

The Pursuit of Happiness

Introduction

Happiness is pursued by just about everyone. Perhaps only a few monks and ascetics are not fully engaged in trying to satisfy their ambition for complete happiness. The responsibilities of each day are performed with a view to gradually be in a position to be more happy than one is now.

Since it is very difficult in straitened circumstances (which affects everyone except the rich) to achieve happiness, the goal to be happy is something that people constantly strive for. Many thus make the mistake thinking that money can create happiness and seek to be able to make more money in order to be more happy.

What people don't realise is that rich people are some of the most unhappy people in the world, and the most insecure. The availability of money does not automatically make one happy. A surprising number of lottery winners have ended up severely depressed, bankrupt, isolated or even have committed suicide. Money is a guarantee of nothing, except having a bigger purchasing power.

So what make people happy? What is happiness?

There is a difference between absence of misery and happiness

Most people confuse these two states. One of the reasons people pursue more money is to reduce their state of misery and money will do this. But this does not automatically make a person happy.

The life of poor people is often full of abject misery. And yet even in this state some poor people are able to be very happy. One can visit poor villages in Africa where people strive for food and water, and yet they are full of rejoicing and have a thriving social community of happy people. Many westerners would consider these African's position to be utterly miserable, and yet they are happy, despite living a very difficult life.

So when western people strive for more money to relieve their miserable conditions, they will find themselves in a better place materially, but they may become less happy than before because happiness does not depend upon outward circumstances.

In general, society today is more prosperous and secure than it was in the 1930s. In those days it was commonplace to see ragged children with worn out clothes and no shoes. There were no computers, no mobile 'phones, no television, no video games. Often people would go hungry and any kind of meat was a luxury. The choice of food in the local grocery store was very limited and was mostly comprised of tinned goods. Most working class families had an outside toilet, often shared with several other families and used a tin bath by the fire. Very few people owned a car and even less a landline telephone. Fewer still had any kind of refrigeration in the kitchen. Washing machines did not exist and washing laundry took housewives many hours of hard work, usually once a week, so clothes smelt stale. Neither were anti-perspiration sprays available.

Despite this, I would venture to affirm that British working class people in the 1930s were far happier than those of today, despite all the modern technological advantages they now possess.

Modern people have had a great deal of materialistic misery removed from their daily lives but it hasn't made them any happier. The poor have the Welfare State to protect them from dying. In many cases, poor people have been given everything on a plate: a house, a basic income, medical care etc. when they have never ever worked for a living. Their miseries have been relieved, but they are not happy. The biggest cause of death for men aged 45 or less today is suicide! Mental health problems have now become a major social issue.

Society is, generally speaking, not happy at all. Despite all the advances of materialistic benevolence, society is sick and people strive for happiness.

Happiness is not a goal

Happiness is not a thing in itself; it is the by-product of something else. Thus if you strive for happiness you will not succeed and will be less happy.

The more you strive to be personally happy, the more you will fail. Thus making happiness the reason for choosing certain life directions is very problematic.

Life-changing decisions need to be made on the basis of evaluating all the facts and making a discerned rational choice. That is normal behaviour. However, many people make life-changing decisions on the basis that it may make them a happier person and then they ignore problematic facts.

For example, a married woman may make the decision to leave her family and run off with another man who has promised her a better material life. Sadly, this is common. Often the excuse is uttered, '*I must follow my heart*'. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The heart is deceitful, the Bible tells us, so following a sinful heart is never a good idea. Then, the hearts of many people are very immature and weak because they have never trained their heart in honourable pursuits. Thus many people's affections are weak, vulnerable, uninformed, undisciplined and shallow. Making a life-changing decision based on how you feel at a certain moment is utterly stupid.

Volition must depend upon the intellect and not the emotions. The will must determine action based upon certain facts and their repercussions, intelligently considered.

In the case of a wife acting on emotions and committing adultery, the repercussions are always going to be catastrophic, especially on any children involved. Such desertion has led in the past to suicide, murder, depression, anxiety, remorse, guilt, grief, abandonment, personality disorders and so on. Children of broken marriages have character problems lasting decades. In some cases lives are ruined. So much for following your heart. There may be joy for a short while but long term happiness is never going to be secured by choosing a destructive path.

The problem with making happiness your goal is that it is primarily a selfish act, and selfishness never produces happiness. It is determining to choose your direction based upon what pleases you. In fact, life is often about making necessary choices that do not please us.

When I left Art College after four years of training and could not get a graphics job in a recession, I chose to get a job as a Post Office counter clerk, something I would have

normally despised. But it was the right choice to provide for my family. My preferences counted for nothing in the light of necessity. Doing something I would normally have hated actually made me happier because I was providing for my family (in fact I learned to be content with the job and moved forward over time).

So, happiness comes as a by-product of doing what is right, not on pleasing ourselves.

What constitutes happiness?

Contentment

We are made in order to perform certain tasks, fulfil our responsibilities and take a place in society. When we fully perform these tasks and fulfil our role there is a certain amount of contentment, if not happiness. In fact, contentment is the basis of happiness.

So fulfilment of duty sometimes results in a certain amount of contentment. However, some people's duty actually makes them less content if the duty is unpalatable or a threat to their conscience. Some people find contentment in being a soldier until they are forced to kill someone. The sense of fulfilled duty in society has limitations to providing happiness.

Furthermore, contentment does not depend on outward circumstances. Money can relieve your misery but it can't make you content.

Not material things

The apostle Paul declared, 'I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content' (Phil 4:11). The interesting thing is that when he said this he was imprisoned under guard in Rome and was possibly facing death. So while chained to a Roman soldier and under prosecution Paul could be content.

In 1961 when Viv Nicholson's husband won the Pools (a football lottery) she famously said that she was going to '*Spend, spend, spend*'. Money gave her an immediate jolt of happiness, but it was short-lived. Her spending became an addiction that was out of control. She became distanced from her friends and neighbours. Before long, her husband died and she became bankrupt, an alcoholic and was even arrested for assaulting a police officer. Her new husband died in a car crash; her next husband caused her to enter a mental asylum. In 1976 she was penniless. One could argue that her life would have been much happier if she had not won the Pools.

Material things cannot make you happy, perhaps they can give joy for a short time but not in the long term. The joy is from alleviated misery and improved life-style, but this is temporary and does not constitute happiness.

Happiness comes from being fulfilled and content. People can be fulfilled from certain material tasks, such as hobbies, but these cannot sustain happiness if they are removed or if circumstances change. A person whose contentment derives from gardening is faced with a problem if bad health stops them from doing any gardening.

People can be contented in a good marriage, but this contentment turns to bereavement if the spouse dies. The truth is that nothing on Earth guarantees permanent happiness; all is passing away.

Not in me

Happiness is never going to come from concentrating on self-satisfaction. Focusing on me is focusing upon changeability, sin, inconsistency, errors, misjudgment and so on. Such a fragile, inconsistent source is never going to produce happiness.

The Bible also explains that man has original sin and an inability to perform spiritual tasks, so man is no foundation on which to find contentment. We see this worked out in children who, without any training, learn to be cruel to other children very early on, even before they can speak.

All people are selfish, even if they mask this in public. Selfishness never produces happiness.

Guilt

Another problem facing man is guilt for sin. Although a person may find contentment within a certain sphere, if he is aware of guilt then this contentment is ruined.

In order to be truly happy a person must find relief from guilt for sins committed.

Personal fulfilment

The condition that brings most contentment is the fulfilment of personal responsibilities.

Now there are limitations to this in society. Succeeding in fulfilling your personal duties in every possible sphere may bring contentment for a time but on Earth it is never final. There is always the possibility of something changing and ruining your contentment.

For example a person may be fulfilled in his job. He may have a lovely, faithful wife. He may have adoring children. He may be in friendly social networks and have a lovely family. All these things contribute to a feeling of general contentment, and perhaps happiness. But it all rests on transient things and is subject to change. If the wife dies or a child dies, or if he loses his job suddenly, his world collapses and he is in misery. Fulfilling duty only partially contributes to happiness on this Earth.

The real source of happiness

In order to be truly content one must find it in a source that does not change and never fails. This source must be outside oneself because we change and constantly fail. It must also be a source that is able to remove guilt for sin.

This source is obviously God. Only by resting in God can we ever truly be happy and content.

This means:

Establishing a personal relationship with God.

This is done in a Biblical conversion whereby the guilt of sin is removed in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God also gives many privileges, such as eternal life, the indwelling Spirit, fulfilment of Biblical promises, adoption into God's family and so on.

What must come first is coming face to face with God, admitting that you are a sinner and seeking divine forgiveness. Then follows commitment to follow Jesus.

Obeying God's law

Discipleship, or following Jesus in obedience, means basically obeying the commandments of God. We do not perform these commandments in order to get saved since salvation is by grace, but we are obliged to obey God's will if we are his sons; the children obey their Father.

This is not onerous; it simply means following Jesus and allowing his Spirit to guide us into all truth and obeying his directions in our conscience. In doing this we will be fulfilling

the various commandments in the Bible in both testaments, but it is not a task performed legalistically, but in a relationship. As the Spirit teaches and guides our conscience, we obey God's will.

Doing God's work

God saves us in order to perform the functions that he has assigned to us since before time began.

These tasks vary according to each individual and they may include suffering. However, God promises to give us all the grace and support necessary to do the things he asks of us. Some tasks may appear to be very simple and ordinary, such as being a good mother, other tasks may seem arduous and difficult. Yet all the tasks God gives us are within our ability to do by his grace.

God also calls us to do good to everyone. Doing good works constitutes a double blessing (something that makes you happy). First there is the blessing of knowing that you have obeyed God and pleased your heavenly Father. Second there is the additional blessing of knowing that you have done good to another person. One source of contentment and happiness is doing good.

Happiness

Now if happiness is the fulfilment of duty, then it is certainly the result of the fulfilment of divine duty.

A person gains the most happiness when he has a clean conscience, removed of all guilt, and is serving the will of God to the best of his ability and knowledge. Being fulfilled in obeying God carries the greatest sense of contentment.

Since God does not change, there is no chance of this contentment failing due to changed circumstances. In addition there is the joy of the hope set before us in the promises of God regarding eternal life in Christ Jesus. This hope strengthens us to be able to serve hard and long and to be able to be joyful and strong even in times of deep affliction and suffering. The hope does not change and this hope becomes an anchor to our souls, keeping us close to God.

The hope is not material but spiritual and thus is unchangeable. It is the performance of spiritual duties that provides the greatest contentment and happiness.

Conclusion

Happiness results from conformity to the standards that God created us for. When we truly behave as God intended us to do there is great contentment. The more we behave differently from the way God created us to (selfishly, angrily, chauvinistically etc.) the more we will be unhappy.

Happiness derives from spiritual duty performed honestly.

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