

## Training Session 26 - Becoming: Happy

### Objective

Help you become a happier human

### Key Scriptures

Zephaniah 3:17; Matthew 25:23; Matthew 6:33; Matthew 10:39

### Introduction to Biblical Happiness

We're in a series looking at the type of person we want to become. Without question, we all want to become a happy person. Pharrell Williams put lyrics to the desire we all have to be happy. His Grammy-winning song, *Happy*, was the most successful song of 2014 in terms of sales plus equivalent streams and downloads. Why? Because he is a talented artist who married lyric and melody in a way that captured our longings and somehow helped us *feel* the happiness he is singing about.

I think one of the reasons the song was so successful is because I've yet to meet someone who would say, "You know, I'm not really interested in happiness. My goal is to barely scrape by and then die." No, we all want to be happy. Augustine put it this way, "*Every man, whatsoever his condition, desires to be happy.*"<sup>1</sup>

Not only do we desire happiness, we will pursue it as surely and as naturally as a dog will wag her tail when she's excited. In fact, happiness, and our pursuit of it, is so inextricably linked with who we are as Americans that Thomas Jefferson famously declared in the Declaration of Independence that it is a self-evident truth that our Creator has hard-wired us to pursue happiness. He went so far as to say we have an unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness as Americans. If we're honest, none of us really know what unalienable means, but it seems like a smart word used by a smart man to say essentially this, "Don't get in my way of pursuing happiness. It's my God-given right."

Without exception, then, all of us will set sail in pursuit of happiness. In Epicurean fashion, many of us pursue happiness by seeking to maximize our pleasure and minimize our pain. Studies reveal, however, that there is "*little correlation between the circumstances of people's lives and how happy they are.*"<sup>2</sup> There just isn't. Have you ever heard someone go on a mission trip and come back saying, "They didn't have anything, but they were so happy."

Why does this surprise us? Why is this so often the takeaway? Why are we so often shocked to find happiness in the middle of poverty? Maybe it is because our slip is showing. If someone asks us why we are unhappy, then we probably start to respond like most Americans, "Because of my job or my marriage or my debt." Quickly, we rattle off circumstances in our lives as the underlying cause of our unhappiness. Happiness is always just around the bend, if only we can just get this one thing to change.

In this training session, we're going to look at the pursuit of happiness and see what the Bible has to say about how to actually achieve it. Biblically, what we'll uncover is that happiness isn't inevitable (like we thought when we were kids), nor is it impossible (like far too many adults think), but happiness is optional. You can opt in or opt out. Like joy, it's a choice.

In order to opt in, you have to *know* what God says leads to happiness and then you have to *do* it. All of us are currently *doing* exactly what we think will lead to our happiness. Blaise Pascal, a really smart philosopher and mathematician who invented the calculator, put it this way, "*All men seek happiness. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.*"<sup>3</sup> Every action we take, according to Pascal, is because we think it will lead to our happiness. We attend college because it will lead to learning and friendships and a job and...happiness. Even sacrificial acts. Soldiers who dive on a grenade do it for happiness. Their happiness comes from serving and dying for a country where their families and friends are protected and safe and can enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. People who work out do it because they believe it will make them happier and healthier in life. We decide what we will eat (or not eat) based on what we think will make us happy. Do I want to feel good or look good? The burger or the kale salad? Either choice is based on happiness--short-run happiness (the burger) or long-run happiness (the kale salad).

Currently, we're making choices we believe will result in our happiness. Today, we'll focus on three choices God asks us to make that really will lead to happiness:

### **1. Choose to trust Jesus and His INDIRECT road to happiness**

Happiness, like joy, involves 3 choices: choosing to see Jesus, to trust Jesus, and to thank Jesus in all of life. The first choice is to trust because Jesus will inevitably lead you down roads that seem anything but happy. They appear dark, scary, and heading in exactly the opposite direction of happiness. "Oh no, I am going to have to relocate, again. Oh no, I didn't get into the school I wanted and I'm left with.... Oh no, I have no idea how I am going to make it work on this salary. Oh no, this diagnosis is really scary and it is going to change just about everything in my life." Hear this though. On repeat. "And my God will meet all your **needs** according to the glorious riches of his glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

Happy people trust that Jesus will meet all their *real* needs. We think our happiness lies on the other side of our *perceived* need that we have a fulfilling job that pays well, a relationship, health, a particular home, and on and on. Wrong. Happiness lies in the person of Jesus Christ. He is our happiness. We have one need. Him. Paul says He will supply all the rest. Until we trust Jesus that He in and of Himself is enough, we won't be happy.

Happiness then becomes a process whereby we learn to trust that Jesus is the singular need we have and that He will reshape all of our other apparent needs. Here is the formula:

Jesus+nothing=happiness. Until we operationalize this truth in our lives, we won't live happily ever after. He is our provider, our strength, our rock, our Shepherd, our bridegroom, our Savior, our life, our hope, our all and all. He is our happiness.

Biblically, then, what this means is that the road to happiness is **indirect**. Pursuing happiness directly is like trying to squeeze wind. Somehow, it always slips through your fingers. If you pursue happiness directly, as if it is a destination, then it is always just around the corner. When we pursue happiness directly (as a destination), we say things like, “If I could just make 15% more at work. If I could just get my health back. If I could just...” In the Bible, however, what we find is that happiness comes as an offshoot of pursuing something much bigger and far more beautiful than any earthly destination. “You’ll get happiness,” Jesus says. “Trust me, but to get happiness you must do what seems utterly counter-intuitive.”

For example, He asks us to “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and **all these things** will be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). All these things. Happiness is one of “all these things” that are thrown in when we choose the heavenly road of seeking first the kingdom of God here on earth. If we pursue Christ, we get Christ and His happiness. If we pursue happiness, we get neither. Happiness, you see, is only found **indirectly**. Pursue it directly and you’ll feel like my kids on a car trip who constantly whine, “Are we there yet?”

Consider another example of Jesus calling us to pursue happiness indirectly. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6). Pursue righteousness, Jesus says, and you will be filled with happiness; pursue happiness, and you will be filled with neither. Author and pastor Tim Keller comments on this verse saying, “The flesh says, ‘Happiness first. What do I have to do to get there?’ The Spirit says, ‘Righteousness first. What do I have to get there?...Joy (or happiness) is always a byproduct of wanting something more than it.’”

He goes on to highlight our typical approach. Keller argues that far too often happiness is our number one priority and we try to manipulate God to help us achieve it. A better approach, he argues, is to say, “My number one priority is to serve God, and if happiness happens, great. To the degree it happens, great.’ Here is the irony: the less you’re concerned about your happiness and the more you’re concerned about him, the happier you get.”<sup>4</sup>

Elisabeth Elliot makes a similar point when she states, “The world looks for **happiness** through self-assertion. The Christian knows that **joy** is found in self-abandonment.” “If a man will let himself be lost for my sake,” Jesus said, “He will find his true self” (Matthew 10:39). Again, note the indirect approach, which requires so much trust. We struggle to believe an indirect route is best and cry out, “Really Jesus? Giving my time, my money, my best at work to make others happy is going to somehow make me happy?” He kindly responds, “Trust me.”

Notice one other thing besides the indirect approach lauded by both Tim Keller and Elisabeth Elliot: they use joy and happiness interchangeably. Should they be doing so? Or is there a significant difference between happiness and joy? If you have grown up in church, then you have probably heard preachers and friends pit joy over and against happiness. Happiness, so it goes, is based on your *happenings* and often dismissed as superficial, worldly, and circumstantial. It is a feeling and it is fleeting. Joy, on the other hand, is really what we’re after because it transcends circumstances and remains through all emotional states.

A careful reading of the Bible, however, reveals no such distinctions between joy and happiness. Instead, the Bible uses the two words interchangeably in more than a hundred verses.<sup>5</sup> Over and over again we see verses like, “I will turn their mourning into *joy*...and bring happiness out of grief” (Jeremiah 31:13).

Hebrew and Greek scholars of the Bible point out that the English word *blessed* can be translated as *happy*. Why is this significant? Because this term blessed in both the Old and New Testament is one of the bedrock Biblical terms for the life we want to live and are encouraged to live. Whether it is the blessed man who is like a tree planted by streams of water in Psalm 1 or the Beatitudinal blessings in the famous Sermon on the Mount, renowned Hebrew and Greek scholars such as Robert Altar will tell you that the original audience would have heard the word happy when we hear the word blessed. We’re accustomed to hearing blessed when we read the Beatitudes because of the profound influence of the King James Version on modern translations, but the original audience would have heard the Hebrew term (asher) and the Greek term (makarios) as a happy man or woman.

Now, what does all that technical stuff mean? It means we’ve created a false dichotomy between joy and happiness that throws unnecessary shade on happiness. For example, you may have heard Christian clichés slamming happiness such as this one: “God is more interested in your holiness than your happiness.” No, He is not! Did you know there are over 2,700 verses in the Bible that deal with one of these synonyms of happiness or gladness or joy? 2700 is a lot!

What you will find if you read the mountain of Biblical evidence on happiness is that God is passionately interested in our happiness but He knows we won’t find it by pursuing it directly. Happiness comes when we make the choice to say yes to Jesus and do what He says do. Period. That is trust. Doing what He says do is the essence of trusting Him through all the twists and turns of life. “Happy is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him” (Jeremiah 17:7).

## **2. Choose to thank Jesus for His guarantee of eternal happiness**

In our training sessions on joy, we referenced God’s command to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Happiness, we mentioned, is a choice to see, trust, and thank Jesus in all circumstances. Some circumstances, especially the not so pleasant ones, make thanksgiving a challenge. We’ll consider thanksgiving more in depth next week, but for now, let’s consider why giving thanks for God’s guaranteed promise of what is to come leads to happiness.

Put in slightly different terms, why does giving thanks for a guaranteed future help shape our present happiness? Because people who possess an unshakeable future are anchored steady in a shaking present. People with an unshakeable future can say stuff like a friend of mine who is anchored in Christ. He always says, “Yes, it may be dark right now, but what I know is that a sovereign God is weaving and working all things for my good and His glory (Psalm 23; Romans 8:28). He has a plan and His plan can’t be stopped.” What my friend knows is that his eternal happiness is guaranteed. Period. Forever. And the promise of what is to come shapes the present of what currently is. In other words, future happiness shapes present unhappiness, and the bridge between the two is thanksgiving.

As we stated last week, it's worth repeating that Biblical happiness, like Biblical joy, can co-exist with sadness, particularly if you keep the end of the story in mind through thanksgiving. What we know is that sadness isn't the opposite of happiness any more than sadness is the opposite of joy. No. Hopelessness is the opposite of happiness. Hopeful people are happy people; hopeless people are unhappy people. Followers of Jesus can be "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10) because they sorrow and grieve with hope, which is different from how the world grieves (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

One sure and certain reason we grieve with hope is that we know the end of the story and it is a really happy one. We win the war. We may be losing the current battle and taking heavy casualties, but the war was won with the decisive victory of Christ's death and resurrection. One day, His victory will be completely realized in a new heaven and a new earth. Until then, sadness, tears, happiness, hopefulness, and rejoicing all get mixed together in life on this side of the Jordan.

Jim Collins, the author of "Good to Great", describes the power of faith in an unshakeable future in his interview with Admiral Jim Stockdale, the highest-ranking officer in the Hanoi Hilton prisoner of war camp during the height of the Vietnam War. Regarding the prisoner of war camp, Collins asked Stockdale, "Who didn't make it out?" "Oh, that's easy," answered Stockdale. "The optimists." "The optimists? I don't understand," responded Collins. "The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart. This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."<sup>6</sup> Followers of Jesus can confront the most brutal realities of life in a fallen world full of sin. We can weep just as Jesus wept over the premature death of his friend Lazarus. Yet, like Stockdale, we must be able to say, "I never lost faith in the end of the story."<sup>7</sup> We know the end of the story and we can't lose sight of it. Our happiness depends on it.

Praise God, the end of the story is guaranteed. Revelations 21 and 22 lay it out. We're on a collision course with the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 21:1), with new bodies and new hearts (Revelation 21:5). We're going to live and love God and one another fully and completely. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4). The new order will be one filled with guaranteed happiness. Giving thanks for what is coming heats up happiness in the heart.

### **3. Choose to see Jesus and His happiness**

Happy people who see the end of the story and choose to trust it aren't optimists, as Stockdale and Collins point out. In fact, a better term might be "unrealistic optimists." Eric Weihenmayer was the first blind climber to ever summit Mount Everest. As a blind adventurer, author, and consultant, he helps people see the world in new ways. He was asked what he looks for in teammates and he said, "I look for people who have an **unrealistic optimism** about life. I hear people say, 'seeing is believing.' I want people who believe the opposite, 'Believing is seeing.'

You've got to believe first in what you're doing and be sure you have a reason to believe it. You can tell who those people are. You say, 'Hey, want to climb Everest with a blind guy?' Pretty quickly you'll figure out who's a believer."<sup>8</sup>

Eric rightly points out that to believe is to see. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Faith is being certain of what we hope for and sure of what we do not see." To choose to believe is to choose faith over and over again—faith that Jesus really is present in *all* of our daily circumstances. It's what Brother Lawrence famously accomplished—practicing the presence of Christ in daily activities such as dishwashing. Brother Lawrence was a monk who had the exalted title of dishwasher in the monastery. The ordinary task of dishwashing, however, became extraordinary when he chose to believe Jesus was present. Believing is seeing. "In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees before the Blessed Sacrament."<sup>9</sup> Maybe that's why the Polar Express rings so true when the conductor says to the boy, "Seeing is believing, but sometimes the most real things in the world are the things we can't see."<sup>10</sup>

But here is a fundamental question that radically impacts the happiness you will derive from seeing Jesus in all your circumstances. Is the God you see in all circumstances of your life happy Himself? Is He angry? Or mostly disappointed with you? Many of us think God is perpetually mad at us. He just sits there with a finger wagging at us for all the dumb things we do. Well, I have news. God is happy. Really happy. He always has been. The Trinitarian God created us out of the overflow of their happiness and love.

Consider all the images of God's happiness in the Bible. When God shows up on earth He sends angels heralding the happy news, "*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people*" (Luke 2:10) When God gives us a glimpse of us entering heaven, it involves a happy Master beckoning us to, "*Come and share your master's happiness!*" (Matthew 25:23). The Master is fundamentally happy.

For my money, nothing beats the happiness of God on display in Luke 15, where we see repetitive images of a God who won't stop throwing parties every time the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son(s) are found. Why do you think the angels are doing back flips? Why do you think the heavenly band strikes up a chorus of jubilant celebration? It is because of one thing: the Father is happy and they are drawn into His happiness. If He's sour, there's no rejoicing in heaven. Everything in heaven boots off of a God who "filled with compassion... ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. Bring the best robe and put it on him. Bring the fattened calf... Let's have a feast and celebrate." (Luke 15:22-23).

What about sin? What about judgment? What about all the smoke on the mountain when Moses went up and people falling out dead when they get near God in the Old Testament? Friends, hear the good news. The judgment of God came down. And we made it out. Jesus, God the Son, stood in our place, so that we can be blessed. So that we be happy and share in the Master's happiness that He has always shared in.

Friends, the only way to happiness is when you read the Bible through the lens of the gospel. God the Father was fundamentally happy with His son until one fateful day when His

Son chose to unite himself to us and all of our sin. On the cross, God's anger and God's judgment for all of our sin was poured out so that the words of the prophet Zephaniah can now come home to roost, "He happily rejoices over you, renews you with his love, and celebrates over you with shouts of joy" (Zephaniah 3:17). If ever there is a verse to marinate in, it's that one.

Uncle Seamus obviously did. I look forward to meeting Uncle Seamus in heaven one day. He's the kind of guy I want to be and the kind of guy I want to hang around. I met him through a beloved Catholic friend who knows a thing or two about the happiness of God. His name is Brennan Manning and he introduced me to Uncle Seamus in *The Wisdom of Tenderness*.

Uncle Seamus is Edward Farrell's uncle. "Several years ago, Edward Farrell of Detroit took his two-week vacation to Ireland to celebrate his favorite uncle's 80th birthday. On the morning of the great day, Ed and his uncle got up before dawn, dressed in silence, and went for a walk along the shores of Lake Killarney. Just as the sun rose, his uncle turned and stared straight at the rising orb. Ed stood beside him for 20 minutes with not a single word exchanged. Then the elderly uncle began to skip along the shoreline, a radiant smile on his face. After catching up with him, Ed commented, "Uncle Seamus, you look very happy. Do you want to tell my why?" "Yes, lad," the old man said, tears washing down his face. "You see, the Father is fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me."<sup>11</sup>

Yes, laddies. Our Father is fond of us. He's happy. He has plenty available for us to take hold of and share happily.

## Discussion Questions

1. Before reading this training session, have you thought of happiness as a feeling or as a choice? Discuss.
  2. Read Philippians 4:19. Jesus+nothing=happiness. Discuss.
  3. Read Matthew 6:33 and 10:39. The road to happiness is indirect, which is why the first choice we must make to be happy is trusting Jesus as He leads us down indirect paths. Discuss the difference between pursuing happiness directly versus indirectly.
  4. Future happiness shapes present unhappiness, and the bridge between the two is thanksgiving. Discuss this and how unrealistic optimism factors in.
  5. Read Matthew 25:23; Luke 15:7,10. Do you view God as fundamentally happy? Why or why not and how does this matter?
  6. Read Zephaniah. 3:17. Is God happy with you? Discuss.
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## Endnotes

1. [https://www.tms.edu/blog/augustine\\_and\\_christian\\_joy/](https://www.tms.edu/blog/augustine_and_christian_joy/)
2. Randy Alcorn, *God's Promise of Happiness* (Illinois: Tyndale, 2015), 15. I am indebted to Randy's excellent book on this subject that has influenced this training session and, in particular, the introduction.

3. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/pride-is-poisoning-your-happiness>
4. Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.
5. Alcorn, *God's Promise of Happiness*, 15.
6. Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 85.
7. Ibid, 85.
8. <https://www.fastcompany.com/48943/60-seconds-erik-weihenmayer>
9. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 16.
10. Chris VanAllsburg, *The Polar Express* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000). See also <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/inspirational-quotes-the-polar-express>
11. Brendan Manning, *The Wisdom of Tenderness: What Happens When God's Fierce Mercy Transforms Our Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002) 25-26.