

Happiness that Lasts  
May 24, 2009  
Psalm 1: 1-6 / Matthew 5: 6  
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Psalm 1 (NRSV)

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Matthew 5: 6 (NRSV)

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Growing up I frequently heard the phrase “the American Dream.” As a teen, I understood this dream to be about the opportunity to attain happiness through personal achievement. Society taught me well: I knew that my generation would prosper beyond that of my parents or grandparents and that the future was filled with possibility and promise.

While that phrase has evolved a bit in the last 20 years, our nation remains committed to the dream of personal happiness.

Think for a moment about those who live outside of our country. For those who have never been to America, what might it be like to come for an extended visit? During that time, what observations might they make about how this society views happiness? Would Hollywood influence them?

In 2006, Hollywood gave us *The Pursuit of Happyness* with Will Smith in the lead role. Based on a NY Times Bestseller, the film tells the real life story of Chris Gardner.

Chris Gardner is a struggling salesman trying to make a better life for himself and his young son. When his girlfriend walks out on him, Chris is left to raise his son alone. His determination finally pays off when he lands a job in a brutally competitive stockbroker training program where only 1 in 20 interns will make the cut.

Chris and his son are evicted from their apartment and forced to sleep on the streets and in homeless shelters. Despite all of the obstacles, Chris Gardner finds his way from his unpaid internship to a full-time paid job as a stockbroker.

While the film ends there, his story of happiness continues as Chris succeeds in his new career and later starts his own brokerage. Today he is a motivational speaker and his new book, *Start Where You Are*, comes out this month. In it he writes these words:

“Is the pursuit of happiness defined as the quest to attain property, status and wealth, as some would say? Or is it the protection of the rights of all citizens to work as hard or inventively as they choose in order to attain whatever fruits of their labor they so determine – in emotional, intellectual or economic terms? In my reading of it and my

understanding of the American dream . . . the unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness gives us the choice to make of ourselves and our lives what we can, will and do.”

Chris Gardner’s story is called the Pursuit of Happiness, but to some degree we can accurately label each of our own life stories with that title.

So, to help me better understand your stories, I engaged in a little informal research. I asked a few groups of people the same simple question: What makes you happy?

I heard many responses.

- ✓ *Sunshine and flowers*
- ✓ *Listening to rain and my family*
- ✓ *The beach*
- ✓ TV and the internet
- ✓ A bargain
- ✓ Summer
- ✓ A completed to do list
- ✓ Chocolate
- ✓ Happy people

Now, let me make this personal: What makes you happy? Think about your life this past week. Think of some of the sources of your happiness. Now make a mental list of at least 3.

Imagine if I compiled the list of all of the answers of those present today. What might that list say about the people of First Presbyterian? Perhaps . . .

Some of the simplest things contribute to our happiness.

We know what it takes to be happy & we are a happy group.

While we have been influenced by our culture’s view of happiness and intuitively and experientially know about and seemingly understand happiness, few if any of us would claim to be subject matter experts.

To offer that perspective, let me introduce you to one of the more interesting happiness gurus: Gretchen Rubin.

Gretchen went from being a clerk to a Supreme Court Justice to pursuing her passion: writing.

Her latest book, THE HAPPINESS PROJECT will be available in January. In her words the book is

“a memoir about the year I spent test-driving every principle, tip, theory, and scientific study I could find, whether from Aristotle or St. Therese or Martin Seligman or Oprah. THE HAPPINESS PROJECT will gather these rules for living and report on what works and what doesn't.”

I am not sure I want to buy the book, but the dedication to test drive every idea about happiness in a year's time is one that intrigues me. The many experiences of happiness and the numerous disciplines that seek to bring meaning to it are almost overwhelming.

Rather than attempt a comprehensive consideration, we will explore a more targeted approach.

#### WHAT IS THE BOTTOM LINE? WHO IS REALLY HAPPY?

According to a Harris Poll taken last month

Women are slightly happier than men

Older people are happier than younger people

18 to 49 – 32%

50 to 64 – 37%

65 and older - 45%

Overall, 35% consider themselves very happy, which is the same percentage as in 2008 – despite the many changes over the last year.

#### HOW IS HAPPINESS MEASURED?

Most measures of happiness are based on self report. What a person says about their own happiness tends to be consistent with what friends would say if asked the same question.

#### WHAT HAS THE ABILITY TO POSITIVELY IMPACT HAPPINESS?

##### DOES MARRIAGE?

Yes! According to many studies, marriage is the strongest predictor of happiness.

##### DOES EDUCATION?

Yes . . . and no.

Education has a positive impact on happiness, BUT some studies have found that education has a negative effect if income and occupation are controlled due to the higher expectations that education often creates.

DOES MONEY?

Yes . . . and no.

It is true that money is related to happiness, but the effect decreases as income increases.

The bottom line according to Daniel Kahneman of Princeton, our "Standard of living has increased dramatically and happiness has increased not at all, and in some cases has diminished slightly. . . There is a lot of evidence that being richer... isn't making us happier"

And finally, the question we all wonder:

DO HAPPY PEOPLE LIVE LONGER?

Yes. In one study those in the happiest group lived 9 years longer than those in the unhappiest group.

We know that happiness matters and it is something we all want for ourselves and for our loved ones.

Maybe the psychologists have it right. Dr. Ed Diener, a leading psychologist who studies happiness, suggests that there is no 1 key to happiness but there are at least 3 necessary ingredients.

1. Family and friends – the wider and deeper the relationships you have with them the better
2. Goals consistent with your long term values that you work toward but also find enjoyable
3. Meaning in life from something bigger than yourself – a philosophy of life or religion

I would suggest that not only is our religion an essential ingredient to developing happiness, it is also the source that helps us define the word. To begin to form our Christian view of happiness, we turn first to the book of Psalms.

Psalm 1 is more than just the first of the 150 psalms that make up the book of Psalms. It is an introduction to all of the Psalms and a guide to the way God wants all of us to live.

This Psalm presents us with the 2 ways people can live:

the way of blessing, which is the path of happiness,  
or the way of judgment.

Instead of conforming to the modern worldview that happiness is a psychological state, we listen to the Psalmist's wisdom about the true nature of happiness - as an ethical state.

The first Psalm begins with the words: Happy are those . . .

If you look in several English translations of the Bible you will see that while the NRSV begins with the word happy, most begin with the word blessed.

The verses that follow are an explanation of how we are to become happy, to be blessed, to live righteous lives.

The psalm begins by telling us that the happy person is one who does not engage in certain behaviors. This person does NOT  
follow the advice of the wicked,  
take the path that sinners tread  
or sit in the seat of scoffers;

These words inspired a popular contemporary Christian song titled Slow Fade, which reminds us how easily we can move from the way we should go to a way we know not to go. The verses of the song consider the many subtle ways we can get off track, while the chorus reminds us of the danger of the slow fade.

It's a slow fade when you give yourself away  
It's a slow fade when black and white have turned to gray  
Thoughts invade, choices are made, a price will be paid  
When you give yourself away  
People never crumble in a day

To be happy, we must find a way to avoid the distractions that lead to the slow fade and the end of our righteous living.

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The Psalmist continues by sharing the positive side of what it takes to be truly happy when he writes:

To be happy, delight in the law - the instruction of the Lord  
and meditate on it constantly.

This delighting and meditating is not so much activity as an attitude. It is an ongoing desire for God's instruction, giving it

our full attention and allowing its content to be our primary guide.

In the words of the Presbyterian Pastor Dr. Rick Dietrich  
Our delight in the "law of the LORD" is not, then, in the 632 rules of Leviticus or the . . . Books of Church Order that govern many of us--not in law or laws in that sense--our delight is in the way God leads us. "Day and night," the Psalmist says, "in the way of the righteous"--across time and through space, along a journey. ([http://day1.org/497-foolish\\_wisdom](http://day1.org/497-foolish_wisdom))

Knowing the ways of God and growing in them are central to our identity. We strive to make that statement true each day of our lives. We are regular readers of God's Word and we are constantly learning more about what it means to live our lives according to it. We must keep on learning about God's instruction.

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Then, as if to anticipate our 21<sup>st</sup> century desire for multimedia, the Psalmist offers a visual image – a picture what happiness looks like. Happy people look like

Trees that have been transplanted right by streams of water  
Trees that always produce lovely fruit and do so in due season.

Like a tree this person prospers from being in a place that provides constant nourishment and ensures growth and stability.

This one who has been carefully transplanted, is sustained and cared for by another: by God. It is God's instruction on which the person focuses. Much like the tree, the person knows that it is NOT the self that generates prosperity, but the streams that surround and the hands that transplant.

These first three verses of the first Psalm are an introduction to happiness that lasts. This is the same happiness about which the Beatitudes speak.

The Beatitudes are found within the Sermon on the Mount - the most famous sermon ever preached. The Beatitudes are as memorable as they are challenging.

They follow the same form as the 1<sup>st</sup> Psalm. The Beatitudes declare an objective reality as the result of a divine act, not subjective feelings. They remind us that God is the source of our blessings – our lasting happiness. Jesus teaches that the way of his disciples is not the path of conventional or worldly wisdom.

Our Beatitude, found in Matthew 5:6, begins with the word *blessed* or marked by lasting happiness and abiding contentment  
*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*

In the words of the great Reformer Martin Luther – what is required is  
A hunger and thirst for righteousness that can never be curbed or stopped or sated, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishments and maintenances of the right, despising everything that hinders this end. If you cannot make the world completely pious, then do what you can.

Blessed – truly happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

This has been called the most encouraging beatitude because the one called blessed is the one in pursuit - the one struggling for righteousness, not the one who has attained it. Unlike the other beatitudes in which the blessed person is one who has done or is doing something, here it is the consuming hunger and thirst to do something that is praised and rewarded.

While few of us have lived through famine and dealt with the consuming struggle of true hunger and thirst, many of the original hearers and many in our world today have known those feelings all too well. They know how hunger and thirst can become dominant forces. The question for us who tend to live beyond those concerns over basic provision is this:

Have we have come to know the powerful force of a life lived with constant hunger and an ongoing thirst for righteousness?

For those who live with such a hunger, the long term reward is certain: you will be filled. Your hunger and thirst will be satisfied.

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Taken together, this morning's readings from Psalms and Matthew offer a biblical definition of happiness and suggest what must be done to attain this kind of happiness. It is a special sort of happiness, the sort Max Lucado calls "sacred delight."

He explains sacred delight as being sacred because only God can grant it and a delight because it thrills.

Since it is sacred, it cannot be stolen, and since it is delightful, it cannot be predicted.

Sacred Delight . . . Happiness that lasts . . . Blessedness

May we constantly hunger and thirst  
may we always seek God's instruction  
may we know the joy of sacred delight – lasting happiness

In the words of the Psalmist,  
The Lord watches over the way of the righteous

In the words of our Lord,  
As you hunger and thirst for righteousness know that you  
are blessed – truly content, marked by a happiness that  
lasts. Amen