

May 22, 2005



## Happiness is ...

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

### Matthew 6:33

[Jesus said] *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.*

There's one thing that every person in this world has in common with every other person in this world: everybody wants to be happy.

"How can I be happy?" The business person driving on the same old streets, to the same old office, where he has worked for twenty years, doing the same old thing day after day; asks that question.

"How can I be happy?" The housewife starting another day making up the same old beds, washing up the same old dishes after having served the same old breakfast, getting ready to vacuum up the same old rugs in the same old rooms for the fifteenth-thousandth time; asks that question.

"How can I be happy?" The teenager walking to the same old high school, where he will see his same old friends, and listen to the same old teachers saying the same old things, wanting to feel like he belongs, wanting to be one of the popular guys; asks that question.

"How can I be happy?" The widow looking around the same, lonely apartment, clasping the same old hands trying to work out the pain and stiffness there, turning on the same, old TV to watch the same old shows, wondering how she will fill-up another same, old, empty day; asks that question.

Everybody wants to be happy. It doesn't matter what age you are, or where you live, or what circumstances you find yourself in - everybody is searching for that elusive old friend, happiness.

Being a Bible-believing person, you look to the Bible for the answer. You open up a concordance and look up the word “happiness.” You’re probably expecting a long list of Biblical references, but the results are surprisingly disappointing. The word “happiness” is not used in the King James Version of the Bible, not even one time! When you look in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the one I use, you will find that the word “happiness” is found only one time.

But when I looked it up, the concordance reference showed it said, “... happiness is.” I was delighted. I thought I had found the ticket. I thought I had found the answer. So, I looked it up.

“... happiness is” is found in the Old Testament, in the book of Lamentations, Chapter 3, Verse 17. Being in the book of Lamentations, I should have known better. That’s not a happy book. Nevertheless, I had great expectations. But when I found the verse, this is what it says: “I have forgotten what happiness is.”

That’s no help. So, I tried the word “happy.” “Happy” is found 23 times in the King James Version and 31 times in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. But none of them fit the bill. None of them satisfied my desire. None of them spell it out. None of them tell me how to achieve happiness.

What’s the matter with those people back in the Bible times? Didn’t they want to be happy?

Of course they did. They just didn’t talk about it the way we do. When you look at what Jesus said, much of what he said had to do with happiness.

He told a story about a younger son who thought he could be happy if he ran off to a far country to live on his own.

He told a story about a rich man who thought he could be happy if he built bigger barns.

He told a story about a man who thought he could be happy if he buried his money in the ground.

All of those stories Jesus told, and many others, have to do with the strange way people have of searching for happiness. And it’s really interesting, because the search for happiness hasn’t changed all that much in two thousand years!

It’s an age-old problem that everybody has to face: how to be happy.

About twenty years ago the magazine Psychology Today ran a survey on happiness. 52,000 people responded to that survey. Here are some of the results.

50% said their level of happiness shifted frequently throughout the day.

80% said they thought about being happy every day.

30% judged themselves to be less happy than everybody else.

70% figured they'd be happy some day, but happiness was always going to come some day in the future.

The editors wanted to understand where a person's basic happiness came from. They divided the respondents up into four groups: single men, single women, married men, married women. They asked for the four most important sources of happiness.

Single men found happiness in this order: their social life, their jobs, their love-life, and success.

Single women had the exact same four sources of happiness in the exact same order.

Married men found happiness in: personal growth, love, marriage, and jobs.

Married women had a different list: satisfaction with love, her marriage, her partner's happiness, and her children.

The editors found out that of all the people surveyed, the least happy people in America are married women!

Only one half of the people surveyed said they and their partners love each other equally. But the survey found that the happiest people are those in love with partners who think their partners love them equally as much.

There was even a comment on faith. Church-goers were no more happy than non-church-goers. However, those people who said they had a deeply held faith that life has meaning ended up being the happiest people of all.

The editors wrapped it all up by listing four essential attitudes you have to have if you want to be happy.

1. You've got to have emotional security, and that means you've got to like yourself.
2. You can't be a cynic.

3. You need to believe that life itself has meaning.
4. You have to feel a good measure of control over your own life.

The editors' final word on the subject was that happiness has to come from within. It can not come from outside. "We discovered," they wrote, "that happiness is in the head, not the wallet. In fact, happiness has less to do with what you have than with what you want. Happiness is a matter of setting personal standards, not chasing after other people's. It comes from tending one's own garden instead of coveting one's neighbor's."

And that's what Jesus has been trying to tell you all along! He says happiness is not found in riotous living in a far off country. Happiness is not found by building bigger barns. Happiness is not found in playing it safe. Happiness depends on your attitude.

That's exactly the kind of thing Jesus says in his sermon on the mount. It's the longest discourse we have from Jesus. It includes today's scripture sentence. It begins with the "Beatitudes."

I suspect most of you have heard of the "Beatitudes." A popular television preacher wrote a book about them. He called them the "Be Happy Attitudes." He was right.

You can find the "Beatitudes" in Matthew 5:3-11. They all begin with the words "*Blessed are...*" But did you know that the ancient word Jesus used that is most often translated as *blessed are* can also be translated as *happy are*? It's what Jesus says.

*Happy are* the poor in spirit.

*Happy are* those who mourn.

*Happy are* the meek.

*Happy are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

*Happy are* the merciful.

*Happy are* the pure in heart.

*Happy are* the peacemakers.

*Happy are* those who are persecuted.

*Happy are* you -

when men revile you

and persecute you

and utter all kinds of evil against you.

Some of those things may not sound very happy, but Jesus knows what he's talking about.

You're a happier person when you mourn,  
because it means you care enough to love.

You're a happier person when you've got a pure heart,  
because it means you've chosen to turn away from some sins.

You're a happier person when you thirst for righteousness,  
because it means you're looking to do the right thing.

You're a happier person when you make peace,  
because it means you're not always ready to fight.

You're a happier person when other people persecute you  
and speak ill of you,  
because it probably means you've taken a stand for  
what is right.

Happiness comes from within, and it begins with your attitude about living.

Jesus wants you to know that happiness almost always comes as a by-product of doing something else. Far too frequently, most people look for happiness as if they are searching for a ring that has rolled under the bed. They know it's down there somewhere, and they're going to keep looking for it until they find it.

But real happiness is not found by tearing the bed apart looking for it. Happiness, when it comes, is more apt to be more like the good feeling that follows a day hard-spent in doing a good job of living.

Jesus tells you what to do. *"Seek first his kingdom,"* Jesus said, *"and all these things shall be yours as well."*

In a surprising twist, the editors of Psychology Today discovered an interesting statistic. Two out of ten people said that they almost never thought about being happy. And that twenty per cent of people who never thought about being happy turned out to be the happiest people of all!

If you forget about wanting to be happy,  
- if you just set out to live your life the best way you can,  
- chances are you're going to end up happier than you  
ever thought you could be!

At about the same time Psychology Today was running its survey on happiness, Time magazine had an article about tennis.

The article focused on the English people who lived in Hong Kong at the turn of the twentieth century. Those Englishmen loved their tennis. Their Chinese servants would sit on the side-lines and watch as their English employers played tennis. What those Chinese servants saw was their English employers getting red in the face, sweating and straining, ranting and raving, and getting very upset over how they hit the ball or missed the ball with their little rackets.

One Chinese servant took his English employer aside and respectfully made a suggestion. “Why don’t you hire some coolies to play the game for you? That way you could just sit there and watch; you wouldn’t have to get so sweaty or so upset.”

What that Chinese servant didn’t realize was that satisfaction only comes from getting in the game, in some game, yourself. So does happiness.

Happiness is like the Green Stamps my mother used to get when she went shopping at the A&P Store. She couldn’t go into that grocery store and buy Green Stamps. She could only get them as a bonus when she bought a can of soup and a loaf of bread.

You can’t go out and buy happiness in life. It only comes as a bonus, thrown in, when you’re doing something else.

A young woman went to India with her husband, a physician. He ran a clinic for the poor in Bombay. She and her husband were very happy together. Then, in quick succession, her husband caught one of the diseases pervading the slums of Bombay, he died, and World War II broke out. The shock of it all was so great that she lost all interest in life. She didn’t care whether she lived or died.

With the war on, she didn’t have much choice in the matter, she was put on a ship headed back to America. On the ship with her was a little seven-year-old boy. His missionary parents had been killed in Burma. “You and I,” he said, “are the only Americans on this ship.” He wanted to be friends. He wanted to cling to her. He wanted her to help his through his hurt.

But she wanted to avoid him. She was so wrapped up in her own grief and anger that she couldn’t be a friend to a lonely little boy.

Out there in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, a torpedo shot through the dark night waters and struck the ship. As it started to sink, she was

ready to go down with the ship, forgetting all her sorrows. Then, she saw that little boy, all alone, shivering like a terrified little bird.

“He came to me,” she said, “and clung close. I realized then, that he needed me.” They were adrift in a lifeboat for several days, and they pulled each other through. Back in America, all her friends said it would be difficult to say who saved whom, for it is one of the unexpected miracles of life that when we serve another, we save ourselves.

When we serve another, we find happiness inside.

So, you want to be happy? Remember, happiness is a by-product of a life well lived. Happiness is a bonus you can't buy for yourself. Happiness is a gift that comes back after you have given your best.

And if you spend your life chasing after happiness, it will always be just out of reach. It'll be after a few more pounds are shed, after you've saved a few more bucks in the bank, after you've found that one special someone, after you've done something else.

But if you're wise enough to forget about it, to stop the chase, to give up looking for happiness -

and you start living your life,  
and giving your best,  
and reaching out to others -  
you'll find happiness at the end of the day.

So you want to be happy? You know where it can be found. Happiness is still where it has always been:

right there inside of you,  
waiting to be brought out,  
a by-product of a joyful,  
faithful life  
through Jesus Christ,  
your Lord.