

Childish to Childlike: Happy and Holy

Psalm 100

1 Peter 1: 13-25



In 2005, scientists at England's Institute of Psychiatry in London conducted some research that I would have liked to have taken part in. They hooked up some wires to some willing participants and then conducted a brain scan while they were eating bowls of ice cream.

What they found is probably something we all could have told them without the need for the wires and the brain scanning: eating ice cream makes people happy.

If you want the details, we have a part of our brains that we call the orbitofrontal cortex. It sits basically right behind our eyes, and it's responsible for delivering the reward value of taste. In other words, if you like something you eat, it's because of this part of the brain.

What these scientists found should surprise nobody, when we are eating ice cream, the orbitofrontal cortex lights up. Every time we take a bite, we are rewarded with happiness from our brains.

Knowing all of this, it should be equally of no surprise that we consume a lot of ice cream. In fact, each year, the average American eats about 23 pounds of ice cream. Now, if you don't eat that much, remember that number is an average, which means that some people (namely my daughter) eat a lot more than 23 pounds.

It's also a lucrative business. Across the globe, ice cream is a \$62 billion industry. In America alone, we spend \$11 billion annually on ice cream. And ice cream directly employs 26,000 people with wages exceeding \$1.6 billion.

Now, we have a few problems here.



First, that means that we are spending a lot of money (and taking in a lot of calories) essentially chasing happiness. Yeah, it tastes great, but we keep going back to it because it makes us happy.

Ice cream isn't the only time we do that. We are constantly told what we need for happiness. We continue to look for happiness in things, in people, in situations...

In short, we try to find happiness in temporary things. Things are temporary. People are temporary. Situations change.

Another problem we have is actually with happiness itself.

Yes, I did say there is a problem with happiness. That sounds counter-intuitive, doesn't it? We all know that it's good to be happy! We want to be happy. We look for that feeling everywhere we can find it.

And yet, there's still a problem with happiness.

Like all of our other emotions, happiness is a conditional state of being. The slightest thing can affect it.

Other people can affect our happiness.

Competing emotions can effect our happiness.

Even the weather can affect our happiness. Winter can be so depressing that we have an entire form of depression named for it. And it's probably not a coincidence that when abbreviated, this condition known as seasonal affective disorder, simply spells SAD.

Happiness is easily affected and just as easily changed.



And yet, knowing all of this, knowing that we look for happiness in temporary things, knowing that happiness itself is temporary, we come into Christianity looking for God to make us happy.

And when we as Christians aren't happy – if we're in pain or grieving or angry, or when we need to give up something that we think makes us happy, we start to question things. This can't be right. If we're not happy, where is God in that?

God isn't looking to make us happy.

Now, if you're thinking to yourself, "Is he saying God doesn't want me to be happy at all? I don't think that sounds right." And if you are, I'm going to ask you to put a pin in that. We'll come back to that idea in a few minutes.

I'll be honest, this doesn't feel quite right. Logically, if God doesn't want to make us happy, then does he want us to be un-happy?

And don't we deserve some happiness? Haven't we done enough? Don't we try our best? We're here, after all. We're watching at home on our own time, aren't we?

Can't we just have this one thing, whatever that might be, that we don't have to give up for God? Can't we just be ourselves and keep doing what makes us happy, and keep doing that thing over and over in order to stay happy, and can't God just be okay with that?

Is that starting to sound a little childish? If it is, maybe there's a reason.

This is how we selfishly view happiness. We want to hang on to our way of doing things, our way of feeling, our way of making ourselves happy – and we want God to go along with it. And if God could just tell us it's okay, we can be happy.

But, as we usually do, we don't look at the whole picture. God does have something wonderful in mind for us.



Let's read together from 1 Peter, chapter 1, verses 13-25:

¹³ Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.¹⁴ As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵ But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

¹⁷ Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. ¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰ He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. ²¹ Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For,

*"All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
25 but the word of the Lord endures forever."*

And this is the word that was preached to you.



A few minutes ago, I promised I'd come back to the idea of whether or not God wants us to be happy. Well, we've arrived at that point.

Like He usually does, God has something better in mind for us than we can come up with ourselves. Knowing the nature of happiness, even knowing that it's a good thing because He created it, He still has something better that He wants us to be.

And what is that?

The answer is found in this passage, in an excerpt that actually comes from Leviticus. God wants us to be holy, because He is holy.

We were not redeemed by temporary things. 1 Peter says things like silver and gold, which are things that can make us happy, those things perish. And if our happiness is predicated on perishable things, even ice cream, then our happiness comes to an end.

Instead, because we were redeemed with the blood of Christ, the Word of God which endures forever, holiness is what God has in mind for us.

Let's look at that word, "holy."

In Hebrew, holy means "set apart." When we look at God as holy, we know He is holy because He is set apart from all that is not God.

Israel was to be a holy nation. They were to be set apart from all other nations as God's example to the world, of His desire for how we should live.

We are also called to be set apart. And I think that a holy God that also wants me to be like Him sounds way more interesting than temporary happiness.



In 2019, news stations started reporting about a young boy named Jermaine Bell. You can see him here on the screen. Jermaine was looking forward to spending his seventh birthday on a trip to Disney World, a trip for which he'd been saving for quite some time.

But this also happened to be right around the time that Hurricane Dorian was preparing to rip through the region. More and more people began to evacuate their homes. That's where Bell saw an opportunity.

Enlisting the help of his grandmother, Jermaine used his birthday money – about \$500 – to buy hot dogs, chips, and bottled water for those who were evacuating their homes. He then made homemade signs and stood with them along the highway, to get the attention of those who needed help.

Bell said, “The people that are traveling to go to places, I wanted them to have some food to eat, so they can enjoy the ride to the place that they're going to stay at. I wanted to be generous and live to give.”

Apparently, news of this young man spread quickly, eventually coming to the attention of some people at Disney. And so Disney sent some representatives to surprise Bell at his mother's home in Jacksonville with a special Simba toy and a set of VIP passes so that he and several family members could enjoy that trip to Disney World after all.



Seeing the look on Jermaine's face as he found out about his new vacation just makes me think how we'll react when we figure out that God has something better in mind for us, too.

I think Jermaine was set apart. I think his actions that day were holy actions.

That is the childlike attitude we need to figure out today. That \$500 of birthday money represented some immediate happiness. But six-year-old Jermaine figured out he could do more with it than make himself happy. And then it turned into something so much better, for those around him and eventually for himself.

When Jermaine was willing to give up his happiness, when he committed himself to being set apart, he experienced something better than happiness. He experienced joy.



Happiness and joy are not interchangeable terms. Happiness is that fleeting emotion we've been talking about. It comes and goes with our circumstances.

Joy is long-lasting. Joy is being content and satisfied with what God has already given us *and* with what He promises us in the future.

And that future promise comes when we practice being set apart as His people, because His goal for us is to be holy like Him.

I'm going to go back to ice cream one last time. I found a saying on the internet this week as I was researching for this sermon. It goes like this: "Ice cream is condensed happiness."

You know, that's more accurate than we think. When you get that fresh new ice cream cone, it certainly feels like you've got a handful of happiness. When you're just starting out with a brand-new ice cream cone, there's not much wrong in the world at that point.

But what happens when it's gone? What happens when the scoops weren't packed together quite right and you lose most of it on the pavement below? What happens when it melts? What happens if it's spoiled to begin with?

Well, then, it's not so happy anymore.

I think this might be the hardest of our Childish to Childlike sermons to come to terms with. We want to be happy. We like being happy. It doesn't feel like a childish thing to want to be happy.

It's only when we realize just how temporary our happiness is, when we decide we can let go of what we think our own happiness requires, and when we realize that God has something better and permanent in mind, that we start to come around to a childlike truth.

Our own happiness shouldn't be our goal. It's not what God is looking to give us.

God is looking to make us holy. He's wanting us to become more like Him each day, to be set apart, a holy people.

In turn, holiness gives us joy. When we are striving to be more like a holy God who has loved us so deeply and given up so much for our salvation, when we can spread a love like He did for us, that's holiness.

That brings joy.

That doesn't go away so easily.

And when, in the end, we receive our reward for a holy and set-apart life, then that's eternal joy. That's permanent.

That's far more than just happiness.

And that's what God wants for us.

And all of God's people said...