

Eight Ways to Be Happy

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A month or two ago, I was talking to Joe about the king of Nepal. Technically, now he's an ex-king because he abdicated so that Nepal could form a democracy, but before that, he ruled with a unique perspective. One of his most famous ideas was to take a yearly measurement, not of his country's wealth or prestige, but of the happiness of its citizens. This Gross Happiness Product, for lack of a better term, was one of the things he used to shape his policy.

I can't help but wonder what the outcome would be if the United States also began to measure the happiness of its people. I suspect the results would tell a gloomy tale. The truth is that even though all of us are fabulously wealthy by worldwide and historical standards, many Americans, perhaps most Americans, have lost the knack of being happy. I've never seen any figures for the number of people in this country who are on antidepressants, and it may well be illegal to collect such a number, but I'm sure that the total is somewhere in the tens of millions. For those who aren't fortunate enough to have money and good health insurance, they tend to self-medicate with drugs or alcohol.

Certainly, I believe that there are brain-chemistry imbalances, and that people who battle depression should seek medical help, but we must also recognize the limitations of those things. I've known a lot of people, both inside and outside the church, who were on meds for depression, but I've never known a single person to say, "Boy, those meds really solved my problem for me! I feel great!" Usually, all those pills manage to do is blunt the edge a little bit.

In reality, we must recognize that our happiness problems exist not just in our brain chemistry, but in the realms of our spirits. Until we re-order our minds, we aren't really going to get to the root of the problem. With this in mind, let's look at one of the more depressing books in the Bible. Let's consider Ecclesiastes and eight ways to be happy.

Don'ts.

The first four items on this list are things that we should not do because they will rob us of joy. Let's begin with where Solomon advises us **NOT TO LIVE FOR WORK**. This idea appears in Ecclesiastes 2:22-23. I tell you, friends, if there's any passage that hits us squarely between the eyes today, it's this one. Many Americans, even many Christians, make a religion out of work. They go in early, they stay late, and even at night when they're in their beds, they're tossing and turning, thinking about work. This is a classic example of what happens when we let God's plan for our lives get out of balance. As human beings, we were created to work, and God has commanded us to work. It gives our lives purpose and keeps us from becoming idle and wicked. However, work is supposed to be a part of our lives, not the center of our lives, and when we make it the center, other equally important parts get shoved to the margins. We've all seen Christians lose their families because they were too devoted to work. We've all seen Christians lose their souls because they were too devoted to work. And for what? No matter how hard we work, it will never amount to more than vanity. We can easily wreck everything else in our lives for nothing. Let's be wise, then, and keep work in its proper place.

Likewise, we must resolve **NOT TO BE MATERIALISTIC**. Ecclesiastes 5:10-11 elaborates. This problem tends to go hand in hand with the previous one. Many people are slaves to their jobs so that they can earn enough money to buy the things that they think will make them happy. Of course, not all materialistic people are workaholics. It's equally possible to be materialistic and lazy, to sit at home, unemployed, and hope to strike it rich playing the lottery.

Regardless of our motivation and methods, this approach to happiness is doomed to failure. The problem is that if our spirits cry out for more, no amount of more will ever satisfy them. We will never reach the point where we say, "OK; I've got enough; I'll slow down now." Yet another depressing truth is that the more stuff we buy, the more money we will need to take care of the stuff we buy, so we don't actually feel richer. When Lauren and I moved into our house a few years back, it was great to be out of our apartment, but it wasn't so great to have to spend twice as much money every month to keep a roof over our heads. We had to do a lot of cutting back in other areas to make the budget work. That happens to everybody, and it's exactly what Ecclesiastes predicts. Materialism is a dead end when it comes to happiness.

Third, it's equally important **NOT TO LIVE IN THE PAST**. This is the advice that Solomon gives in Ecclesiastes 7:10. Young people, here's a chance to be really obnoxious to your parents. Memorize this passage, and then, the next time Mom and Dad start in on the good old days, quote this one at them. When they glare at you, innocently reply, "Well, it's just what the Bible says." Of course, this verse isn't here just to provide ammunition for smart-alecky teenagers. Lots of people fall into the trap of idealizing the past, either nationally or personally.

The problem is that the past that they idealize usually never actually existed. We look back to a time like the 1950s and conveniently forget all the problems of that decade, little things like racial intolerance, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and a spiritual culture in which most people still weren't going to heaven. We look back to some happy moment with our families and forget that half the time, we were fighting with those relatives like cats and dogs. Worse still, when we dwell in the past, it robs us of the desire to improve the future. Let's keep looking forward, not back.

Finally, we need to be careful **NOT TO BE DUMB**. This is the point made by Ecclesiastes 10:1. This is one of my father's favorite passages in the entire book, and with reason. If you're a perfumer, and you let some flies crawl into your batch of perfume and die, the end product is going to smell like fly carcass. Nobody wants to buy a bottle of Chanel No. 5 with a bunch of dead flies floating in it. In just the same way, we can live good and honorable lives, yet ruin those lives just by making one dumb mistake. I knew a man who was a Christian from the time he was young, who became a deacon in the church, participated frequently in the assembly, had a wonderful wife, wonderful kids, and blew it. He had an affair with a woman who wasn't worth half as much as his wife was, got caught, lied about it, got caught again, had to resign as deacon, had to repent publicly at least twice, and then a couple of years later, he died. I liked him. He was a good friend of mine. But even now, when I think about him, I don't remember his talents or his decades of service to the Lord. I remember his adultery. That one foolish, evil act tainted the memory of his entire life. All the influence for good that he might have had even now, he destroyed. Brethren, any one of us can make exactly the same mistake. None of us are so righteous or so honorable that we cannot be brought low by a single bad decision. We must be wise all the time.

Do's.

Naturally, we can't work toward a happy life simply by avoiding disaster. We have to do some things right as well. First of all, we need to learn to **ENJOY LIFE**. Among many other places in Ecclesiastes, this is spelled out in Ecclesiastes 9:7-9. Although some of the images don't carry over very well three thousand years later, the basic point is plain. We are to work hard to provide for ourselves, but once we've done that, we're to savor what we've earned. We're to savor our spouses and our families. We are to enjoy God's blessings as we are being blessed with them.

Sometimes, this can be a hard skill to master. We get so stressed out about a million and one things. We get so bent out of shape by the ways that our lives aren't perfect and the things that we don't have, that we forget to take pleasure in the things that we do have. We don't notice anymore when our children or our friends smile at us. We eat a good meal without tasting it. Basically, we starve our souls of joy. The only cure for this that I've found is to slow down and take notice. We need to see that something can be familiar and still be precious and wonderful. Earth isn't heaven, it's true, but earth isn't hell, either. Let's not be too proud or too inwardly focused to take our joy as we find it.

Similarly, we need to **BE WISE**. Solomon emphasizes the importance of wisdom in Ecclesiastes 7:11-12. To put it another way, if we want to be happy, we need to make good decisions. Some people are naturally better at this than others, but every one of us can learn to be a good decision-maker by following God's word. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 4, godliness is not just profitable in the life to come. It's profitable in this life too. There are some areas of our lives where the Bible doesn't have much to say, but when it comes to the truly important decisions, the Scripture speaks with clarity and authority. It tells us what kind of people we should associate with, what we should do with our money, whom we should marry, how to conduct ourselves in our marriages, how to raise our children, how to avoid a thousand different kinds of disasters, and how to seek out the things that will benefit us. The more we internalize the wisdom of the Bible, the better off we will be. It's impossible for us to make a bad decision while leaning on the word of God. When we live in that way, we're living the life that God designed for us, and it gives us the best chance of being happy.

Next, we must **REMEMBER THE DARKNESS**. Look with me at Ecclesiastes 11:8. The truth is, friends, that none of us have a happy future of indefinite length stretched out before us. For all of us, our lives are going to end, and unless that end comes with the return of Jesus, we aren't going to enjoy it. No matter how quickly we die, it's never a pleasant experience, and sometimes the unpleasantness can stretch out for years. Along these lines, I can't help but think of our poor sister Dorothy Lee. Even though she's in her nineties, she's just as sharp as can be, but her body has become feeble and frail. She can't do anything but sit on the couch all day, and I know she just doesn't enjoy life anymore.

None of us want to contemplate ending up in a situation like that, but it's important that we think about it. The days of our lives where we have health and strength are not an unlimited resource. We may well only have a few more days like that, no matter how old or young we are. We need to use each one of those days to its fullest, not killing time, not looking longingly toward the future, but making the very best from each moment of our existence that we can.

Finally, the very best thing we can do to ensure a happy life, and I think that "ensure" is an appropriate description, is to **FEAR GOD**. Consider Ecclesiastes 8:11-13. This verse is a wonderful reminder about the difference between the short term and the long term. Most people are foolish and look only at the short term, and in the short term, evil seems like a good choice. Some people do evil over and over again and seem unharmed by it, and when others see how they seem to prosper by doing evil, they also run to imitate their evil.

In the long term, though, that's not the way things work. In the long term, it is not going to be well with the wicked. It is going to be well with those who fear God. In the short term, all kinds of bad things happen to good people. They suffer because of the sin of others, and they suffer because this is an imperfect world. However, they can still find joy because of their relationship with God. That's in the short term. In the long term, all of those hard times will drop away, and God, who is eternally just, will justly reward those who have feared Him and served Him.