

“The Problem With Happiness”

2 Corinthians 4:5-5:1

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • July 12, 2015

What makes you happy? Think about that for a moment. What really makes you happy? Is it your family? Your kids or grandkids? Your job? Maybe it's a really good meal. Food can make us happy, right? When the founding fathers of our country were writing the Declaration of Independence, they wanted to make the point that certain rights come from God and not from government, in their case the King. So the declaration reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and *the pursuit of Happiness.*” For Thomas Jefferson and the other founders, the pursuit of happiness is a God-given right.

In our culture today, happiness has been elevated to the supreme right. Our society tells you that it's not just the *pursuit* of happiness that you have a right to, it's happiness itself. There are even preachers who will tell you that God's primary purpose for your life is for you to be happy. The question, then, is why are there fewer happy people today? Instead, depression and anxiety are at record levels, even among children. Only one country in the world has a higher rate of clinical depression than the United States.

You see, the problem with all this happiness is that it doesn't last. If our highest goal in life is happiness or pleasure, then we will never really be happy. I sometimes say, “All I want is the chance to *prove* that money can't buy happiness.” But seriously, if I am concerned with maximizing my happiness in life, I will always feel like I'm missing out on something better, which will keep me from enjoying the moment. Happiness, as it turns out, is really all about *me*. If I believe that what God wants is for me to be happy, then God becomes all about *me*, also. And that's not the God of the Bible.

One of the great dangers in the church is if we feel that Christians should be happy all the time. The truth is that we can't be happy all of

the time. But if we think that's how Christians should be then we will try to fake it and faking it is exhausting and it destroys true community. We can't be happy all the time but the Bible tells us that we can have joy. So what's the difference? Jesus is the most joyful person who ever lived but he wasn't always happy. The Bible tells us that he got angry and drove the money changers out of the Temple. He also wept at the tomb of Lazarus and He wept over Jerusalem. Jesus, the Son of God, experienced every human emotion that you and I experience.

Happiness is an emotion and it depends on your circumstances. You could say happiness reflects the state of your heart. If things are going well you may be happy and if things are going badly you may be sad. There's nothing wrong with being happy and I think God delights in our happiness, the same way we delight in our children's happiness. If we didn't, McDonald's wouldn't sell very many Happy Meals.

Joy, on the other hand, does not depend on our circumstances. Joy comes from within. It reflects the state of your soul. I think this is part of what the Apostle Paul is saying in today's passage. Beginning in verse 16, “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

The things that are seen would be the circumstances of your life – your job, money, family, even your health. He talks about our outer self wasting away. We get that. We get sick. As we age our bodies don't do what they used to do. A couple of weeks ago I was on a canoe trip in Arkansas with our Scout Troop. I discovered that sleeping on the ground is a lot

harder than it was 30 years ago. There are things in life that will make us sad or angry. People you love will disappoint you. You will disappoint people you love. Psalm 90 says, “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble.” In today’s reading Paul says, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. Jesus said, “In the world you *will* have trouble.” He never said you had to be happy about it.

But then Paul says, “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” Joy does not depend on our situation. Joy comes from our inner self. So the question for us today is this: how is our inner self renewed so that we have joy? In the Bible, joy is almost always associated with closeness to God. In Galatians 5, joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit working in your life. Joy is evidence of the transformation Christ is making in you. In the Old Testament God commanded His people to rejoice. Joy is not really optional. Psalm 16 says, “in your presence there is fullness of joy.” Psalm 21:6 says, “You make him glad with the joy of your presence.” The words “joy” and “rejoice” each appear over 200 times in the Bible and they almost always have to do with the work of God in the lives of His people. Ultimately what we discover is that joy is the nature of God himself. C.S. Lewis said that “joy is the serious business of heaven.”

For us to have real joy we must be close to Jesus. Listen to verse 6 of our reading: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” The joy that Paul is talking about is the result of having the light of the knowledge of what Jesus has done for you shining in your heart. Joy is your heart’s byproduct of hope – real hope that that we see in verse 14, a hope from “knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.” That’s the gospel. If

you are a Christ follower, you will get to be with him forever. Jesus made that promise himself in John 14. “if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

There’s one more thing about joy we need to discuss. You can’t pursue joy the way you pursue happiness. You can’t change the circumstances of your life to increase your joy. But you can cultivate joy. Just like you cultivate plants you can work to make sure that your life is fertile ground for the good news of Jesus to work and produce joy in your life. I think there are basically three ways you can cultivate joy. The first way to prepare your life for joy to grow is to take advantage of what the Reformers called the “means of grace.” These are the ways that God works in your life, the way He communicates His benefits to you. The means of grace include reading the Word of God, listening to sermons, participating in the sacraments, which we talked about last week, and prayer. Participating in genuine Christian community is another means of grace. If you are experiencing a lack of joy in your life, start with these practices, asking God to work.

The second practice that can go a long way to cultivating joy in your life is the spiritual discipline of celebration. Often when we think of spiritual disciplines we think of depriving ourselves of something. But many of the disciplines involve doing something you’re not currently doing. If joy is in short supply in your life, begin looking for things to celebrate. If you’re involved in the life of the church there will always be something to celebrate – birthdays, anniversaries, weekends, whatever. The point is to celebrate, to rejoice in God’s goodness.

The final practice I want you to try that I think will cultivate joy in your life is to try to bring happiness into other peoples’ lives. While pursuing your own happiness will not be satisfying, making other people happy will be. Here are a few things you can do to bring happiness and joy to the people around you. Smile. Write thank you notes. Take someone to

lunch. Open doors for people. Let people get in front of you in traffic and in line at the grocery store. Leave encouraging notes for people. I like this one – give out compliments like they are candy. Be a good listener. That means putting your phone away. Tell jokes. Compliment five people every day. Encourage young parents. You get the idea. When you spend your life spreading happiness to other people, you get joy in return.

The bottom line is this. God doesn't want us to pursue happiness, He wants us to pursue

Him. We don't pursue Jesus in order to get something, not even happiness. We pursue Jesus because He's all we want or need. Jesus plus nothing equals everything. As He said, "Love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, mind, soul, and strength." But He also said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these other things will be added to you." Like joy. "For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Amen