

The Key to a Truly Happy Life

What's the key to a truly happy life? It starts with understanding how the gospel is inseparable from a joyful God.

The greatest thing about family is they are always there for you. Ironically, that's also the worst part. Christmas comes around, and so does the family. It's inevitable. You can run but you can't hide. I don't mean any disrespect, but I'm sure you can relate.

How can family be so blissful and so painful at the same time? How can they be so loyal and yet so ... weird? Families are loud. Families invade your personal space. Families tell you that you've put on weight since they last saw you. Families smell like pretzels. Families eat the last piece of leftover pie, the one you hid under a paper plate in the fridge. Families think it's cute when their kid beats up your kid. "Ah, he gave him a bloody nose. So cute. Well, boys will be boys."

George Burns, that late, great theologian, once said: "Happiness is having a large, caring, close-knit family in another city." And pastor Jerry Seinfeld says, "There is no such thing as fun for the whole family." (I swear that's in Proverbs somewhere.)

I don't mean to pick on family. Family is wonderful. It gives us a place to belong, an identity, a sense of value. When done right, I think family is the greatest source of joy this side of heaven. But ultimately, our family is not the key to our happiness.

Some people tie their emotional stability—or lack thereof—to family. If they aren't happy, they think it's because they come from a bad family, or because they don't have a family, or because they have a bad marriage or bad kids. If their family would just get their act together, they would be happy.

We do the same thing in other areas of life. We think, *If I just had that career, I'd be happy. Or, If I could just make that much money each year, I would be happy.*

All of us are pursuing happiness and joy. No matter what each of us believes about God or life after death, we all want happiness and joy. It's one of the ultimate goals of man. Thomas Jefferson famously called the pursuit of happiness an "inalienable right" given to us by our Creator.

Desiring happiness, peace and joy is not wrong. But how we pursue them is important. Our real problem is that we search for satisfaction in the wrong places. And we come up empty. Like Solomon in Ecclesiastes, we become disillusioned with life.

Happiness really isn't as elusive as people think. But we have to start with the right perspective. Here's a truth that can change your life: *True happiness can't be found in anything unless it is first found in God.*

Family can't bring us happiness. Packages on our doorstep can't bring us happiness. Seeing our names in lights can't bring us happiness. Landing that big contract will not bring us happiness. A new car, a new drill, a new coffeemaker—big or small, nothing on this earth can bring true happiness unless we first find joy in God.

Trying to find happiness of the soul by grasping at the little pleasures of life is like trying to build a sandcastle in an inch of water. The harder you work and the faster you scramble, the more things cave in.

God wants you to be happy, but joy has to be first found in Him. Joy has to be first found in the Good News of Jesus Christ. And when joy is found there, you'll find joy in everything else.

Jesus and Joy

We read Luke 2:1-20 at Christmas because it tells the story of Jesus' birth. But tucked away in this story is a phrase that says a lot about the nature of God and the gospel. The angel who announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds said, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people" (v. 10, NIV).

Jesus and joy are always a package deal. And it's not just average joy—it's *great* joy.

"Good news" is the English translation of the Greek word *euangelion*, which is also translated *gospel* or *preach*. It's the root of the word *evangelism*. In other words, the gospel is by nature good news. *Gospel* and *good news* are synonyms. The gospel is not bad news. It's not threatening news. It's not hellfire-and-brimstone 's good news. Great news. Over-the-moon news. You cannot separate joy from the gospel. Joy is built into the very definition of the gospel. They are literally the same word.

The answer to your happiness problem isn't taking a vacation, reading a joke book, getting a nap or watching a comedian. The answer to your joy problem is the gospel.

Jesus Laughing

Some people can't understand how God and happiness could go together. They think religion and fun are fundamentally opposed. To them, God is a cosmic party pooper. A grinch. A fun sponge. A spoilsport. God is against parties and fun and pleasure, so He's the antithesis of happiness.

Nothing could be further from the truth. God invented happiness. He came up with the idea of humor. He created our ability to have fun. He made a world and gave us five senses to enjoy it. Our pleasure gives Him pleasure. If we love to be happy, and if we were created in His image, then how much more does God radiate joy?

Jesus is happy. I don't know what's wrong with many of the paintings and movies about Jesus, but for some reason He looks like a zombie. His eyes are freaky and He never smiles. He looks stressed out or high on drugs or something.

That wasn't Jesus. Do you know how I know? Because kids liked to be with Him. Kids don't like creepy people. They don't like grumpy people. Yet Jesus had so many kids wanting to come to Him that His disciples felt they had to forbid it.

The Bible says about Jesus, "You love justice and hate evil. Therefore, O God, your God has anointed you, pouring out the oil of joy on you more than on anyone else" (Heb. 1:9, NLT). Jesus was the happiest guy around. He told jokes. He poked fun at people. He laughed.

For some people, the thought of Jesus laughing seems irreverent, like happiness means He wasn't holy or something. They believe that "God is more concerned with our holiness than our happiness." But holiness is the key to happiness, and happiness can be the purest expression of holiness. Really, you can't separate the two.

The Bible is full of words like *joy*, *rejoice*, *blessing*, *happiness* and *peace*. Happiness is a natural result of knowing God and of experiencing His love. When the Bible describes what it means to be a true follower of God, it repeatedly uses the word *blessed*. That term can be translated *happy* or *pleased*. Authentic faith produces happiness, pleasure, enjoyment and blessing.

Bad News Bears

Unfortunately, most people tend to focus on bad news more than good news. Turn on the local newscast; bad news abounds in our culture and society. When it comes to life in general, we're used to bad news. Many of us expect bad news. I've met sickos who seem to relish bad news. They look for the cloud around every silver lining. If your joy level is low, ask yourself

what kind of news you are listening to.

God is counterculture. God brings good news. The angel's announcement to those shepherds was the greatest good news this planet had ever heard. The shepherds figured that out. That's why they were pumped out of their minds.

It's human nature to mistrust what seems too good to be true. Let's settle in our hearts once and for all that Jesus is too good to be true. Salvation is too good to be true. Grace is too good to be true. Heaven is too good to be true.

One of the greatest indictments against Christians isn't sin or hypocrisy; it's our lack of joy. Something is wrong when we call ourselves Christians but almost have an aneurysm just trying to crack a smile.

Some people take themselves too seriously. They take everything too seriously. Their hair. Their flossing. Their spouse's mistakes. Their schoolwork. Their past, present and future.

We can get too serious about life, and it actually reflects poorly on the gospel, because the gospel, by definition, is good news. There's nothing bad or sad about God's gospel. It is only good news.

Think about it. If I preached about love, joy and happiness from the pulpit, but my kids always walked around sad and dejected, never looking people in the eyes, never talking to anyone—at some point, people would wonder what was wrong with me. My kids' attitudes are a direct reflection of me as a parent.

There are people who think walking around with a long face and reciting a list of their sufferings makes them more spiritual, but it doesn't. It just makes them unpleasant to be around. It certainly doesn't make people want to hear what they have to say about God.

I preach good news, and I'm not going to apologize for that. The Good News of Jesus produces joy in the hearts of people. It replaces depression, condemnation and hopelessness with joy, faith and hope.

"I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people." That's the gospel. Joy is central. Joy is imperative.

The Joy of the Lord

The Bible says in Nehemiah 8:10, "Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!" It doesn't say exercise is your strength, or hard work is your strength, or winning the lottery is your strength. It doesn't even say joy is your strength. It's the joy that comes from the Lord that is our strength.

Some of us are weary, and we think maybe it's because we're overworked or not getting enough sleep. So we take sleeping pills and buy mattresses intelligent enough to have a measurable IQ, and we try to get some rest. And yet, we still feel lethargic. Our strength seems zapped.

The problem isn't a lack of sleep; it's a lack of joy. Our strength is connected to our joy, and our joy is connected to the gospel we believe in.

I'm not promoting fake joy—the smile-for-the-camera kind of joy that doesn't make it past your Botox. It's not about forcing laughter and bubbly words just so you'll look spiritual.

"Well, I read this book that says I have to be joyful. Because, you know, joy is part of the gospel. And I want to look like someone who believes the gospel, and if I don't smile a lot, it makes God look bad." So we laugh and smile and high-five everyone, but at home we're grouchier than ogres with hemorrhoids.

The joy of the Lord is authentic. It seeps into the core of who we are and holds us in a perpetual state of peace and happiness. The joy of the Lord strengthens us, soothes us and sustains us.

True happiness is a state of being, not just a passing emotion. Even when external circumstances rock our emotions for a time, we are able to strengthen ourselves by trusting in the Lord.

David prayed this prayer, recorded in Psalm 51:12: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” A lot of times it gets misquoted as “Restore to me the joy of my salvation.” It’s not my salvation—it’s God’s. I am not the originator or the creator. It’s His work of grace. It’s His initiative.

There is a perpetual state of joy that comes with the gospel. No matter what we are going through, no matter what circumstances we are facing right now, when we understand the gospel, it will keep us in a state of happiness and joy.

The gospel and joy are a package deal. It’s the original Happy Meal. The box reads, “Free joy inside. No assembly required.”

It’s God’s grace, God’s joy and God’s strength—and we have free and complete access to it. It doesn’t get better than that.

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