half-Truth #1

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God wants you to be happy! Is that true? Well, I don't think he wants you to be miserable. In fact, I would say yes, God does want you to be happy. But maybe not in the way you think. He loves us and wants us to experience a deep, satisfying, lasting happiness. He knows there is only one path that leads to that type of joy. Because he loves us, he doesn't want us to travel down any other roads in our quest for happiness. Thus, the statement “God wants you to be happy” is a half-truth or at least a statement in need of considerable clarification. Friends, this is the 1st in our sermon series, “harmful half-truths.” It flows out of my belief that wrong ideas about what happiness involves and how it can be attained, are very dangerous to our souls. I am convinced that a clear understanding of true happiness should be a priority for all of us.

Before we get started, I want to note that I would be using the words joy and happiness interchangeably as an emotion tied to our circumstances, while joy transcends circumstances. So you are not happy if you have the stomach flu, but you can still have joy. I am not going to make that distinction, even though I love the saying, “happiness is when your happenings happen to happen the way you want them to happen.” Rather I will use happiness and joy synonymously because there really is no difference in the definitions of the words, and because I actually think making a distinction can be confusing. If that seems confusing, chat with me later. Whether I speak of happiness or joy this morning, I am talking about the same thing. Ok, let's pause and pray the Lord would help us understand and apply the truth on this important topic.

#1 it is true that God wants us to be happy, because he himself is a very happy God. John Piper calls this the foundation of Christian joy, God's happiness. God has the right, the power and the wisdom to do whatever makes him happy. In *Isaiah 46:10a* the Lord says, “**my counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,**” that is why *Psalms 115:3* says Our **God**

is in heaven and does whatever he pleases. But P.D. God is not always happy. The bible talks about him being angry and grieved. Yes, that is true. But those are all from the narrow perspective. Let's say a running back gets hit really hard as he crosses the goal line to score the winning touchdown in a football game. Is he happy about that? Well, from a narrow perspective the pain he feels from that hit, does not make him happy. It hurts. But, from a wider perspective he is happy, because that touchdown means his team has won the game. Friends, when evil occurs in our world, which happens frequently, it does in a sense anger and sadden God. That is not what he desires. But he does choose to allow it, because it fulfills a bigger purpose, a purpose that brings him joy. The clearest example of this is the crucifixion of Jesus. As his son bore the penalty for our sins it brought God the father great pain. Yet, Jesus' death on the cross was also God's ultimate victory. The apostle Peter describes it this way as he speaks to the Jewish leaders, ***Acts 2:23 this man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan ad foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put to death by nailing him to the cross.*** God uses the greatest evil in the history of the planet to accomplish the greatest good. That is why the apostle says, ***Ephesians 1:11b God works out everything in conformity with purpose of his will.*** And what is the purpose of his will? That ultimately he would be glorified. The entire bible, from Gen to Rev, describes how God has created and redeemed a people for himself. Who throughout eternity will never tire of declaring his greatness and goodness. They will continue to glorify him. And that will make God exceedingly happy and it is his desire that we share in that great joy.

#2 God wants us to be happy by finding our happiness in him. As human beings we make choices which we believe will lead to our happiness. Blaise Pascal, besides being a math guy he was also a theologian, once said this: “All men seek happiness. This is without exception.

Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of other avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even those who hang themselves.” Indeed, someone who commits suicide has. In despair, come to believe he/she will be happier dead, then continuing to live. We want to be happy. On this a staunch atheist and a devote Christian are in agreement. The disagreement is about how happiness is best attained.

The bible indicates that true joy is found in trusting and loving the Lord. ***Ecclesiastes 2:26 For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.*** This theme is especially evident in the book of Psalms. ***Psalms 37:7 Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Psalms 36:8,8 “(Lord), People feast on the abundance of you house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life. Psalm 43:4 Then I will come to the alter of God, to God, my greatest joy. And then Psalm 16:11 Lord, you make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*** I think it is pretty clear. Joy is found in the Lord. Trusting him, loving him. Delight in him, that’s the path that leads to true happiness, to eternal happiness. Jesus affirms that truth in ***John 15:10,11 If you keep y commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.***

#3 it is a mistake to try to find happiness apart from the Lord. One of the most prevalent ideas in American culture is that everyone has the right to choose their own path to happiness. An obvious example of this is the transgenderism. E.G. when someone decides he is really a woman in a man’s body and that he would be much

happier identifying as a she, most folks say that is a choice that an individual has the right to make. Now, frankly, I am not really interested in arguing about whether someone has the right to make that choice. My point would be it is not a good choice. I do not believe in following that path would lead to happiness. Interestingly there was an op-ed in the New York Times 2 years ago by Andrea Long Chu. This individual was “transitioning” from to male to female and was having the surgery that goes along with that. Chu said, “I am under no illusion that this surgery will make me happier, but I have to do it to be true to myself.” Now, “Being true to myself” is actually an effort to find some type of happiness by doing that, but in this case it would also fail.

Now, of course, many people make bad choices and insist that it will bring them happiness. E.G. when Joe Theisman, the QB and sports commentator, left his 2nd wife for another woman he told her, “I am doing this because God wants me to be happy.” Well, Joe you are right. God does want you to be happy. But that is not the path that leads there. And it is certainly not the path God wants you to take. Sexual sin in its many different forms, adultery, pre-marital sex, porn, homosexuality, all are rooted in a desire for pleasure and happiness. Involvement in illicitly sexual actives does feel good...for a short time. It is one of the clearest examples of the truth of what ***Hebrews 11:25*** calls “the feeling pleasure of sin.” Yes, the various sexual activity the bible forbids are fun...for a short time. But they do not produce real happiness. Indeed, more and more studies confirm that the most satisfying sexual relationships occur within the context of a marriage relationship. The happiness found in sexual sin is “fleeting.”

But this is not the only type of sin that fails to produce real happiness. Some people focus their lives on food and drink, which are not evil in themselves, but when they dominate our lives they become gluttony and drunkenness. We call them addictions. All sorts of the drugs that

people abuse also fall into this category. These bring pleasure, but again it is fleeting pleasure, a very shallow joy. C.S. Lewis talked about “an ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure.” That is what addictions or what we might call sinful habits produce.

Another type of sin that fails to produce joy is materialism, loving money and things. Yes, it brings a degree of pleasure, but not real happiness. In fact, that is what **Hebrews 11:25,26** is talking about. ***By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.*** The wealth and prestige of being a prince of Egypt brought only fleeting pleasure. True happiness came through trusting and following the Lord. The inability of wealth to make people happy is reflected in the annual surveys the Gallup polls does about happiness and income. Worlds wide they have found that greater income brought of \$60k. between \$60k-\$95k the level of reported happiness was about the same, but when income went over \$95 a year, people reported being less happy. This reflects the truth found in **Proverbs 30:8** where the prayer is ***“Give me neither poverty or riches.”*** Trusting the Lord brings more joy to one's life than wealth ever would.

Yet, this “fuller joy” one experiences in trusting and following Jesus is just part of the benefit. Even more significant is the duration of the happiness. These are “the pleasures forevermore” that would be experienced throughout eternity. Joys experienced here on earth by those of us trusting the Lord are only a fraction of what we will experience in heaven. The happiness sexual immorality brings often lasts for just a few minutes. Food, alcohol, and other drugs provide a very temporary pleasure. Those who seek to find happiness in money and the things it can buy also find that happiness is rather short lived. Actress Terri Garr once said, “I have learned that money can indeed, by

happiness. For about 15 minutes.” These cannot even begin to compare with the eternal, never ending joy that we can only begin to imagine. 1 **Corinthians 2:9** says, ***what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has Conceived-God has prepared these things for those who love Him.***

#4 trying to find joy in “good things” is a poor substitute for finding joy in the Lord. Most of you knew when you walked into this room that sexual immorality, excessive food and drink, materialism, and other sinful activities are not a good path to happiness. However, activities that in themselves are not sinful, should still never replace trusting and following the Lord as the path we take in our quest for joy. I think of 4 things that are indeed good things, blessings from the Lord, that we often look to for happiness instead of the Lord. 1) is our family and friends. I treasure my family and friends and am so grateful they are a part of my life. I do know this however: all of these wonderful people are capable of disappointing me. In fact, they will all likely not only bring joy to my life, but also pain. And these relationships are also very temporary. Every one of my family and friends will die someday... unless the Lord returns first. Yes, memories of a loved one who has died can bring pleasure, but it is a bittersweet pleasure, and the memories always bring a bit of lonesome pain.

2) some see their career or job as the path that will bring them real happiness. Yes, a career or good job can be very fulfilling. Yet, again, the joy which I lead is imperfect and temporary. Even the best jobs almost always have aspects that people find unpleasing. And once again it often ends abruptly, either with retirement or death. It is great to love your job, but it is foolish to see it as the key to happiness.

3)the same is true with hobbies, sports, or recreational activities. More and more people seem to think that is where true happiness can be found. Oh yeah, these activates can be a lot of

fun. Yet, the joy experienced is imperfect and temporary. The thrill of victory in an athletic event is pretty short lived. I think of Leon Lett, former defensive tackle for the Dallas Cowboys. After his team won the Super Bowl in 1995...Lett sat by himself in the locker room after the game and quietly asked a reporter, "ok, so who do we get to play next?" It is great to have hobbies, sports, etc. as part of your life. But if that is what you think life is about, you have a pretty empty life and you are unlikely to find any real happiness, and certainly no eternal happiness.

4) Some people seek to find happiness through involvement at church or in some form of ministry. Isn't that a good thing P.D.? maybe. I believe that those who serve in a church out of genuine love for Jesus will indeed experience a deep joy and enjoy eternal rewards. But there are other reasons why people serve in church other than a genuine love for Jesus. When we do things because the compliments we will receive or because of the good feeling we get from helping others, or because we are just trying to avoid feeling guilty, we will miss out on the real joy. That type of joy, a solid and lasting joy, is found in the Lord, in knowing, trusting, and loving him. Satisfaction experienced in Christian service is no substitute for joy found in the Lord.

And that is true for all 4 of these, or any other good things we do that provide a degree of pleasure and happiness. They are fine things to do and have in our life. But they are no substitute for the joy found in the Lord. And remember this: because God loves us he does not want us to settle for an inadequate substitution. He wants us to experience the fullness of joy, not a mere fraction of joy. E.G. when I get done playing a few games of pickle ball, I think God is pleased with the enjoyment I find in that sport. Yet, if in anyway pickle ball distracts me from loving and serving the Lord, if in anyways it diminishes the joy that is to be found in him, then it is not a good thing in my life. We all need to heed Tim Keller's warning that "good things make the best idols."

Whenever something, no matter how good, starts to replace the Lord as the object of our affection, it is becoming an idol and it will rob us of a true and lasting joy.

So, friends, does God want us to be happy? He certainly does. Because he loves us he wants us to experience a deep, satisfying, lasting happiness. A happiness found only in him. So our problem is not that we want to be happy, but that we often look for happiness in the all the wrong places. Or as C.S. Lewis puts it, we are "too easily pleased." He writes: our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. In other words, the problem is not that we desire too much happiness, but that we are content with too little. We are content with the limited and temporary happiness that many things, the mud pies of life, can provide, and we do not think about the solid, lasting joy, the holiday at the sea type. Joy, that is found in the Lord.

So, how do we experience that happiness, that joy, the Lord offers. The 1st step, is to turn to Jesus Christ, embrace him as savior and Lord, and receive the salvation he freely offers. As God's spirit enables, we need to stop trusting in ourselves and instead place our faith in Jesus Christ and in what he has done for us through his death and resurrection. It's what the apostle Paul was talking about when he said, **Acts 16:31, "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."** The forgiveness, freedom and hope that comes from Jesus being your savior, gives you a wonderful taste of joy. Friends, if you have not tasted that joy please, please, please, pastor Mark or and I would love to talk to you about that. The 2nd step, is to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 3:18) As we spend time getting to know the Lord through reading

the bible, prayer, worship, etc., our love for the Lord will grow. The more our love grows, the greater the joy. The 3rd step would be the “I can only imagine” type of joy we experience when we are in the presence of the Lord, in our eternal home where there is no more (Rev 21:4) death, sorrow, crying or pain. We will then experience the fullness of eternal joy.

So, friends, does God want you to be happy? He sure does. However, he wants you to find that happiness in him. By God’s grace, may we seek to experience that joy in the Lord.